

Tom Fairfield's Pluck and Luck eBook

Tom Fairfield's Pluck and Luck

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Page 1

TOM FAIRFIELD'S PLUCK AND LUCK

CHAPTER I

AN INDIGNATION MEETING

"Well, well, by all that's good! If it isn't Tom Fairfield back again! How are you, old man?"

"Oh, fine and dandy! My! but it's good to see the old place again, Morse," and the tall, good-looking lad whom the other had greeted so effusively held out his hand—a firm, brown hand that told of a summer spent in the open.

"Any of our boys back, Morse?" went on Tom Fairfield, as he looked around the campus of Elmwood Hall. "I thought I'd meet Bert Wilson or Jack Fitch on my way up, but I missed 'em. How are you, anyhow?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Say, you're looking as if you had enjoyed your vacation."

"I sure did! You're not looking bad yourself. Able to sit up and take nourishment, I guess."

"You've struck it, Tom. But what did you do with yourself all summer?"

"Jack, Bert and another chum of mine went camping, and, believe me, we had some times!"

"So I heard. I had a letter from Jack the other day. He mentioned something about a secret of the mill, the crazy hermit and all that sort. Say, but you did go some."

"That's right. It was great while it lasted. How about you?" and Tom looked at his friend, Morse Denton, anxious to hear about his good times.

"Oh, I went with my folks to the shore. Had a pretty good summer—motorboating, canoeing with the girls, and all that. But I got a bit tired of it. I came back early to get some of the football material into shape for this fall," and Morse Denton, who had been captain of the Freshman eleven, and who was later elected as regular captain, looked at Tom, as if sizing him up as available pigskin material.

"Well, I guess none of our crowd has shown up yet," went on Tom. "I fancied I'd be a day or so early, as I wanted to have a good pick of rooms. Got yours, yet?"

"Sure thing. I attended to that first. But there are some fine ones left. Come on over to Hollywood Hall, and we'll see what'll suit you. Try and get one next to mine if you can. Are Bert and Jack going to room with you?"

"They are if we can get a place that will hold us."

"That isn't as easy as it sounds with the way you fellows do things. But there's one nice big study near mine."

"Then I'll just annex it. Say! But it's good to be back. The old place hasn't changed any," and Tom looked around admiringly at the groups of buildings that made up Elmwood Hall. His gaze strolled over the green campus, which would soon be alive with students, and then to the baseball diamond and the football gridiron, on which latter field the battle of the pigskin over the chalk marks would soon be waged.

"Well, they've done some painting and fixing up during vacation," said Morse, as he linked his arm in that of Tom and the two walked on together toward Hollywood Hall, the official dormitory of the Sophomore class. "The gridiron has been leveled off a bit and some new seats put up. Land knows we needed 'em! We'll have some great games this year. You'll play, of course, Tom?"

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"Maybe—if I'm asked."

"Oh, you'll be asked all right," laughed Morse. "Did you expect Bert and Jack would be here?"

"I didn't know but what they might. I haven't seen 'em for the last two weeks. After we closed our camp Bert went up in the country, where his folks were stopping, and Jack took a little coasting trip on a fishing boat. We were to meet here, but they must be delayed. However, school doesn't open for a day or so. But I want to get my place in shape."

"Good idea. That's what I did. Well, here we are," Morse added as the two came opposite a large building. "Let's go in and see what Old Balmy has in stock."

They advanced into the dormitory, being met in the lower hall by a pleasant-faced German who greeted them with:

"Ach! Goot afternoons, gentlemen. Und it iss rooms vat you are seeking?"

"Rooms it is, Herr Balmgester," replied Morse. "My friend, Tom Fairfield, here, wants that big one next to mine."

"Vat! Dot large room for one lad?"

"Oh, I've got two friends coming," explained Tom. "I had a double room over in the Ball and Bat," he added, referring to the Freshman dormitory, "but there'll be three of us here."

"Ach! Dot iss goot! Two boys makes troubles," and the German monitor of the Sophomore dormitory held up two fingers. "Three is besser—vat one does not vant to do ven der oder two does makes like a safety-valve; ain't it yes?" and he laughed ponderously.

"Oh, we'll be good," promised Tom, with a wink at Morse. "Let's see the room."

It proved all that could be desired in the way of a study and sleeping apartment for three healthy, fun-loving lads, and Tom at once signed for it, feeling sure that his two chums, when they did arrive, would approve of his choice.

"Well, now that's done, come on into town, and I'll treat you to ice cream," invited Morse, for though it was late in September the day was warm. "I'm in funds now," went on the football captain, "and I may not be—later," he added with a grim smile.

"Oh, I don't know," said Tom, hesitatingly. "I rather thought I'd hang around. Maybe Jack or Bert will come, and—"

“They can’t get here until the five o’clock train, now,” declared Morse. “You’ve got time enough to go to town and be back again. Come ahead.”

“All right,” assented Tom. “Wait until I get the porter to fetch my trunk from the station.”

The check having been given to the porter, Tom and his chum strolled toward the trolley line that would take them into the small city of Elmwood.

“Here comes the human interrogation point!” exclaimed Morse, when they were almost at the trolley line.

“I thought he wasn’t coming back to school,” remarked Tom, looking around.

“He did say he wasn’t, but I guess his folks made him. He wanted to branch out for himself and be a lawyer, I believe. He sure would be great on cross-examining witnesses with the way he asks questions,” finished Morse with a laugh.

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A small lad was approaching the two friends on the run, and, as he neared them, he called out:

"Hello, Morse! Say, Tom Fairfield, when did you get in? Did you have a good time? I hear you went camping and discovered a hidden treasure. Did it amount to much? How much did you get? Where's Jack and Bert? Are you going in for football? Where are you rooming?"

Tom and Morse came to a stop. They eyed each other solemnly. Then Tom said gravely:

"Isn't it a shame; and he's so young, too!"

"Yes," assented Morse with a mournful shake of his head. "I understand that his case is hopeless. They are going to provide a keeper for him."

"Say, look here, you fellows!" exclaimed the small lad. "What's eating you, anyhow? What do you mean by that line of talk?"

"Oh, he heard us!" gasped Tom, in pretended confusion. "I didn't think he had any rational moments. But he has. There, Georgie," he went on soothingly. "Go lie down in the shade, and you'll be all right in a little while. Do you suffer much?"

"Say, what's the joke?" demanded George Abbot, the small lad referred to. "Can't I ask you a question, without being insulted and called crazy?"

"Sure you can, Why," replied Tom, giving the lad the nick-name bestowed on him because of his many interrogations. "Of course you can ask one question, or even two, but you can't fire broadsides at us in that fashion. Remember that we have weak hearts."

"And our constitutions are not strong," added Morse.

"Oh, you be hanged!" murmured George. "If you can't—"

"Oh, come along!" invited Tom, catching him by the arm. "We're going to town. It's Morse's treat. Yes, George, I did have a bang-up time on my vacation. I'll tell you all about it later."

The three were soon on a trolley car and, a little later, they had reached the town, heading for a drug store where ice cream sodas were a specialty.

"It goes to the right spot!" exclaimed Tom gratefully, as he finished what was set before him. "What do you say to a moving picture show? It will pass the time until the last train gets in. Then for some fun to-night, if Jack and Bert show up."

The others were willing, and soon, in company with some other Elmwood Hall students whom they met, the boys went to the place of the moving pictures.

"Well, it's almost time for the choo-choo cars to sand-paper in," remarked Tom a little later, looking at his watch as he and Morse paced the depot platform.

"Yes, there she blows," remarked his companion, as a distant whistle sounded.

"There they are!"

"There's Tom!"

"Hello, you old skate!"

"You got here ahead of us!"

"And there's Morse Denton!"

"Rah for Elmwood Hall!"

"I see Joe Rooney."

"Yes, and there's Lew Bentfield."

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"Hello, Bruce! Bruce Bennington," yelled Tom.

"Hello Tom! Didn't expect to see me back; did you?" and a tall, well-browned lad, somewhat older than the others, leaped from the still-moving train, and grasped our hero's hand.

The other remarks, preceding Thorn's, had come so fast and in such confusion that it is impossible to declare who said which or what. Then, when Tom had greeted Bruce, the Senior who owed so much to him—a Senior who had returned for a post-graduate course—our hero spied some others of his chums on the train.

"Jack! Jack Fitch!" he yelled. "Hello, Bert—Bert Wilson! I've been waiting for you!"

"There he is! There's Tom!" yelled Jack, hauling in the head of his chum Bert from one window, only to poke his own cranium out of another. "Hurrray!"

There was a rush of many feet, a tossing about of valises and suit cases, the hoarse cries of hack drivers and expressmen, and, above all, the greetings of the students, the smack of meeting palms and the pistol-like reports of clappings on backs and shoulders.

"Three cheers for Elmwood Hall!" cried someone. They were given, and a "Tiger" was called for, followed by the school yell.

"Say, Tom," began Jack Fitch, when he could get his breath. "What about a room? Let's slip off and get one before this mob takes 'em all."

"Go easy, son; go easy," advised Tom calmly. "All is provided for. Just tell the man to send your luggage to Hollywood Hall, and all will be well. Same to you, Bert. I've got a swell apartment for us three, near where Morse hangs out."

"Good for you!" cried Bert.

"Trust Tom to look out for the sleeps and eats," laughed Jack. "Oh, but it's good to be back!"

"Just what I said," declared Tom. "There's lots of good times in prospect."

Together the four chums, followed by others of their acquaintance, moved toward the Sophomore dormitory. The five o'clock train had brought in many students, all of whom were in a hurry to pick out their rooms.

"Say, this is a swell place all right," declared Bert, a little later, when Tom had ushered his two chums into the cozy apartment he had reserved.

“All to the plush furniture,” added Jack. “You’re all right, Tom. How is it for getting in after hours?”

“Fine. It’s right near a rear stairway. Oh, I saw to that all right. And the monitor is Old Balmy—we can work him easy.”

“Fine!” cried Bert. “Now let’s get things straightened out, and unpack some of our duds,” for their baggage had arrived ere they had done admiring their new quarters.

“We’re Sophs now—don’t forget that,” advised Tom. “No more Freshmen!”

“And we can do some hazing on our own account,” added Jack. “Oh, glorious!”

There came a knock on the door.

“Come!” invited Tom.

The portal swung open to admit the form and features of little George Abbot.

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"Are you all here? When did you and Bert come? Is there any——"

"Stop!" thundered Tom, catching up a heavy baseball glove. "Halt in your tracks, or it will be the worse for you! One more question, and——"

"You wait until you hear this one," said George calmly. "Maybe you don't want to, though," he added mysteriously.

"What is it?" asked Jack, struck by something in the manner of the human question box, and Tom lowered the glove.

"I was going to ask if you'd heard the news," went on George. "But if you don't want to ——"

"Go ahead, Why," invited Bert. "I'll listen, anyhow. What's the news?"

"Sam Heller and Nick Johnson just arrived in a big touring car. Sam says it's his."

"Sam Heller here?"

"And Nick Johnson?"

"In a touring car?"

Tom, Jack and Bert asked the questions in turn. They fairly glared at George. The latter, satisfied with the impression he had produced, sank into an easy chair.

"They're here," he went on. "I just saw 'em come, and they're headed this way."

"Sam and Nick going to room in the same dormitory with us!" gasped Bert.

"After what they did?" asked Jack.

"Helping to capture and hold us fellows prisoners," said Tom bitterly.

"We won't stand for it!" declared Bert vigorously.

"I should say not!" came from Jack indignantly. "We will have to do something—protest—make a class matter of it. After what happened at the old mill, for those snobs to have the nerve to come back to Elmwood Hall. Why——"

"It is rather raw," interrupted Tom. "What shall we do?"

"Let's go out and confront 'em," suggested Bert. "If they have the nerve to meet us face to face—well, I don't believe they will have—that's all."



“Come on!” urged Jack, and he caught hold of Tom’s arm and led him forth to face their common enemies. The meeting of the chums, that had started off so jollily, was now a session of indignation.

CHAPTER II

BRAZEN DEFIANCE

Talking over the unexpected news George Abbot had brought to them, and planning what they would say to the two lads who had done so much to injure them, our hero and his chums hurried out of the dormitory and across the school campus.

“Where did you see ‘em, George?” asked Jack, looking at the small youth who had such fondness for asking questions.

“They just got in—fine big auto—they’re over at ‘Pop’ Swab’s soda emporium, filling up on ginger ale, and poking fun at some of the new fellows.”

“Just like ‘em,” murmured Tom. “We’ll do something more than poke fun at ‘em when we see ‘em.”

“That’s what,” added Jack.

“Maybe they aren’t going to stay—they may have just come here for a bluff, and are going away again,” suggested Bert.

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"How about that, George?" asked Tom, and the small lad, who was too much engrossed with the possibility of some excitement presently to ask his usual number of questions, replied:

"I guess they're going to stay all right. I heard Sam tell Nick to hurry up and pick out a room in Hollywood Hall, or all the best ones would be gone."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Jack. "They mean to stay all right!"

"If we let 'em," added Bert significantly.

"Come on," urged Tom. "If we're going to have a run-in with 'em, let's have it in the open, before they get in the dormitory."

And while our hero and his chums are thus hastening to meet the lads who had played such a mean trick on them that summer may I be permitted a few pages in which to make my new readers a little better acquainted with Tom Fairfield?

Tom, aged about sixteen, was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Brokaw Fairfield. He lived in the village of Briartown, on the Pine river, and had much sport running his motorboat on that stream.

In the first volume of this series, entitled, "Tom Fairfield's Schooldays," I related how Tom's father and mother had to go to Australia to claim some property left by a relative. As it was not convenient to take Tom along he was sent to school—Elmwood Hall—where he boarded and studied.

Tom at once made friends and enemies, as any lad would. But his enemies were few, the two principal ones being Sam Heller and Nick Johnson, and they cordially hated our hero. Tom's chief friend was Jack Fitch, with whom he roomed, though Bert Wilson, George Abbot, Joe Rooney, Lew Bentfield, Ed. Ward, Henry Miller and a host of others were on intimate terms with him. I might also mention Bruce Bennington, a Senior when Tom reached Elmwood Hall, and with whom Tom soon became friendly.

Dr. Pliny Meredith was headmaster at Elmwood. He was sometimes called "Merry" because, as Jack Fitch used to say, he was so glum. But he was a gentleman. Not so Professor Skeel, who was a taskmaster. It was against Mr. Skeel that Tom led a revolt because of the professor's meanness in Latin class.

How the boys went on a strike, how they were made prisoners, how they escaped in a great storm, burned the effigy of Mr. Skeel at the flag pole, and how Tom won the strike—all this is set down in the first volume. There is also told how Tom saved Bruce Bennington from disgrace, and was the means of Mr. Skeel fleeing in fear of discovery.

In the second book, entitled, "Tom Fairfield at Sea," I told how our hero learned that the vessel on which his parents were sailing from Australia had been wrecked. He at once set out to make the long voyage to try to find some news of them or, if possible, to rescue them.

The steamer on which Tom sailed was wrecked, and he and some sailors, together with a little boy, floated for some time on a derelict with which the *Silver Star* had collided. On the derelict, most unexpectedly, came Professor Skeel, who was on his way to Honolulu when the accident happened.

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The dreary days of suffering on the derelict, and in an open boat, the meanness of Mr. Skeel and how Tom and his companions were finally rescued, is all set down in the second book of this series. Tom finally reached Australia and, setting out again, was just in time to rescue his parents from the savages of one of the South Pacific islands.

Tom reached home in time to go back to school and take his second-year examinations, which he passed, thus becoming a Sophomore.

Then came the long summer vacation, and as Tom had had enough of travel he decided to go to the woods. In the third volume, called "Tom Fairfield in Camp," I told of his experiences in the forest. With him went Jack Fitch, Bert Wilson and a Briartown lad named Dick Jones.

Almost at the first Tom and his chums ran into a mystery. Near where they pitched their tents there was an old mill where there was said to be a treasure hidden. But an old hermit who owned the mill was seeking for the treasure, and he was not the most pleasant character in the world. At the very start he threatened the boys and tried to drive them from the woods.

But they decided to have a hunt for the treasure. It did not add to their pleasure to learn that Mr. Skeel, who had returned from Honolulu, was also camping near the mysterious mill, and, most unexpectedly our friends also learned that Sam Heller and Nick Johnson were also in the same woods.

Tom and his friends had many experiences in camp, and with the old hermit. Finally their motorboat was taken, and they were in sore straits. But still they kept after the treasure.

Then Bert, Jack and Dick mysteriously disappeared from camp. Tom suspected Mr. Skeel, and the two school bullies, Sam and Nick, of having had some sort of a hand in the kidnapping of his chums.

How he traced them, recovered his boat, and found the secret passage into the old mill, you will find told in my third book. Also how Tom accidentally discovered the hidden room and the place where the treasure was concealed. Mr. Skeel and the two Elmwood lads, who had held Jack, Dick and Bert prisoners, fled in alarm, and the old hermit, restored to his right mind through the finding of his wealth, lived a peaceful life thereafter.

Once the secret of the mill was discovered, Tom and his chums had an enjoyable time in camp. They remained until it was almost time for school to begin, and then returned to their several homes.

And now, once more, they were together in Elmwood Hall, and, most unexpectedly, had come the news of the return of the two bullies, Sam and Nick. It was startling news, in a way, for, after the mean fashion in which the two cronies had treated Tom's chums, when they were held prisoners in the old mill, Tom scarcely believed that Sam and Nick would dare show their faces at Elmwood Hall again.

"And yet they're here," said our hero, as he and the others hurried on across the broad campus.

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"And they're going to stay, if what George says is true," added Jack.

"Oh, it's true enough," declared the questioning lad.

"There they are!" suddenly exclaimed Bert Wilson, pointing toward a small building just outside of the school property. It was a shack where "Pop" Swab sold soda and "pop," from which he took his name.

"Yes, that's them all right," assented Tom.

"And some car they have," added Jack. "I wonder where they got it?"

"They won't have it long, if they treat it as recklessly as that," commented Bert, for the two lads having leaped into the auto, Sam threw in the gears so clumsily that the machine was stalled, with a grinding that did not augur well for the mechanism.

It was evident that the two cronies, having satisfied their thirst, were about to drive on, but Sam's error made it necessary for him to get out to crank the car again. This gave our friends a chance to come up to them.

Sam had his back to them, as he bent over to take hold of the crank, but something Nick said in a low voice caused him to turn around. Then he saw Tom and the others.

There was something in Tom's manner that caused Sam to take an attitude of defence, though our hero had no intention of coming to blows with the bully.

The oncoming party of lads came to a halt a short distance from the auto, and Sam, straightening up, surveyed them, a shade of wonder, not unmixed with apprehension, passing over his face. Nick, sitting in the car, openly sneered.

"So you've come back," spoke Tom cuttingly.

"Of course we have," answered Sam, breathing a little easier, as he saw that he was in no immediate danger.

"And we're going to stay," added Nick with a laugh.

"You are?" Jack almost yelled.

"We certainly are," was the answer. "This is a free country, you know; and we've paid for our board. See you later, fellows. Crank her up, Sam!"

The brazen effrontery of the two amazed our friends. They had not believed that the two cronies would come back. And that they would dare remain, after what they had done, seemed incredible.

“Are you in earnest?” asked Bert, raising his voice to be heard above the thundering exhaust of the auto which Sam started.

“Of course we are,” declared Sam calmly, as he took his seat. “What’s the matter with you fellows, anyhow? Why shouldn’t we stay?”

“You know why you shouldn’t stay!” cried Tom, shaking his finger at Sam and Nick. “After the mean trick you played on Bert and Jack, standing guard over them in the old mill, in league with that scoundrel Skeel—giving Jack and Bert only bread and water—after that you dare come back here and expect to be treated decently? Well, you’re expecting too much, that’s all I’ve got to say! We’ll make Elmwood Hall too hot to hold you! You’ll live in Coventry all the while you’re here. You won’t get a decent——”

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"Oh, get out of my way, Fairfield, or I'll run you down!" snapped Sam, as he threw in the gear and released the clutch, and, had our hero not leaped back, he would have been struck by the heavy touring car.

"Well, of all the gigantic, unmitigated nerve!" gasped Jack, as he stared at the swiftly moving car. "That is the limit!"

CHAPTER III

THE ADVICE OF BRUCE

The silence amid the group of Tom's friends, punctuated at first by the exhaust from the car, was finally broken by Bert Wilson, who asked:

"Well, Tom, what do you think of that?"

"I don't know what to think," was the answer, given slowly. "It gets me!"

"And it does all of us," added Jack. "In the first place, I never thought Sam and Nick would have the nerve to come back, but since they had, I surely thought they'd cave in when they saw we meant business."

"So did I," agreed Bert. "But since they haven't, what's to be done?"

"There's only one thing," decided Jack. "We've got to expose 'em, that's what!"

"Sure!" cried George Abbot, getting a bit excited. "Let the whole school know what they did to you, and I guess that will end things for them at Elmwood Hall."

"It seems to be the only way," agreed Tom. "Of course I'm out of it, in a way, for they didn't keep me locked up in the old mill, with nothing but bread and water. But they did Bert and Jack, and that's the same thing. And there's Dick to be thought of. Of course he isn't an Elmwood lad, though he may be soon, for he wants to come here. But I feel that I ought to take his part."

"Sure!" chorused Jack and Bert, while the former added grimly: "We're on the job, and can look after ourselves. You can represent Dick, Tom, and we'll form a combination."

"To run them out of this school!" exclaimed Bert with energy.

"That being the case," went on Tom, "we'll have to consider the ways and means of doing it. Of course Nick, being a Junior, isn't in the same class with Sam. If it had been two Juniors who acted the way those fellows did I don't know that we would have such a

kick coming, but when a member of your own class turns against you it's time to do something!"

"Hurray!" cried George. "What are you going to do, fellows? Will you let me in on it? Will you haze 'em? Say, you'll let me have part in it; won't you?"

"Hold on, George!" begged Tom with a smile. "Just shut off your gas, throw back your spark, and put on the brakes. You're skidding a bit."

"Aw, say, I want to be in on it," begged the small chap earnestly.

"Oh, you will be all right," Jack assured him.

"The whole Sophomore class will be in it when we give those fellows the lesson they need."

"I'd--I'd like to-----" began Bert energetically as he clenched his fists and look at the departing car, which was now almost hidden in a cloud of dust. "I'm going to-----"

"Hold on," broke in Tom soothingly. "Let me prescribe for you, Bertie my boy," and taking his arm he steered his chum around and toward the little shack where Pop Swab held forth.

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As they filed into the little building two other school lads passed by.

"What's going on?" asked Bruce Bennington, one of the twain.

"Oh, it's Tom Fairfield and some of his chums," answered Morse Denton. "I don't know just what the row is, but I heard that Sam Heller and Nick Johnson played some kind of a mean trick on Tom and Bert and Jack this summer. I don't just know the particulars."

"That's so," agreed Bruce. "I did hear something about it. Feel like having some pop?"

"Not now, and if any of those fellows expect to make the eleven this fall I'll have to make them cut it out."

"Right! How's football coming on?"

"Oh, I've got some good material, and I expect more when the new fellows begin to arrive."

"Going to play Tom Fairfield?"

"I sure am, if he'll train properly, and I think he will. I want him for one of the backs. He's a sure ground gainer, quick on his feet, he holds the ball fast and he can kick well."

"I hope he makes good," went on Bruce. "Well, I'm going to cut away. I want to see the doctor, and arrange about my studies."

The two strolled over the green campus, arm in arm, and they had hardly gone a dozen steps before, from the little store of Pop Swab, there come pouring Tom and his friends, all talking at once.

"That's what we'll do!"

"A class matter of it—sure!"

"We'll work the Coventry game to the limit!"

"And if it comes to a fight——"

"They'll get all they want!"

These were only a few of the remarks that came to the ears of Bruce and Morse.

"Something doing back there," remarked the football captain, nodding his head toward the rear.

"Yes," agreed Bruce, "and I don't like it, either."

"Why not? It's only Tom and his chums talking over what they're going to do to Sam and Nick, I expect."

"Yes, and that's why I don't like it."

"Why not?" asked Morse.

"It may have a bad effect on the whole school. Class disputes always do. If a class doesn't hang together-----"

"They'll hang-----" began Morse, about to perpetrate the old joke of "hanging separately," when Bruce laughingly interrupted with the remark:

"Now that'll do you. There's a five spot fine for using that classic so early in the season. But you know what I mean. It won't do to have class dissension."

"No, you're right. But maybe it will work itself out."

While Bruce and Morse went their ways, Tom and his chums, talking excitedly, went to Tom's room. He had some new rods and a gun he wanted to exhibit, but, most of all, he wanted to give his friends the whole history of the summer's adventures.

"Now go ahead," invited Joe Rooney, when they were all seated, more or less comfortably, on the beds and chairs in the room of the three chums. "Let's have the whole yarn."

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And Tom began, telling the story of the secret of the old mill. He had not proceeded far ere there came a knock on the door.

"Come!" invited Tom, after a moment's hesitation, during which he recalled that, as the term had not officially started, there could be no danger from prowling monitors, or suspicious professors. The door opened and Bruce Bennington entered.

"Hello, Bruce, old stock!" greeted Tom, rising and holding out his hand. "Glad to see you! Here, some of you fellows get up and give one of our betters a seat."

"Not a one! Not a one!" exclaimed Bruce, holding up a protesting hand. "The floor's good enough for me."

But several chairs being offered by admiring Sophomores, who knew how to appreciate one of the best-loved lads in Elmwood Hall, Bruce accepted a seat.

"Go ahead, Tom," he suggested. "Don't let me interrupt the festivities. I don't want to be the skeleton at the feast."

"Oh, I was only telling the fellows how Sam and Nick acted this summer," proceeded our hero. "And, as I was saying," he resumed, "they captured Bert, Jack and my friend, from home, Dick Jones.

"They sneaked up on 'em while I was away from camp, mauled 'em something fierce, and tied 'em up. Then they held em prisoners for several days-----"

"On bread and water," interrupted Jack. "Don't forget that, Tommy my boy!"

"That's right," added Bert with a sorrowful sigh at the recollection. "I was nearly starved before you rescued us."

"And that's what they did," concluded Tom, telling the final details. "Now the question is, what had we better do to such cads when they come back to school and expect to be treated decently? What ought we to do?"

There was silence for a moment, and then Bruce Bennington asked quietly:

"May I say something?"

"Surest thing you know!" came promptly from Tom.

"Then I'm going to give you a bit or advice," went on the older lad. "You may follow it, or not, but I feel it's my duty to offer it. And it's this. I've heard the whole story now, and I know how you fellows must feel. But my advice is—to do nothing at all to Sam and Nick."

CHAPTER IV

HOW SAM TOLD IT

For a few seconds there was silence in Tom's room. All eyes were fixed on Bruce Bennington, but the latter bore the scrutiny well. Then came gasps of surprise, and one or two mutterings. Bruce heard them, and smiled.

"Come!" he invited with a laugh. "Out with it. I know what you are thinking. Speak up, Tom—and the rest of you."

"Did you—did you really mean that?" asked Tom slowly, "or was it a joke?"

"It wasn't a joke, certainly. I'm in earnest," and the smile faded from the face of Bruce Bennington.

"But what do you mean?" insisted Tom. "After the way those fellows treated Jack and Bert—to say nothing of having practically stolen my motorboat, together with the help of the old hermit and Mr. Skeel—not to do anything to 'em!"

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"That's it, Tom. Let it drop, is my advice."

"But why? I can't see why, Bruce."

"Because it will make a heap of trouble in the school, that's why. Look here, Tom. You know you and Sam, to say nothing of Nick, haven't been on good terms from the start; have you?"

"No, but it was Sam's fault. I had no quarrel with him."

"I know that. I'm not saying but what you're in the right. But it's the effect of the thing I'm looking at. Tom, do you want to see two factions in the Sophomore class? Two bunches of fellows, one striving against the other? Do you?"

"No, I don't know as I do. But once we get rid of Sam, Nick will take himself off, too, and then everything will be fine."

"I'm not so sure of that. You might drive Sam out of Elmwood, but I doubt it. And look here, Tom. You know there's going to be a big Freshman class this year."

"So I heard, but what has that got to do with it?"

"Lots. You know, without my telling you, that the Sophs and Freshies are mortal enemies. There'll be hazing to do—whisper it of course—and with the Sophomore class divided against itself, where are you second-year chaps going to be when the Freshies cut up—let me ask you that?"

"How will the class be divided?" inquired Jack.

"Why, if you make this fight against Sam you can't expect his friends to hob-nob with you when it comes to hectoring the Freshies."

"Sam hasn't any friends!" burst out Bert.

"Oh, don't you fool yourself," said Bruce quickly. "Sam has money, and no fellow with cash need be without friends—or at least fellows who call themselves such. Then, too, he's got a big car I understand, and that will go a great ways toward making friends for him. Besides, there's Nick to count on. His friends will be Sam's, and Nick has quite a few, as he isn't such a bully as Sam is. Nick's a Junior now, and the Juniors will side with the Freshmen."

"Now I don't want to be a croaker, or a death's head at this gay party, but you mark my words, if you carry this fight against Sam to the limit it will mean a heap of trouble for the school. And, more than that, the Sophomore class will be torn apart."

“Don’t do it!” pleaded Bruce, arising in his earnestness, and addressing Tom’s chums. “Let it drop, or, if you feel that you have to get even, do it some other way. I know it’s galling to sit still and suffer—but think of the school. You owe something to Elmwood Hall! Besides, I think you’d have your own troubles in getting unanimous class action against Sam.”

“How so?” asked Tom quickly. “As soon as I tell the fellows how mean he acted they’ll vote to send him to Coventry at once, I’ll wager. Not a man will speak to him.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Bruce quietly. “Tom, I’m going to try a little experiment, if you’ll allow me. I guess all you fellows know that I’d stick up for my rights as hard as any one; don’t you?”

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"Sure!" came the quick chorus.

"And I wouldn't stand for any ill-treatment of my friends, or my class. But I put the school above my own feelings, and my class next. And you ought to, also, Tom. If you feel that you have to take it out of Sam and Nick, do it—er—well—say *privately*," and Bruce whispered the word with a smile.

There was a murmur of understanding.

"But what's the experiment?" asked Tom, curious to know what his friend would propose.

"It's this," answered Bruce. "If I prove to you that you'd have trouble in rallying the whole Sophomore class under your banner, Tom, to take some action against Sam, will you agree to let the matter drop, for a time, at least?"

Tom did not answer at once. He looked at Bruce, who returned his gaze steadily. Then, somehow understanding that his friend had a deeper meaning than he had yet disclosed, our hero replied:

"Go ahead; Bruce. I'm with you. Lead on to the experiment, as you call it."

"Do you all agree?" inquired the older lad. "Will you let this matter rest until you hear from Tom again?"

"Sure," answered Jack and Bert, and the others chorused an assent.

"Then you wait until I send for you, Tom," went on the post-graduate student. "It may take a day or so to get the experiment in shape."

There were murmurs of surprise as Bruce bowed himself out, and some were still rather in favor of taking summary action against Sam and Nick. But Tom said:

"No, I've passed my word, and that goes. Bruce knows what he's talking about, and we'll wait and see what he has up his sleeve. If his experiment doesn't work, he'll be the first one to admit it, and then he'll say the bars are down, and we can do as we like."

As he finished there came across the campus the sound of a bell ringing.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do right now, and that is get ready for grub!" exclaimed Bert. "Sam and Nick can wait for all of me, but I'm hungry."

Soon a merry party had gathered in the big dining room, for more students had arrived by later trains, or other conveyances, and Tom and his chums were kept busy renewing old acquaintances, or making new ones.

“There are a raft of Freshies,” commented Jack to his chum, as they lingered over the dessert. “We’ll have our hands full hazing them, all right!”

“Oh, we can do it,” declared Bert. “We always have.”

“Humph! We’ve been Sophs such a terrible long time,” murmured Tom with a smile.

Discipline was rather lax that night, and there was much visiting to and fro in the rooms. The proctor and the professors were kept busy registering new students and did not pay much attention to the older ones, including Tom and his chums, who made merry.

“Oh, you boys!” exclaimed Demosthenes Miller, or “Demy” as he was called—the studious janitor. “Oh, you boys! Will you ever settle down?”

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"I'm afraid not," replied Tom, as he invaded the lower regions of the man who attended to the fires, to borrow a long poker. "We want this for some fun. There's a prof. who has a room just under ours, and he wears a wig. It's out on the window sill to air, and I think I can hook it."

"Oh, young gentlemen, don't, I beg of you!" expostulated the janitor. But they paid no heed to him, and hurried off with the long poker, while the studious janitor, to drown his apprehension, took up a Latin book which he was struggling through, endeavoring to educate himself in the classics.

Tom was engaged in the exciting, if forbidden, sport of trying to lift the wig of the unfortunate professor from the ledge beneath his room window, when there came a knock on his door.

"Oh ho!" ejaculated Bruce Bennington, as he entered. "Up to your old tricks, I see. Well I can't blame you. I did the same thing once. What are you after, a bottle of pop?"

"A wig," explained Tom, briefly. "Want a try for it?"

"Not me. I've got to walk pretty straight you know. I'm regarded as a sort of professor now, and I suppose, if I did my strict duty, I'd report you. But I'm off duty to-night. I say, Tom, are you ready now for that experiment I spoke of?"

"Sure I am. But—" and Tom looked suggestively at the poker and motioned downward to where the wig was still reposing.

"We'll get it up while you're gone," said Jack.

"You will not!" cried Tom. "Do you think I want to miss all the fun? Wait until I get back. Will your experiment take long, Bruce?"

"It may take most of the evening. But the wig will keep, and you may think up a better plan in regard to it. Why not substitute another for it while you're at it?"

"By Jove! The very thing!" cried Jack.

"You can get one while you're in town if you like," went on Bruce dryly, "for I'm going to drag you off to town, Tom."

"Good! I'm with you. Mind now," he cautioned his chums, "don't touch that wig until I get back."

They promised, and, though wondering what Bruce had in mind, they asked no questions.

"I guess it's safe to run the guard to-night," remarked Bruce, as he and Tom crossed the campus on their way to the trolley line running into Elmwood.

"Oh, sure," assented our hero. "But what's in the wind?"

"I'm going to prove to you that it would be bad policy to make a class matter of sending Sam to Coventry, or of trying to run him out of the school. And to do that I invite you to have a little lunch with me in town."

"All right," assented Tom, wondering what his friend had in store for him.

A little later they were seated in a private room in one of the Elmwood restaurants much patronized by the students. Bruce ordered a tasty little lunch, and they were in the midst of eating it when there came the sound of several lads entering the next room. There was talk and laughter, somewhat boisterous, and then a voice exclaimed:

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"Sit down, fellows, and make yourselves at home. This is on me and Nick. We'll have a jolly time, and I'll run you back in my car!"

Tom started. "Sam Heller!" he exclaimed, half rising in his seat.

"Keep quiet," advised Bruce. "Of course it's Sam. This is part of my experiment. Now you listen."

There was some more talk and laughter, and then a waiter came to take the orders. Sam called for a rather elaborate lunch, and while it was being gotten ready a voice, which Tom recognized as that of a Sophomore with whom he was slightly acquainted, asked:

"You had great sport this summer, didn't you, Sam?"

"I should say we did! Nick and I helped find a treasure in an old mill."

"Whew!" gasped Tom. "So he found it, did he?"

"Keep quiet," whispered Bruce. "Listen!"

"And what's this I hear about playing a joke on Tom Fairfield, and some of his friends?" asked another voice.

"A joke!" gasped Tom.

"Quiet!" warned his friend.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Sam. "Yes, it was a *joke* all right. You know those fellows happened to go camping near where Nick and I were. We met old Skeel—you know, the prof. who used to be here. Well, he had some scheme of finding a hermit's money hidden in the old mill, and we went in with him. Then we found that Tom and his crowd were on the same trail.

"Nick and I decided to have some fun with 'em. So one day we sneaked into their camp, when Tom was out, and just took Bert, Jack and a fellow named Dick something-or-other prisoners. Say! but they did kick and struggle, but we managed 'em.

"We carted 'em off to the old mill, and there we put 'em in a secret room. It was jolly fun, until Tom came, made quite a row, and got 'em out. But it was all a joke."

"By Jove! and a good one, too!" cried several laughing voices.

"Did you get the treasure?" someone wanted to know.

"Yes, it was there all right. The old hermit got it. I don't know just how that was, for Nick and I left. But I think Tom and the old chap had a row, and part of a wall fell down, showing a secret room. Oh, but you should hear how indignant Jack and Bert got when they found we were standing guard over them! It was as good as a hazing."

"It must have been!" agreed his friends, laughing heartily.

"Aren't they sore on you?" someone asked.

"Oh, well, maybe a bit," admitted Sam, with a show of frankness. "But if a fellow can't take a joke what good is he?"

"That's right!" came in a chorus. "If they make any trouble for you, Sam, let us know."

"I will, but I don't think they will. Ah! here comes the eats! Pitch in, fellows!"

"You're the stuff, Sam!" came from several. "And that sure was a joke on Tom Fairfield and his crowd," added a voice. "A corking good joke!"

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There was more laughter and talk, and in the next room to the jolly party sat Tom, looking at his friend Bruce in wonder.

CHAPTER V

TOM DECIDES

"Well?" asked Bruce questioningly, after a pause. "What do you think of my experiment, Tom?"

"Is this it?"

"It is. Are you ready now to go on with your plan of reading Sam out of the class, so to speak?"

Tom did not answer for a moment.

"Take time to think it over," advised his friend. "You have heard Sam's version of the affair. And it's reasonable to suppose that many will believe him—as many perhaps as would believe you and your chums."

"But he treated Jack and Bert miserably," declared Tom, "he and Nick."

"Of course he did," admitted Bruce. "He isn't denying that. But he makes a joke of it, and it will be hard to convince the Sophomore class that it wasn't done in fun. That's what you're up against, Tom. I rather suspected it would be that way from the first, and that's why I wanted you to hear for yourself just how Sam would tell his side of the story. He makes himself out in rather a better light than you and the others shine in, Tom. And you've got to consider that. I was waiting for a chance to let you hear him talk to some of his friends, but I didn't think I'd have the opportunity so soon. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Again Tom was silent, while from the next room there came the sound of jolly laughter, mingling with the clatter of the dishes and cutlery.

"Here's to Sam Heller!" cried someone, toasting the bully.

"And Nick Johnson!" added another.

"The fellows who know how to play jokes!" put in a third voice, and the toast was drunk amid laughter.

"You see how it is," went on Bruce. "There are a lot of Sophomores in with him—probably some of your own intimate acquaintances, if not friends. They'll side with Sam, after this, no matter how much of a case you make out against him."

"I suppose so," admitted Tom ruefully. "Well, I guess I'll have to let things go by default. There's no use splitting the class in twain."

"That's the way I look at it," said Bruce eagerly, "I'm glad you see it in that light, Tom. Save the class. But if you feel that you are entitled to revenge-----"

"I sure do!" interrupted Tom.

"Then take it privately—some other time," went on Bruce. "Football is coming on now, and you may play on the team—so may Sam. It wouldn't do to have bad feeling-----"

"I understand," said Tom. "I'll let the thing slide for the time being."

"And Jack and Bert?" queried Bruce.

"I'll get them to do the same thing. But there'll be a day of reckoning for that bully all right!" and Tom clenched his fists.

"I don't blame you a bit," admitted Bruce. "Now go ahead with the meal. My experiment is over."

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"Come on," suggested Bruce when he had paid the bill. "What do you say to a walk back to the Hall? It's a fine night, and the tramp will do you good."

"I'm for it," agreed Tom, and they set out.

"Hark!" exclaimed Bruce a little later, pausing in the middle of the road, which was flooded with moonlight. "What's that noise?"

"Auto coming," replied Tom. "Let's pull over here where we won't get so much dust."

As they shifted to the side of the highway they heard the sound of singing from the rear, mingling with the exhaust from a car.

"Elmwood Hall fellows," spoke Tom briefly, as he recognized one of the school songs. "I wonder who they are?"

"Don't know," answered Bruce. "Joy-riders, I guess. The fellows are getting more and more sporty every year."

"Get out!" laughed Tom. "You were as bad as any of us!"

The car came nearer. Tom and Bruce were well over to one side of the road, but in a spirit of mischief the lad at the wheel yelled:

"Get out the way! Give us room! We're the cheese!"

"They've got all the room they're entitled to," murmured Tom, for he and Bruce were on the extreme left of the highway, and the auto should have been on the right.

"Look out!" yelled a voice suddenly. "Pull that wheel over, Sam!"

But it was too late. A moment later Tom felt something strike him on the hip, and he went down in the dust.

"Put on the brakes!"

"You've hit someone, Sam!"

"Pull up!"

These cries followed the striking of Tom. There was a screech from the brake bands and the car came to a quick stop.

"You knocked him down," someone said.

"I don't care. Served him right. No business to get in my way!" snapped Sam.



"Are you hurt, Tom?" asked Bruce anxiously, as he bent over his friend. "Were you hit hard?"

Tom's head cleared. It had struck rather heavily as he went down, yet it was but a passing faintness. He struggled to his feet, with the aid of Bruce, and some of the lads who leaped from the auto.

"I—I guess I'm all right," Tom answered slowly. "What happened?"

"Sam Heller's car struck you," said Bruce quietly. "And it was on the wrong side of the road. Where's Heller?" he asked of some of that lad's friends.

"Here I am," blustered the bully. "What's the matter? I didn't mean to hit him. The steering gear is stiff. I tried to turn out. Anyhow, only the mud guard brushed him. Who is it?"

There was no need to answer for, as the group about our hero parted, Sam Heller came face to face with Tom.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE GRIDIRON

Sam started back, almost as though he expected Tom to strike him, but our hero did not raise his hand. There came a grim tightening of his lips, and into his eyes that had been dazed by the fall there was a look of anger, but that was all.

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“By Jove! Fairfield!” exclaimed Sam. “I—I didn’t know it was you. I wouldn’t for the world have-----”

“I suppose if it had been someone else you’d have ridden right over him,” said Tom quietly.

“No, indeed. But—er—I guess I was going a bit too fast. I didn’t see you—or—rather, I thought you’d step over a bit more.”

“Step over more!” exclaimed Bruce. “What do you want; the whole road? We were on the proper side for you to pass. What’s the matter with you, Heller?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to do it I tell you. My car is a new one, and the steering gear is a bit stiff. I wouldn’t have done it intentionally for the world.”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Frank Nelson, a Sophomore who had been riding on the front seat with Sam. “I thought Tom would get out of the way.”

“Thanks,” responded Tom briefly. “I would have, if I’d known what was going to happen.”

“Are you—are you hurt—much?” faltered Sam.

“No, it was only a glancing blow,” and Tom began to brush the dust from his clothes, assisted by Bruce and some of those with Sam.

“I—I’m sorry,” faltered the owner of the car. “I wouldn’t have done that for anything, and-----”

“Especially after the ‘trick’ you played on my friends this summer,” cut in Tom.

“Oh, I say now,” began Sam. “Look here, Fairfield, I’m as sorry as can be over this. Will you—will you shake hands?” and he advanced with outstretched palm.

“I will—not!” said Tom sharply, turning aside.

There was a moment of tense silence, and then Sam went on:

“Well, if you won’t—you won’t—that’s all. I’ve done my share.”

“That’s right,” chimed in some of his cronies, including Nick Johnson.

"It was an accident, anyhow," the latter added.

"An *avoidable* accident," put in Bruce quietly. "You are lucky it was no worse, Heller. Tom might have been seriously injured."

"A miss is as good as a mile," quoted someone. "Better give him a lift back, Sam. I'll walk."

"Will you ride in the car?" asked Sam, half eagerly, for he realized how popular Tom was, and he knew how thin was the ice on which he was skating. "Come on, there's lots of room."

"No—thank you," said Tom between his teeth, and it was an effort to add the last two words. "I can walk."

There was a little pause—an embarrassed silence, and then Nick said:

"Well, we might as well go on, Sam."

"Yes, I guess so. We can't do any good here. Come on, fellows."

They piled back into the car. There were some good-nights in which Sam and his crony did not join, and then the auto rolled off in the moonlight.

"Can you walk, Tom?" asked Bruce, with his arm around his friend's shoulders.

"Oh, yes. I'm a bit stiff, that's all."

"Too bad. This is my fault. You may be lame for football practice now."

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"No, I guess not. I'll use some liniment when I get back. It wasn't your fault at all. It was that Heller's confounded meanness, and I've a good notion to-----"

"You're not going to make a row over it; are you!" asked Bruce quickly. "You won't go back on what you said?"

"No, but I'll watch my chance for getting back at him. I almost believe he did it deliberately."

"I hardly think so, though it was mighty careless of him. But we might as well be getting on. It isn't far to the Hall now."

Tom found himself a trifle stiff and lame but he could walk all right, though with a slight limp. Bruce bade him good-night and passed on to his own dormitory, while Tom silently made his way to the room he had picked out for himself and his chums. There was a light burning in it, though it was after hours.

"Guess all rules are suspended for a while yet," mused our hero as he entered. "Well, we'll pass the wig joke for a while. I forgot to get one anyhow."

"Hello, what's up?" demanded Bert, who was getting ready for bed.

"Steam roller hit you?" inquired Jack. "Why, your head is cut, Tom!"

"Yes, I had a little go with Sam Heller's auto, and I got the worst of it," and our hero told his story of the evening.

"The cad!" cried Jack. "We'll fix him for this. I almost wish you hadn't given Bruce that promise, Tom."

"Oh, that's all right. There are more ways of getting back at Sam than making a class matter of it. Let's forget all about it. Whew! but I'm stiff. Any of you fellows got any liniment?"

"I have," declared Bert, producing a bottle of highly-flavored compound. "It's home-made but it goes to the spot," and Tom was soon bathing his injured hip, and telling the story of Bruce's "experiment." Much against their desires his chums promised with Tom not to proceed against Sam and Nick.

Elmwood Hall began to buzz and hum with activities, not alone of lessons and lectures, but of sports and the rumors of sports. There were also whispers of hazings to come, and the luckless Freshmen cowered in their rooms, and trembled at the sound of a knock on their portals.

“Did you see the notice?” exclaimed Jack one afternoon as he rushed into the room he shared with Tom and Bert.

“What notice?” asked Bert. “Has that sneak Heller left? If he has it will save trouble later.”

“No such luck,” was the answer. “But football practice starts to-morrow on the gridiron. Hurray! Let’s get out our suits, and see how many holes there are in ’em.”

Books were tossed aside, and from the trunks were pulled the jackets and trousers that had seen yeoman service.

“Mine are all right,” announced Tom.

“Whew! There’s an all-fired big rip here,” declared Jack, as he viewed his trousers.

“Anyone got a needle and thread with ’em?”

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"Use some wire," suggested Bert. "That's what I do. Thread won't hold."

And then began a busy session for the chums.

It was the day of the first football practice. Out on the field assembled half a hundred lads from whom the leading school team would be picked. There were at least a dozen lads for every position, and only a few positions to fill, for many of the former players had come back.

"What are you going to try for, Tom?" asked Bert, as he delivered a beautiful drop kick down the field.

"One of the backs—left half for choice."

"Here comes Morse," remarked Jack, as the captain came into sight, surrounded by a score of lads seeking to curry favor.

"And there's Jackson, the coach," added Tom. "He's got a suit on. Guess he'll go in for practice."

The field soon became a scene of activity. From one side two lads strolled from under the grandstand where some of the dressing rooms were, and advanced toward the coach and captain.

"There are Heller and Johnson," said Bert in a low voice. "They're going to have a try, too."

"Did you hear where Sam wants to play?" asked Tom.

"No," answered his chums.

"Come on now, boys, line up!" called the captain. "We'll play a scrub game. Hecker, Miller, Jones, Reilley, you'll be on the scrub for a while," and Morse called on other names to make an eleven.

"Regular team over here!" went on the young captain—"that is what's left of 'em. Tom Fairfield, you'll be left half, I guess. Bert, get in at guard, though I may change you later. Jack, you'll do at tackle, I think."

"Where am I to play?" asked Sam Heller as though it was all settled—that is all but naming his position. "I'd like to go in at quarterback."

Morse looked at him. So did the coach, and the latter nodded at the captain.

“Very well, Heller. Try it at quarter,” assented Morse, “though I can’t promise to always play you there in matches. Now then line up. Tom will take the ball for a try through the scrub. Be careful in passing it, Heller.”

There was rather a gasp of astonishment from the other players and some of the spectators as the two enemies were thus brought into the limelight. As for Tom, he felt a sinking at his heart, for he realized that Sam had it in his power to make or mar his play by the manner in which he passed the ball.

“But they shan’t say it was my fault!” said Tom grimly to himself. “I’ll play a straight game, and if Heller wants to do any crooked work—well, let him, that’s all!”

CHAPTER VII

A CROSS-COUNTRY RUN

“Line up! Line up!”

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It was the call of the coach and captain to the improvised regular eleven and the scrub. Twenty-two rather nervous lads faced each other—no, not all of the twenty-two were nervous, for there were some veterans—warriors of past battles—who were as cool as the proverbial cucumber. But the new lads—those who hoped to make the first eleven—were undoubtedly nervous. And so, too, were some of those who had played before, for they had not yet found themselves this season, and they did not know but what their playing might be so poor and ragged that they would be ordered to the side lines.

“Line up! Line up!”

Again came the stirring cry. The scrub team, under the leadership of their captain, withdrew for a short consultation regarding signals, and to plan how best to stop the rushes of the regular lads. The latter, under the guidance of Morse, were ready to put the ball into play, for the captain and coach had decided to see what value their side was in rushing tactics, before going on the defense.

“All ready now, boys!” exclaimed the coach briskly. “Get into the plays on the jump. You can do twice as well if you have speed than if you have not. Hit the defense hard, get some momentum back of you. A moving body, and all that sort of thing you know, that you learn in your physics class.

“Jump into the plays. Meet the ball; don’t wait for it to get to you. That applies to you backs,” and he nodded at Tom and his two mates. “Quarter, don’t fumble when you pass the ball back. Be accurate. Don’t make a mistake in the signals.

“You guards and tackles, hold hard. Tear holes big enough for the man with the ball to get through. Don’t be afraid. Ends, you want to get down like lightning on kicks. Nail in his tracks the man who catches the ball, but don’t, for the love of the pigskin, touch him until he has it, or you’ll be offside. Watch out for fake kicks, forward passes, double passes—watch out for all tricks. If there’s a fumble, fall on the ball and stay there, unless you see a chance to run with it. You fellows who expect to do any toe work, don’t get nervous. The boys will hold the others back until you get a chance to boot the ball away. And you fellows in the line, see that you do hold.

“There!” concluded the coach with a sigh. “I’ve given you enough football instructions to last all season. Now get busy and let’s see how much of it you remember.”

“Line up!” cried Captain Morse Denton, and, the preliminaries having been arranged, the ball was kicked off by the scrub, as the other players wanted to see how well they could rush it back.

It was Tom’s luck to capture the yellow spheroid as it descended, and, well protected by interference, he raced down the field.

“Get him, fellows! Get him!” appealed the scrub captain, and several made an effort to break through to tackle Tom. Our hero noticed that Sam Heller was running interference for him on the left, and for a moment Tom felt that perhaps he had misjudged Sam in one particular.

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"He certainly is making good interference for me," mused our hero. "Maybe he won't play me false after all. But I'm going to be on the watch."

There was now but the scrub fullback between Tom and the opposite goal line, though it was some distance away. Most of the leading team lads, streaming and straggling along, were shouting to encourage Tom.

"Go on! Go on!"

"Touchdown! Touchdown!"

"Good run, Tom old man!"

Tom was getting into his stride. Sam was just ahead of him seemingly getting ready to bowl over the scrub fullback, who was racing down the field, eager-eyed, to tackle Tom.

"If Sam disposes of him I will make a touchdown," mused Tom, and then Sam and the fullback came together. Sam went down in a heap at the first impact, and the fullback—who was Henry Everett—came on, scarcely hindered.

The next moment he tackled Tom and threw him heavily, though Tom kept possession of the ball.

"Down!" gasped Tom, as he felt the weight of his opponent. The latter arose.

"Got you; didn't I?" he asked, grinning.

"Yes," replied Tom, looking to where Sam Heller was leisurely getting to his feet. Our hero watched his enemy narrowly. Was it only a fancy, or was it true that Sam had not made half a try to throw off the interference of the fullback?

"You were easy," laughed the scrub lad. "I thought I was going to have trouble with you, Sam, but you were easy."

"Aw, my foot slipped, and I fell, or you wouldn't have gotten me," asserted Sam, but to Tom's ears, somehow, the words did not ring true.

"I believe he deliberately let Everett get me so I wouldn't have the honor of making a touchdown," thought our hero.

The players ran up to Tom.

"Good work, old man!" complimented Coach Jackson.

"Some run, Tom," added the captain. "Come on now, line up boys, and we'll walk through 'em!"

"Yes you will—nit!" jeered the scrub captain.

As Tom was panting from his long run, the other halfback was sent at the line with the ball. He did not gain much, and then the fullback was allowed to try. He gained a few feet.

"We'd better kick," whispered the captain to Sam, who was giving the signals.

"No, keep the ball," advised the coach. "I want the boys to have practice in bucking the line. Let Fairfield try again. He has his wind back now."

"All right," assented Morse, nodding at Sam, who began to give the signal.

Tom stiffened, ready to take the pigskin, and, at the same time he moved up a little nearer Sam, for somehow, he felt that the passing of his enemy might not be just accurate. And it was well that he did, for the quarterback threw the ball short.

"Look out!" cried the captain, but his warning was not needed, for Tom made a jump and met the pigskin. With it safely tucked under his arm, he made a jump between guard and tackle in the hole made for him by his players, and completed the gaining of the necessary distance.

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"Down!" he panted, as nearly half a score of lads threw themselves on top of him.
"Down!"

"Good work, old man!" the captain shouted in his ear. "Great line-bucking!"

"But almost a fumble!" came the sharp voice of Coach Jackson. "What was the matter, Fairfield? You nearly dropped the ball."

"It wasn't passed accurately," asserted Tom.

"Aw, go on! It was so!" snapped Sam.

"Well, don't let it happen again," advised the coach. "Fumbles are costly—they mean the loss of a game many a time. Watch yourselves!"

The play went on, with the luckless scrubs being shoved slowly back toward their own goal. There they took a brace, and held for downs, getting the ball. They quickly kicked it out of danger, and then the regulars went to work to do it all over again.

Tom was called on several times, and, though he watched Sam narrowly, there was no further cause for complaint about the passing of the ball.

"Maybe it was a mistake," thought Tom, "but I'm going to be on the lookout just the same. I don't trust Sam Heller."

"That will do for to-day," called the coach, after two touchdowns had been rolled up against the scrub, Tom making one of them. "Take a good shower and a rub now, all of you, scrub included, for there's no telling when I may want one of you scrub lads on the first team. You're doing pretty well," he allowed himself to compliment them. "But there's lots to be done yet. We're only beginning. Morse, come here, I want to talk to you," and captain and coach walked off the gridiron, arm in arm.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Jack of Tom, as the two came out of the gymnasium, glowing from a rub and shower.

"Oh, it seemed to go all right."

"Heller try any mean tricks?" asked Bert.

"I thought he did, but maybe I was mistaken. Oh, but I got one beaut kick on the shin," and Tom gently massaged the leg in question.

"Some lad tried to gouge out one of my eyes," added Bert.

“And if I have any skin left on my nose I’m lucky,” asserted Jack, trying to look cross-eyed at his nasal member.

“It’s just a little sunburned,” said Tom, with a laugh. “I guess we’ll have a team after a bit.”

“Sure!” chorused his chums.

Practice went on for several days after this, and there were a number of changes of position made, though Sam was still at quarterback, and Tom held his same place.

“Now, fellows, we’re going to have a little different form of exercise to-morrow,” announced the coach, at the conclusion of a short game one afternoon. “I want you all to take part in a cross-country run. It will improve your wind, and work some of the fat off you fellows that can stand losing it. It will be good for your legs, too.

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"We'll start from the gym after last lectures, hit the turnpike for Aldenhurst, cross the river at Weldon, circle up the hill through Marsden, and come back along the river road. You can go in bunches, or singly as you choose, but you must all make those towns, and there'll be checkers at each one to see that you don't skip. It's only fifteen miles, and you ought to do it in four hours without turning a hair. There'll be a five-hour time limit, and those who don't make all the checking points, and report back by eight o'clock will be scratched off the active football list. That's all."

A silence followed the announcement of the coach, and then came several murmurs of disapproval.

"Fifteen miles!" came from Sam Heller. "That's a stiff run all right."

"I should say yes," agreed Nick Johnson.

"Can't we shorten it in some way?" asked Sam of his crony in a whisper, but not so low that Tom did not overhear him.

"Dry up!" commanded Nick. "I'll see. Maybe we can cut off a few miles. Fifteen is too much!"

"He sure is working us," said Jack to Tom.

"And a time limit," added Bert, with a note of grievance in his voice.

"Oh pshaw!" exclaimed, Tom. "Anyone would think you fellows had never tramped before. Why in camp you thought nothing of doing twenty miles in a day."

"But we could take our time," asserted Bert.

"Nonsense! We always did better than four miles an hour and never minded it. Come on, be sports! We'll go together, won't we?"

"Sure," said Bert. "Well, if it has to be, it has to—that's all. Hang it! I wonder if I want to play football anyhow?"

"Of course you do," said Tom. "We'll have some fun on the run. And think of the supper we will eat after it. I'm going to see if we can't have a little something extra."

And he went to the kitchen of the eating hall where he and his chums dined, to wheedle the chef into serving generous portions after the cross-country run.

CHAPTER VIII

LOST IN THE WOODS

“Fairfield, Fitch, Wilson, Abbot,” remarked the official checker-out, as Tom and his three chums trotted out of the door of the gymnasium on the afternoon of the cross-country run. “All right boys. Getting away in good time,” and the Senior student who was acting in the official capacity smiled in rather a patronizing manner. “Now if you check in together you’ll be doing well. Take it easy. You haven’t got much of a run, and you’ve oceans of time to do it in.”

“Huh! I guess you think this isn’t much of a Marathon,” remarked Jack, pausing to address the checker, who had marked their names down on a slip of paper.

“Neither it is, son,” came the answer. “In my day we had lots of stiffer ones.”

“And did the fellows all make good?” asked Tom, for though he and his chums had spent one year at Elmwood Hall this was the first big run they had taken part in, and on it depended much—their chance to play on the big eleven.

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"Oh, most of 'em did," replied the Senior. "Of course some couldn't stand the pace, and others wouldn't. But, as I say, it was stiffer in those days. I don't know what the world is coming to, anyhow," and he looked as though he had on his shoulders a large share of the responsibility of regulating the universe. "You'd better cut away, fellows," he added, "for, though you've got lots of time, it's better to loaf on the other end of the run than on this one. Hike!"

"He doesn't give himself any airs; does he? Oh no!" exclaimed Bert sarcastically, as he jogged along beside his chums.

"Oh, that's the way with all Seniors," said Jack.

"I hope we'll not be," murmured Tom.

"Do you think we will?" asked George Abbot. "I wonder what makes Seniors think they're so high and mighty? Do you think we'll make this run? Will-----"

"Foolish question number six thousand four hundred and twenty-one!" interrupted Tom, with a laugh. "Now if you're going to start on your interrogatory stunt, Georgie my lad, you'll make this run alone. I'm not going to get dry in the roof of my mouth answering questions."

"All right, I won't ask any more," promised the lad who was such a questioner.

"I wonder who are just ahead of us?" asked Bert, as he stopped a second to tie a loose shoe lace.

"Let's ask," suggested Tom.

He halted and hurled back this question at the checking Senior, who sat near the door of the gymnasium.

"Who's ahead of us, Rockford?"

"Let's see," and the checker consulted his slips. "Oh, Sam Heller and Nick Johnson," he answered. "They've got four minutes start of you."

"All right; thanks!" shouted Tom, as he again took up his stride.

"Say, let's pass 'em," suggested Jack. "I'd rather be ahead of 'em, than behind, anyhow."

"All right," assented Tom. "Shall we pass 'em now, or later?"

"Oh, wait a bit," said Bert. "Let's get our second wind, first."

This suited the others, and they jogged along at an easy pace. The day was pleasant, not too warm, and there was a refreshing breeze when one got on the hilltops. The run was through a rolling country, and the roads were in good condition.

“Say, this is fun!” exclaimed Bert, when they had covered the first half mile. “I like it better than I thought I would.”

“Wait a bit,” advised Jack. “It hasn’t half started yet. When you’ve done about ten miles the next five will seem twice as long.”

On they swung, down a slope that made for easy going. When they topped the next rise Jack uttered an exclamation:

“There are a couple of lads just ahead of us,” he said, pointing down in a small valley into which the runners must now descend.

“And if they aren’t Sam Heller and his crony I’m a goat!” said Tom. “That’s Sam’s run, all right.”

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"So it is," agreed Bert. "Shall we make a sprint and pass 'em?"

"Oh, there's time enough yet," said George. "Don't let's rush things."

They accepted this easy way out of it, and, as a matter of fact, none of them cared very much about passing Sam and Nick. They jogged down the slope, to strike a level stretch, and, by this time, Sam and his companion were out of sight beyond a turn in the road.

"There's Aldenhurst!" exclaimed Tom at length, as they came in view of a small but pretty village.

"And if there isn't a soda water stand in it I'm going to make a complaint to the police!" gasped Bert. "I'm as dry as a fish."

"Don't fill up on trash," advised Tom. "The rules said that was bad to do;" for a few simple directions as to the best way of making the run had been circulated by Coach Jackson.

"Well, I'm going to swab out with seltzer, anyhow," declared Jack, "rules or no rules."

"Oh, I guess that won't hurt," admitted Tom, and a little later they had lined up before a crossroads grocery, in front of which was the magical sign: "Ice Cold Soda!"

"Ginger ale! Birch beer! Sasp'rilla! Cream sody!" rattled off the snub-nosed and freckle-faced lad behind the counter, when our four friends filed in and asked for some cool drink. "That's all I've got."

"Any seltzer?" asked Tom, who knew the risk of taking into an over-heated system the artificially flavored and colored concoctions that pass current as summer drinks.

"Seltzer?" queried the lad. "Do you mean that there fizzy stuff that squirts all over when you press down on the handle of the bottle?"

"That's her!" laughed Jack. "Pass it out—if it's cold."

"Oh, it's cold all right, but nobody around here likes it," volunteered the lad. "I took some once, and it tasted like salt water with needles in it. I'd rather have strawberry pop."

"Seltzer's good for your system, son. Pass it out," ordered Tom, with a laugh at the description of the mineral water, and the lad went to a big refrigerator where, after moving out some tubs of butter, and some bottles of milk, he came upon the seltzer which he set before our heroes.

“That’s good!” exclaimed Tom, as he drained his glass, and then, after a brief rest, they started off on the cross-country run again, waving farewell to the lad who had so aptly characterized the seltzer.

They crossed the river at Weldon, and circled up the hill to Marsden. There the going was stiff, and they realized why Jackson had given them such leeway in time, for the slope was a steep one.

“This is good for our legs,” remarked Jack, as he plodded on.

“Yes, and Sam and Nick seem to be still ahead of us,” remarked Tom. “They’re keeping up well—better than I thought they would.”

“Unless they’ve taken a short cut,” suggested George.

“They have to check in at Marsden,” said Bert.

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"Well, they may take a cut there. However, it doesn't matter," said Tom.

It was beginning to get dusk now, the September days being short. There were about five miles of the run left when the four lads paused at a wayside farmhouse located at the fork of the highway to make sure they were on the right route to reach the river road.

"Yes, you kin git to it this way," remarked a tall, lanky lad, who was hanging over the front gate, seemingly waiting for someone. "There's a bad hill, though."

"Is there any other road to the river?" asked Tom.

"Yes, you kin cut through the woods, and it's level all the way," was the answer. "I'd take that road."

"But we don't want a *shorter* way," said Tom quickly. "We're doing a school endurance run," he explained, "and we have to cover just so many miles. We don't want to cheat."

"Oh, you won't cheat," chuckled the farm lad. "If any thing it's longer through them woods," and he pointed to a patch of forest just ahead. "There's a wagon road through them trees, that comes out on the river road. The only difference is that it cuts off the hill."

"Then let's take it!" suggested Jack. "I hate hills, and it's all right as long as we cover the distance. There's no more checking to be done until we hit the gym. I say let's take to the woods."

"All right," agreed Tom. "Is the path a plain one?" he asked the lad. "We don't want to get lost."

"Oh, yes, it's plain enough. A couple of other fellows passed here a while ago, and I told them about it."

"Sam Heller, and Nick, I'll wager!" exclaimed Bert.

"Sure," assented Jack. "Much obliged," he called to the farm lad, as the four struck off toward the woods.

"Maybe you won't be—after a bit," murmured the lad, as he turned away from the gate, a twinkle coming into his pig-like eyes. "I earned that dollar easy enough—jest directin' 'em to the wood-road," and he looked at a bill crumpled in his hand. "I never made money any easier. Them two fellers, jest ahead, who told me to direct the next bunch into the woods, must have lots of coin. I guess it'll be a while afore them four lads strike the river, goin' through the woods," and, chuckling, he went into the house, after a look at Tom and his chums.

“Say it’s going to be dark before we get back,” remarked George, when they were well within the woods. “I wonder if we can see?”

“Sure,” asserted Tom. “The trees are cut away at the top and it’s going to be moonlight a little later. This is a good road, and, even if it’s longer than the other, we cut off a big hill. We can explain how we came to take it, and it’s fair as long as we do the distance.”

“If we only get in on time,” murmured Bert.

“Oh, I guess we will,” said Jack.

Together they jogged on. It became more and more dark, and, as the wood road was not in the best of condition, they stumbled over roots and tree branches. But, as Tom said, it was light enough to see their way fairly well.



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"Say!" exclaimed Jack, after nearly an hour spent in tramping the woodland path, "this doesn't seem just right. The road is narrower than it was at first."

"Let's strike a match and take a look," suggested Tom.

"And we ought to have been at the river some time ago," added Bert. "I wonder if we came right?"

Tom lighted a match, and set fire to a wisp of bark. It blazed up brightly, and as he held it to the ground he cried out:

"Fellows, we're off the main road. We must have made a turn in the dark. We're on some by-path."

"Then turn back right away!" exclaimed Bert.

They did, using the torch to see by. But, after they had retraced their steps for fifteen minutes, Tom again called a halt.

"Fellows!" he said, "there's no use going on.

"Why not?" asked Jack.

"Because we're lost. We've been going around in a circle. There's the same fallen beech tree we passed a little while ago. We're lost!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ANGRY FARMER

Everyone had come to a halt, and, while the bark torch burned dimly his three companions gazed blankly at Tom.

"What's that you said?" asked Jack, as if he had not comprehended.

"We're lost!" repeated Tom.

"Come again!" invited Bert. "You're jollying us!"

"Indeed I'm not!" exclaimed Tom indignantly. "You can see for yourself that we've passed this place before. Here are some of the ashes I knocked off the bark torch," and he showed his chums the place where he had hit the burning bark against a stone.

"That's right," Bert and the others were forced to admit.

“Well, what are we going to do about it?” asked Jack. “We’re lost—that’s evident and we don’t need a pair of opera glasses to see it. But how are we going to get back to school? Or even on the right road? I wish we’d stuck to the way, even if it did go up hill. This taking of short cuts never did appeal to me, anyhow.”

“But we didn’t take a short cut,” insisted Tom. “We took a long cut, and that’s the trouble.”

“I wonder if that farm fellow directed us wrong on purpose?” asked George.

“He might have,” said Jack. “And yet what would have been his object?” If he could have seen that same farm-hand gloating over a crumpled dollar bill about that time, Jack might have found an answer to his inquiry.

“Well, there’s no use going into that part of it,” spoke Tom. “The question is, what are we going to do?”

“Get back on the main road as soon as we can,” suggested Bert, “and stick to it, hills or no hills, I never wanted to come this way anyhow.”

“Neither did I,” asserted Tom, a bit nettled.

In a short time they had several improvised torches, made of bark, and, each one lighting his own, and holding it down close to the ground, they started off again.

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"Here comes a shower!" exclaimed Tom, as he felt the first drops of a September storm. "Lucky we got the dry bark in time."

"Say, but this is punk!" grumbled Bert, as he stumbled on in the half-darkness.

By carefully noting the path, and keeping to it, they managed to avoid going in a circle again. Their torches smoked and spluttered, as the rain increased, and, though they were under the shelter of trees, they soon were quite wet.

"Cross-country runs!" murmured Jack, as he stepped into a bog-hole up to his ankles. "No more for yours truly!"

"It's all in the game," said Tom, with a laugh. "We'll soon be out of it."

"We're out of it now," snapped Bert, looking at his watch. "We've got half an hour to make the gym, for it's half-past seven now, and I'll wager a can of beans that we're five miles from it."

"Not as bad as that," asserted Tom. "We may make it yet, if we can strike a good road. This looks like something here, fellows," he added, as he emerged from the woodland path upon a firm footing. "It is!" he cried a moment later. "I guess we can make it now! Come on!"

Holding his torch of bark above his head, Tom led the way. He was quite sure of himself now, even though he did not know just where the path was coming out. It was broadening as he advanced, and he was positive it did not lead deeper into the woods.

"Ugh!" suddenly grunted Tom, as he came to an abrupt halt.

"What's wrong?" asked Jack.

"I ran into a fence, or something. Yes, It's a fence," Tom went on. "We must have struck some sort of a farm."

"I wish it was the one where that fellow works," put in Jack. "I'd like to rub his nose in the mud for sending us on the wrong path."

"There's a light over there!" cried Bert, as he and the others came up to where Tom had come to a halt at the barrier. It was a rail fence of the "snake" variety, and Tom had run full tilt into it in the darkness, his torch having burned out.

"A light!" cried Bert. "That means a house, or some sort of human habitation. Let's head for it, fellows, and maybe we can get on the right road."

"Over the fence is out!" cried Jack, as he leaped the barrier. "Come on, fellows!"

The others followed him, the torch of George being the only one aglow.

"It's a cornfield!" cried Tom, as he landed in it. "Look out, and don't trample too much of it down."

"Oh, it's only late fodder corn, and I guess it won't matter much," was Jack's opinion, as he floundered on through the field. They could hear him crashing down the corn stalks, and being wet, tired and miserable, and perhaps a little unthinking, the others did the same thing.

"Head for the light!" called George. "My torch is on the blink."

It went out a moment later, and in the darkness and rain the lads stumbled on. The light grew plainer as they advanced toward it, and, in a little while, trampling through the corn, they saw a farm house just beyond the field through which they had come.

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"That's not where the fellow lives who sent us wrong," asserted Jack, and the others agreed with him.

"Now to see where we are," suggested Tom, as he vaulted another fence, and found himself in the big front yard of a farmhouse. There was a barking of dogs, and, as Tom's chums followed his lead, a door opened, letting out a flood of light, and a rasping voice asked:

"Who's there? What d'ye want this time of night?"

"We're from Elmwood Hall," replied Tom. "We were out on a cross-country run, and we lost our way. Can you direct us to the river road?"

"Which way did you come," the rasping voice went on, and a man, with a small bunch of whiskers on his chin, stood in the lamp-illuminated doorway.

"Through the woods," said Tom. "We got lost there."

"And then we cut through a cornfield," went on Jack.

"Through a cornfield!" cried the farmer in accents of anger. "D'ye mean t' say you tromped through my field of corn?"

"I—I'm afraid we did," answered Tom ruefully. "We couldn't see in the dark, and it was the only way to come. I hope we didn't do much damage."

"Well, if ye did ye'll pay for it!" snapped the man, as he came from the doorway. "I don't allow nobody t' tromp through my prize corn. I'll have th' law on ye fer this, that's what I will! Knocked down my corn; did ye? Well, ye kin find th' road the best way ye like now. I'll never tell ye. And I want t' see how much damage ye done. You wait till I git a lantern. Tromped through my corn! That's jest like you good-fer-nothin' school snips! I'll fix ye fer this all right, or my name ain't Jed Appleby!"

CHAPTER X

A HAY STACK FIRE

Cold, wet and altogether miserable, Tom and his chums stood in the farmer's yard, waiting for they scarcely knew what. Their reception had been anything but cordial, and, considering that they were unaware that they had done any damage to the field of corn, it was almost unwarranted.

"Well, what do you know about this?" asked Bert, as he took off his cap and dashed the rain drops from it.

"I don't know much," replied Jack, dubiously as he turned the collar of his coat closer up around his neck.

"He's a cheerful chap—not," murmured George.

"He might at least treat us decently," said Tom, and there was a note of defiance in his voice. "If we've damaged his corn I'm willing to pay for it, but he might at least direct us to the road."

"That's right," chimed in Jack. "What's he doing now?"

"Getting a lantern, from the looks of things," replied Bert. The farmer had gone to the barn and in a few moments he returned carrying a light that swung to and fro, casting queer fantastic shadows on the rain-soaked ground.

"Now I'll see what sort of damage ye done t' my corn!" grumbled the man. "I don't see what right a passel of youngsters have t' tramp through a man's field for, anyhow?"

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"We got lost, I told you!" exclaimed Tom, a bit provoked. "We didn't do it on purpose. If we've done any damage we're responsible for it."

"Yes, I know what that means!" sneered the man. By this time he was at the fence over which the boys had leaped into his yard, and, swinging the lantern about, he endeavored to see how much damage had been done to his corn.

"Tromped down! A whole passel of ye tromped it down!" he muttered. "I thought so, an' that's my best field, too! I've a notion t' have ye arrested fer trespass."

"Oh, be sensible," ripped out Tom, who was fast losing his temper, a thing that seldom occurred to him. "Tell us what the damage is, and I'll settle. And then tell us how we can get on the river road, and back to Elmwood Hall."

"Huh! A nice lot of school boys you are!" sneered the, man. "Th' fust thing they ought t' teach ye is manners! Spilin' a man's corn!"

"Can't you say what the damage is?" put in Jack.

"No, I can't—not until mornin', anyhow."

"Then tell us how to get on the right road, and you can send your bill to Elmwood Hall. Fairfield is my name—Tom Fairfield," cried our hero.

"Oh, I'll send you the bill all right," snapped the farmer. "I'll attend to that, and ye'll pay th' last cent due, too, let me tell you that!"

"All right," agreed Tom with a sigh. "I suppose you'll charge us double, but we've got to expect that from such as you."

"What do you mean?" snapped, the man swinging his lantern up so he could see Tom's face.

"You know what I mean! You don't seem to want to be reasonable. Now, if it's all the same to you, will you kindly direct us to the right road? And as soon as your bill comes in I'll settle it, though I want to say that we had no idea of injuring your corn, and wouldn't have gotten into your field but that we got lost."

"Huh! That's a likely story. I know you fresh young school squabs!"

"Oh, where's the road?" asked Tom impatiently. "We don't care much for your opinions!"

"Find it yourself!" snapped the man. "I'll not show you, and the sooner you get off my property the better for you!"

“Humph! I can’t say that I admire your disposition,” spoke Tom, in exasperation, for he was cold and wet, and the prospect of reporting in late, and making a failure of the cross-country run, was not pleasant.

“None of your sass!” growled the man. “Be off, now, or I’ll turn the dogs loose!”

With another look at the trampled rows of corn he went into the house, taking the lantern with him, and shutting the door after him. It seemed darker than ever in the farmyard with the light gone, and the rain was coming down in torrents.

“Nice prospect!” murmured George.

“What are we going to do?” asked Bert.

“He’s the man with the original grouch all right,” contributed Jack. “Where’ll we go?”

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"Over this way!" called Tom, who had been looking about. "I think I see something like a gate leading into a lane. It may take us to a road. Come on."

They followed him, splashing through the mud puddles and darkness. Then came a flash of lightning, which showed them the lane in question. It did lead into the road, and a little later they were on the river highway, headed toward the Hall.

"Let's run and get warmed up," proposed Bert, and they set off on a dog trot.

"I wonder if any of the others are as badly off as we are?" spoke Jack.

"I hope not," came from George.

"I suppose we're out of the running," remarked Bert. "It must be after eight."

"Half-past," said Tom, managing to see the dial of his watch by a lightning flash.

"Ugh!" grunted Jack. "It's all up with us."

In silence they plowed on, and a little later they saw the welcome lights of Elmwood Hall.

"Humph! Late, young gentlemen," remarked Mr. Porter, the proctor, as they filed in the gate. "Report to Doctor Meredith at once."

"It was an accident—we got lost," explained Bert.

"And a crusty old farmer wouldn't show us the road," added Tom.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help it. Report to the doctor," was all the satisfaction they received.

But the head master was not at all unkind about it. He listened to their explanation, and consoled them for their ill luck.

They managed to get something to eat, and then, paying a surreptitious visit to the rooms of some of their chums, they learned that they were fully three-quarters of an hour later in coming back than were the last of the stragglers.

"Did Sam and Nick make good time?" asked Tom, of the football captain.

"Very good, yes. They were among the first ones in. I'm sorry about you boys."

"I suppose we're out of the game," hinted Jack.

"Well, not altogether, but it'll set you back. However, I'll do what I can. Better turn in now. You must be tired."

“Tired isn’t a name for it!” groaned Bert. “I’ll sleep like a locomotive to-night.”

They were all slumbering almost as soon as they tumbled into bed, and, though they had been well soaked, they experienced no ill effects the next morning.

To their delight the football captain and coach said nothing about their ill-luck in being outside the time limit for the cross-country run, and they went to practice as usual.

“Huh! I wonder if they call that fair?” sneered Sam, when he saw his enemy, and the latter’s friends, in their usual places.

“It’s not right,” asserted Nick, “after we made the run, and got in on time.”

“Well, you didn’t get lost in the woods,” said George Abbot, who was at least on speaking terms with Sam and his crony. “A farm fellow told us to take the wrong road to avoid a hill.”

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"Did he?" asked Sam, and there was a trace of a smile on his face. "Well, you can't always trust farm hands," and he nudged Nick in the ribs, though George did not see it.

Two days later Doctor Meredith called Tom to his office.

"There has been a complaint made against you," said the school head. "Trampling down the corn of one—er—Jed Appleby——" went on Doctor Meredith, reading from a memoranda. "He says you agreed to pay for it, and his bill is—ten dollars!"

"What!" cried Tom. "We didn't do half that damage! But I'm willing to pay."

"And after this, please be careful not to annoy the farmers hereabout," warned the head of the school. "We have to guard against the students doing that."

"I'll be careful," promised Tom grimly. "Ten dollars! Whew!" he exclaimed, as he took the bill and went out. "If he got a dollar he'd be getting more than the corn we trampled was worth. But I'll not dispute it. Only I'll get square with him," he boasted to his chums.

On going to pay the amount assessed against him, Tom found that the possessions of Mr. Appleby extended to within a short distance of the school grounds. At least one of the farmer's hay fields did, being connected to a main road by a long lane.

"And if he'd been decent," mused Tom, on his way back, after settling the score, "he could have shown us the way through his hay field, and we might have gotten into the Hall on time. The old grouch!"

He cut through the lot, passing a big pile of hay that was stacked and thatched for winter.

"Well, did you fix him up?" asked Jack, as his chum entered the room on his return.

"I did—worse luck to him. Some day we'll have to have the white-caps visit him, or treat him to a coat of tar and feathers. It isn't the ten dollars that I mind so much as it is being gouged by a farmer. I'll get square though!"

It was several nights after this that Tom, gathering up some packages from his dresser, slipped on his coat and cap.

"Where you going?" asked Jack, yawning and tossing aside a book he had been pretending to study.

"Oh, just out for a walk," replied Tom, evasively.

"Want any company?"



"I'll be right back," was the remark, which would seem to indicate that company was not desired.

"All right. Bring me back some peanuts if you go past Pop's place," and Jack tossed over a dime.

Tom's chums were in bed when he returned, and without awakening them, as he supposed, he undressed in the dark and tumbled into his cot.

"That you, Tom?" murmured Jack sleepily.

"Yes."

"What smells so queer? Have you been smoking?"

"No, but I came home in a trolley and there were some fellows in it hitting the pipe."

"Oh, I thought it couldn't be you," for neither Tom nor his chums used the weed.

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Jack turned over, and was soon breathing heavily, and Tom, too, was not long in getting to sleep.

It was Bert who awakened them some hours later.

"Hello fellows!" he called. "There's a fire somewhere. I can see the reflection of it on the windows."

They all jumped up, and Jack, going to the casement, exclaimed:

"It isn't here. None of the school buildings are ablaze."

"No, it's over that hill," said Bert. "I have it!" he cried. "Some of Farmer Appleby's hay ricks are on fire, or maybe a barn. Come on fellows, let's help put 'em out!"

"Oh, what's the use?" asked Tom. "It serves him right. He gouged us enough to pay for a ton of hay anyhow. Let it burn!"

CHAPTER XI

HOT WORK

Tom's chums looked at him for a moment in the reflected light of the blaze, as it shone in the windows of their room. Then Jack exclaimed:

"Oh, quit your kidding, Tom. Get on your clothes and we'll go over and play firemen. You're not going to stay here."

"No, I meant it!" insisted Tom. "I don't see why we fellows should go to a lot of trouble, and get all smoked up, to save the hay stacks of a grouchy old codger who raised a row just because we trampled down a few hills of his corn."

"Oh, forget it and come along," urged Bert. "There are some of our fellows going now," and he pointed down to the campus, across which several figures could be seen hurrying.

"Sure, come ahead," added Jack, beginning to dress. "It will be something new, anyhow. It isn't like you, Tom, to hold back, even though you have been gouged."

"All right I'll come along," assented our hero, with a short laugh, "though if I get a chance I'll tell Jed Appleby what I think of him, the old skinflint!"

"Better not have a row," suggested Jack calmly.

In a short tune the three chums, followed by George Abbot, were hurrying out of the school dormitory. Some of the monitors began a remonstrance, but when a Senior or two pointed out to Doctor Meredith, who had been hastily aroused, that it was the duty of the students to help prevent the spread of the conflagration, so near the Hall, the head of the school allowed as many as cared to go to the blaze.

“Say, it’s a big one all right!” exclaimed Jack, as they hurried on.

“Yes, I shouldn’t wonder but what more than one stack is going,” added Bert, for they were below the hill now, and could see only the increased reflection of the flames on the sky.

“How did it start? Who set it on fire? Is it hay or straw?” asked George excitedly.

“Stow that!” commanded Tom sharply. “How do we know; and how do *you* know it was set on fire, George?”

“I don’t know. But hay stacks don’t generally set themselves ablaze; do they?”

“How about spontaneous combustion?” asked Tom, quickly.

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"Or a tramp sleeping under the hay with a pipe going?" added Bert. "Come on, hit it up, or we'll be the last ones there."

This was evident, for a number of groups of school lads had passed our friends, who were jogging along rather leisurely.

"There goes Sam Heller and Nick," remarked Bert.

"All right. Let 'em get ahead," advised Tom. "We don't want their company."

As they reached the top of the hill the blaze burst full on their sight.

"Two stacks on fire!" yelled Jack.

"Big ones, too!" added Bert.

"And they're near the barn," said Tom. "That'll go next, if the wind shifts."

"They've formed a bucket brigade," said George. "Come on, fellows, let's hurry and get busy!"

He broke into a sharp run, the others following, and soon they were at the scene, together with a number of their friends from all classes. Farmer Appleby was running about "like a hen with her head cut off," as Tom expressed it, calling out various orders.

"Git more water there!" he shouted. "Fill them buckets faster! Hurry up, boys, or th' hull place'll go! Lively now! Oh when I git holt of th' rask'il thet set fire t' my hay I'll have th' law on him!"

"He thinks someone set the fire," remarked Bert to Tom.

"Very likely," was the calm reply. "Most farmers do when it's their own carelessness that's to blame. But he'll never get the fire out that way."

This was only too evident. Half a score of men and boys, some of them the hired help of Mr. Appleby, were filling pails from a cistern, and at a pump, and dashing the water on the blazing hay. They could not get near enough to make the water effective, and what little they did dash on was almost at once turned to steam by the heat. Then, too, the stack was so large in diameter at the bottom that only one side could be attacked at a time.

"Have you any more pails?" yelled Jack into the farmer's ear.

"I don't know. Don't bother me! Look in the barn! Oh what a

calamity!” was the answer. “If I get holt of th’ rask’l-----” and then the farmer rushed off to grab a bucket from a staggering lad, who was advancing with it. Mr. Appleby slipped in the mud, and went down, spilling the precious fluid.

“Jupiter’s crab apples!” he cried. “What d’ ye mean by that, Hank Norton? Butterfingers!”

“You spilled it! I didn’t!” snapped the lad.

“All right, git more! Oh, what a fire! My barns’ll go, sure!” and the distracted man rushed about not knowing what to do.

“He’s half crazy,” decided Tom. “He’ll never get the fire out in the world acting that way. And if the wind shifts the blaze will blow right toward the barns.”

This was evident. Two large stacks of hay, for which there had been no room in the barn, stood in the farmyard not far from the big buildings that contained the farm products, horses and machinery. Both stacks were afire in several places, but as there was only a slight wind the flames went almost straight up, inclining away from the buildings. But it would need only a slight shift of the wind to cause much damage.

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"What's to be done?" asked Jack.

"Get the horses out first," decided Tom. "That is if they're not out already. Let's have a look." Now that he was on the scene, even his feeling against the old farmer would not allow him to stand idly by and see property destroyed.

"That's the way to talk!" cried Bert. "Let's save the horses."

They found the animals in their stalls, trying to break loose, and tramping excitedly on the wooden floor.

"Steady, boys! Steady!" called Tom soothingly, and at the sound of his voice the steeds were a bit less restless.

"How are you going to manage?" asked Jack. "I don't know much about horses, but I've heard that they'll rush into a blaze if you cut 'em loose."

"That's bosh!" cried Tom. "It's hard to get 'em past a fire, unless you blind 'em. Get me some old bags and I'll lead 'em out. Come on, Bert. You used to live on a farm."

From the light of the blazing stacks, shining in the barn windows, Jack and George saw where a pile of grain sacks were lying. They passed some to Tom and Bert, and a little later the two lads each led a horse out, the bags having been tossed over the steeds' heads to shut out their view of the fire. The animals were restive, but allowed themselves to be led.

"Here you go!" called Tom to some of his school friends. "Take the horses quite a way off, and tie 'em to the fence. There are four more in here!"

He and Bert went back, and soon had led out two more steeds, while one of the farmer's hired men, becoming aware of the need of haste, led out the other two. Thus the horses were saved.

"Whew!" exclaimed Tom, as he came from the barn after the last of the steeds were safe. "That was hot work!"

"And look at the hay stacks!" cried Jack. "They're blazing fiercer than ever."

"Yep. Water's give out!" exclaimed a hired man. "I guess th' hull place'll go now. I'm goin' t' save my trunk. I've got a new shirt an' a pair of pants I ain't wore yit!" and he scurried toward the house.

"Water's gone!" cried Tom. "Then there's only one way to save the barns."

"How?" asked Jack.

“They’ll have to pull the stacks to pieces, and throw the hay that isn’t blazing as far off as they can. Scatter it, and then the fire will eat itself out. It’s the only way, and it can be done if they hurry, and the wind doesn’t shift.”

“Come on then!” yelled Bert. “It’s up to us. No one else seems to know what to do.”

“Grab these pitchforks!” yelled Tom, pointing to several of the implements standing near the barn. “Tear the stacks apart!”

With the sharp-pointed tools ready for service, Tom and his three chums rushed toward the burning stacks. The farmer and his men were standing helplessly by.

“Tear ’em apart! Tear ’em apart!” yelled Tom. “It’s the only way!”

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The next second, in spite of the intense heat, he and the other lads were scattering the hay on the side of the stack that was not yet ablaze.

CHAPTER XII

ACCUSATIONS

"That's the way to do it!"

"Why didn't we think of that before?"

"Get busy, everybody! Scatter the hay!"

These cries greeted the activity of Tom and his three friends, and, a few seconds later, as many of the crowd of students as could get near were picking and tearing at the stacks of hay, with whatever they could lay their hands on—pitchforks, rakes, sticks, clothes-poles—anything that would serve to scatter the inflammable mass, that was not yet ablaze, far enough off so that the tongues of fire could not reach it.

It was hot work and disagreeable work, for the smoke and ashes were blown into the faces of the lads time and again. Yet they persisted, not from any love for the farmer, since his treatment of Tom was well known, but because of the lads' inherent desire to do something—especially at a fire.

Meanwhile, Mr. Appleby, seeing that the blaze was now in competent hands, turned his attention to the barns, getting out, with the help of some students and his hired men, the farm machinery, and some sacks of grain.

But there was no need of this, as it developed, for, in a comparatively short time, Tom's tactics proved effective. The fire, from lack of material to feed on, gradually died out, and though the greater part of the two stacks were consumed, the scattering of the remaining hay solved the problem.

The fierce heat and blaze began to subside, and in a short time all that was left was a pile of glowing ashes. Tom and his friends ceased their efforts, and withdrew to the cooler area near the barn, that had been half emptied of their contents before it was certain that they would not go up in flames and smoke.

"Well, that's over," remarked Jack, as he stood his pitchfork up against the building, "and I'm glad of it."

"So am I," declared Bert.

“And you’re a mighty lucky man, Mr. Appleby,” said one of his neighbors, “that you have any out-buildings left.”

“But look at the hay that’s burned!” whined the farmer. “Nigh on to three tons of it gone, an’ the rest spiled by smoke, I reckon.”

“But you’re lucky just the same,” insisted another neighbor who had come over to help fight the blaze. “If it hadn’t been for these school boys, and that one in particular who had the gumption to think of scattering the hay, you’d be many thousands of dollars poorer than you are now. What’s a few tons of hay compared to that?”

“Of course!” came a murmur from several other farmers.

“Humph!” almost sneered Mr. Appleby. “Them school fellers! Maybe they know more about this fire than they’re lettin’ on!”

“What’s that?” cried Tom, who overheard the words. “What do you mean?”

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"Oh, nothin'—at least not yet, until I've looked around a bit," replied Mr. Appleby. "You needn't be so touchy. Ain't I seen you before, somewhere?" he asked, peering into Tom's face by the dying glow of the fire.

"You have," answered our hero calmly. "I had the pleasure of paying you ten dollars for some corn you said we spoiled the night we were lost on the cross-country run, and you refused to direct us to the right road."

"Humph! I thought I recognized you," and the farmer turned away without so much as a word of thanks to Tom and his chums.

"Keep the change," called Tom after him. "Next time you have a fire send for us!"

"The old grouch!" gasped Jack. "Isn't he the limit?"

"And then some more," added Bert. "Come on back to bed. I smell like a smoked ham I imagine."

"We all do," agreed Jack. "But I wonder what old Appleby was driving at when he said some of our lads might know more about this fire than they were saying?"

"Oh, just talk I imagine," said Tom quickly. "He hedged when I tried to corner him. He's so excited he doesn't know what he is saying. Come on; let's go back."

They filed out of the still smoky farmyard and made their way back to the Hall, other lads doing the same thing. The excitement was over now, and soon Elmwood Hall had taken on her normal appearance at night, with her students resuming their interrupted slumbers.

There was much talk of the fire the next morning, the topic forming a fruitful source of conversation at the breakfast tables, and on the way to chapel. Then came lessons, when the lads separated. But in Tom's mind there rankled the words the old farmer had used.

"I wonder what will come of it?" he mused.

He had not long to wait to find out. That afternoon, following some hard football practice, when he and his two particular chums were on their way to the gymnasium for a shower bath, they heard a voice behind them asking:

"I say, kin you boys tell me where I kin find Doctor Meredith? I want t' have a talk with him."

They turned, to behold Farmer Appleby, dressed in what were apparently his best clothes, and with a "biled" shirt, the collar of which obviously galled his neck.

“There is the doctor’s residence, over there,” indicated Tom. “I trust the fire is all out,” he added, half sarcastically.

“Humph! Yes, it’s out, but I ain’t done with it yet,” and the farmer nodded his head vigorously. “I’ve got some suspicions, and I’ve come t’ tell ’em. I want t’ have a talk with Doctor Meredith about that fire.”

“Here he comes now,” said Jack, as the tall form of the head master was seen approaching over the campus. Seeing the group of lads, and recognizing them, the doctor turned and approached Tom and his mates. Mr. Appleby, assuming an air of importance, stood waiting.

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"Well, boys, none the worse from the excitement of last night, I hope," began the head of the school. "At least I see you are able to resume football practice," and he smiled at the rather soiled appearance of the lads.

"Yes, we're all right," assented Jack.

"Be you Doctor Meredith?" broke in the farmer.

"I am," was the quiet answer, and a pair of eyes that had an uncomfortable habit of seeming to bore right through one, looked sharply at the farmer. "Did you wish to see me?"

"Yes, I'm Mr. Appleby. It was my hay stacks that burned last night."

"Oh, yes, I heard about it. I am sorry for you. I understand that had it not been for some of my students the fire would have been much worse. You have come to thank them, through me, I take it."

"Well, no, Doctor Meredith, I don't know as I have," and the farmer's voice seemed harsh and grating.

"You have not? Pray, then, what-----"

"I come t' tell you, Doctor Meredith, that perhaps if it hadn't been fer some of your boys maybe there wouldn't have been any fire!"

"What's that?" exclaimed the doctor, drawing himself up sharply and looking at the farmer intently. "Just what do you mean, Mr. Appleby?"

"Jest what I said. I'm not satisfied as t' how that fire started, and I suspect that some of your students set it."

"Preposterous! Why should they do such a thing as that?"

"Because some of them have a grudge against me. It ain't th' fust time the school boys has played tricks on me. Two years ago they burned up an old shed."

"So you said at the time, but you could never prove it, I believe. You should be careful how you make accusations, sir."

"I am careful, Doctor Meredith, an' that's why I didn't come sooner. I've got evidence now."



"Evidence? What kind?"

"Well, one of my hired men saw a fellow, who looked like a school lad, sneaking around the hay stacks a leetle while afore they begun to blaze."

"Is that all? If it is, I call that very flimsy evidence; and I again warn you to be careful how you make accusations."

"It ain't all, Doctor Meredith. Th' same hired man picked up this pin near the stacks," and the farmer held out a pin such as was worn by nearly every Elmwood Hall student.

"Picked up the pin near the stacks; did he?" asked the head master coolly, as he looked at the ornament. "Well, seeing that a number of my students were helping put out the fire, it is but natural that one might lose a pin there. I see no evidence in that, and again _____"

"This here pin were picked up at the stacks just *afore* th' fire was discovered—not *afterward*," said the farmer in a harsh voice, as his gaze swept the faces of Tom and his chums.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POISONED HORSES

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For the space of several seconds there was silence—a portentous silence—and then the head of the school, looking from the pin in his hand at the accusing farmer, and thence to the three lads said:

“Do you know, Mr. Appleby, to whom this pin belongs?”

“No, sir, I don’t. But I thought maybe you could tell. That’s why I come t’ see you. If anybody set my stacks afire I want t’ know it, an’ I want damages, same as I had when some fellers tromped through my corn,” and Mr. Appleby looked straight at Tom, who returned the gaze fearlessly.

“Again I warn you to be careful in your accusations, Mr. Appleby,” said the head master sharply.

“I am, Doctor. I ain’t namin’ no names, but I brought that pin t’ you, thinkin’ you could tell who owned it. Then, when it is knowed who was sneakin’ around my barns, I may be able t’ say who sot the fire!”

“Preposterous!” exclaimed Doctor Meredith. “I will not, for one moment, entertain a suspicion, even, against one of my lads on such flimsy evidence as this.”

“‘Tain’t flimsy!” retorted the farmer. “There’s been men convicted of serious crimes on less evidence than a gold pin. That’s a school emblem, an’ I know it!”

“True enough,” agreed the head master.

“Then I ask you to say who owns it?” demanded the incensed farmer.

“That I cannot say,” was the cool answer. “This is not a class pin—it is a hall emblem—that is, any lad in the school is entitled to wear it, and nearly every one does.”

“Then call the roll, an’ find out who’s lost his pin!” suggested Mr. Appleby eagerly.

“That’s an easy way to find out.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort!” answered the doctor firmly.

“Then I’ll go t’ law about it. I tell you, Doctor Meredith, that pin was picked up near the stack before the hay was found t’ be on fire. It belongs to one of your students, an’ I demand an investigation.”

“Well, you may demand as much as you please, Mr. Applesauce——”

“Appleby’s my name—Jed Appleby.”

“Very well, Mr. Appleby. You may demand as much as you please, but I shall not inflict an accusation on any of my students in general, and certainly on none in particular, on such flimsy evidence as this. Here is the pin, you may advertise it if you like.”

“Huh! Yes, an’ d’ ye s’pose th’ owner would claim it? Not much. I don’t want th’ pin. It ain’t mine. But I want t’ know who sot that fire, an’ I’m goin’ t’ find out! One of my men seen a school lad near the hay early in th’ evenin’, I tell ye!”

“Can he identify him?” asked the doctor.

“No, I don’t know as he kin. It was dark, an’——”

“That will do,” interrupted the head master. “I am afraid I have no more time to listen to you. Good day. I shall keep the pin, since you refuse to take it,” and the doctor, with a curt nod to the farmer, and a smile at the lads, passed on.

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For a moment Tom and his chums stood looking at the somewhat bewildered farmer, and then Tom spoke.

"You've got a lot of nerve!" he said cuttingly.

"I should say so," added Bert.

"The worst ever," added Jack. "After we help you put out the fire, and practically saved your barns and horses, you come and make trouble like this. You're a peach, you are!"

"Don't you give me none of your back talk!" snapped Mr. Appleby. "I know what I'm doin'."

"Yes, and I suppose you did when you charged us ten dollars for a little corn," said Tom.

"That's all right," replied the farmer, doggedly. "I'll find out who sot that fire, and I'll have th' law on 'em, student or no student. An' I'll find out who lost that pin."

"Good luck to you!" called Bert sarcastically.

"Maybe you lost it yourself," said the farmer quickly. "Will you show me your pin, an' will you swear you wasn't away from the school early in th' evenin' of the fire? Will you?"

"I sure will!" exclaimed Bert, "and here's my pin," and he showed where it was fastened on his sweater that he used to throw over his broad shoulders when resting from football practice.

"Where's yours?" demanded Mr. Appleby, turning to Tom and Jack.

Bert, who was looking at Tom, fancied he saw a start on the part of his chum. There was just the suggestion of a flush under the tan of his cheeks, and then he answered:

"It's in my room probably. I don't wear it all the while."

"Neither do I," added Jack quickly. "I haven't mine on. Maybe I lost it."

"Why, Jack!" began Bert. "I saw your pin on you this af-----"

He subsided quickly, for, as Tom turned aside Jack administered a swift kick to Bert, at the same time hissing into his ear: "Shut up, you chump! Why do you want to bother answering a fellow like him?"

"Oh—er—all right," stammered Bert, and he looked from Jack to Tom, wonderingly.



"All right. You may think you're smart, but you'll find that th' law's smarter than any of ye!" threatened the farmer, as he turned aside with a scowl.

"Nice sort of chap—not," murmured Tom, as he strode on, his companions hurrying to catch up to him.

"I should say so," agreed Jack. "Why, any fellow might lose his pin—not necessarily at Appleby's hay stacks—and that, in his eyes, would make him guilty. I don't even know where my school pin is at this moment."

Once more Bert looked at Jack, and he wondered much, for he was sure he had seen Jack's pin gleaming on his sweater a short time before the farmer appeared, and yet now Jack said he did not have it.

"It's too much for me!" murmured Bert. He was not much given to solving puzzles, and this one was beyond him. Why had Jack pretended not to have his pin, when all the while Bert was sure he had seen it? Could it be that-----?

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"Oh, pshaw!" exclaimed Bert, to himself. "I'm not going to get into deep water over this. I'll wait and see what happens."

And, though he did not know it, much was to happen soon.

It was soon noised about the college that Farmer Appleby had made a "crack" about his hay fire, and great was the indignation of the lads.

"After what we did for him, he ought to be glad enough to keep quiet, if we burned half a dozen stacks!" exclaimed Reddy Burke, the genial Irish lad. "Sure and it's meself would tell him that same if I got a chance," Reddy always lapsed into the idioms of his forebears when he grew excited.

"Oh, it isn't worth bothering about," declared Bruce Bennington. "Appleby is naturally sore at losing some of his crops, for he's a regular miser. I know him of old. Every time something happened on his farm he always complained that we boys did it or had a hand in it."

"And did you?" asked Tom.

"Sometimes, but oftener not. Don't let it worry you. He's only looking for money. I'll wager if he was to be paid for his hay, and if he knew who set fire to it—if any one did—he'd keep quiet and compound the felony. Forget it."

It was about two weeks later, just prior to the first match football game of the season, that Bert and Jack, coming in from practice which Tom had left earlier because of a slight injury to his shoulder, found their chum busy with bottles and test tubes in their room.

"Whew! What a smell!" cried Jack, as he opened the door. "What in the world be you a doin' of, Tommy, my boy?"

"Oh, working out some physics problems. I'm a bit back in my work."

"Noble youth! I ought to be doing the same thing. My! but I'm dry. Got any ice water? What's this?" and Jack caught up a glass filled with a colorless liquid.

"Here! Drop that!" cried Tom, quickly. "That's had cyanide of potassium in. There may be some in it yet. If you want to go to an early grave, taste it."

"Not on your life!" gasped Jack, a bit white. "But you shouldn't leave such stuff around carelessly, Tom."

"I didn't intend to. I didn't think you fellows would be back so soon. I'm just cleaning up. I'm done now. How did practice go after I left?"

“Oh, we shoved the scrub all over, and made two more touchdowns. Say, though, I hope you can play Saturday,” and Jack looked anxiously at Tom.

“Oh, sure I can play. I just didn’t want to get laid up, and that’s why I pulled out. I’ll play all right.”

The Elmwood regular eleven was being whipped into good shape by captain and coach, and to their delight our three friends were promised places for the first match game of the season.

It was a night or two before the game when Jack, who had been to town, came back with an evening paper.

“I say!” he exclaimed, looking it over before the summons to supper, “here’s more trouble for our friend Appleby.”

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"What is it?" asked Tom quickly, looking up from a book.

"Why, it seems all his horses were poisoned night before last, all six of 'em. And they found traces of a white powder in the mangers this morning."

"Really?" cried Bert.

"Sure. Here's a long piece in the paper about it."

"Are they dead?" asked Tom.

"No, but it says it's doubtful if they'll get better. I say, I s'pose he'll make another row now, and charge some of us fellows with doing it," and Jack pored over the item.

"Why will he?" asked Tom.

"Because—Oh, just on general principles I fancy. Or he may find another school pin. I guess I'll put mine in a safe deposit box—when I find it," and Jack laughed, but there was no mirth in his voice.

"When you find it," repeated Bert. "Why--er--I thought you-----"

Again he subsided, as Jack kicked him under the table, and an embarrassing pause was broken by the ringing of the supper gong.

CHAPTER XIV

SAM HELLER'S EVIDENCE

"Young gentlemen, I have a serious matter to bring before you. A very serious matter, involving not only the personal honor and reputation of every student here, but the school itself. I must ask for your close attention."

It was Doctor Pliny Meredith who was speaking, and the place was chapel, after the usual morning exercises. The students had been about to go to their lectures when the venerable head of the school, entering most unexpectedly, asked them to remain a moment.

"Two nights ago," went on Doctor Meredith, "several horses belonging to our neighbor, Mr. Appleby, were poisoned!"

There was a gasp of surprise from several students, not only those who had read the account in the paper, as Jack and his chums had done, but from others, who wondered what was coming next. They had not long to wait.

"You young gentlemen will recollect," went on Doctor Meredith gravely, "that, some time ago, there was a fire at the farm of this same Mr. Appleby. I made no reference to something that happened directly afterward, for I scouted the idea that any of our boys could be involved. Yet, as some of you may know, the farmer intimated that the fire might have been set by some of the Elmwood Hall students."

There were several hisses, but Doctor Meredith raised a quick hand for silence.

"That will do," he said calmly. "That is undignified, and we must meet this in a dignified and fair spirit. As I said, I took no action at that time, for the evidence was absolutely nil. However, since the affair of the poisoning I am compelled to take some notice of an accusation that has been brought to my notice."

Again there was a gasp of surprise. Had the farmer dared to intimate that any Elmwood Hall lads had poisoned his horses?

"Since the last unfortunate affair," went on the head master, "I have received a visit from Mr. Appleby. He states to me that some kind of chemical poison was administered to all his horses after his men had fed them in the evening. One of the animals has since died, and the others are in a precarious state. If they recover it will be some time before they are fit for service. Now comes the part that interests us.

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“Mr. Appleby states that he himself saw, and recognized, one of our students about his barrio shortly before it was discovered that the horses were poisoned.”

“How does he know?” asked one of the Seniors—a privileged character, evidently, for he was not rebuked.

“He says he recognized a peculiar colored sweater the student wore, and also his manner of walking. This student was seen near the barn, and when Mr. Appleby hurried out to warn him away, the individual ran off, dropping a small package. This Mr. Appleby picked up, not paying much attention to it at the time. But later, when he learned that his horses had been poisoned, he gave this package to a veterinarian. It was found to contain a powder, one ingredient of which was cyanide of potassium, a deadly poison, but which, blended with other things, may only cause severe illness. It was this poison that was administered to the horses.”

Once more came a murmur from the students. It was hushed as Doctor Meredith went on.

“Mr. Appleby insists on an investigation,” said the head master, “and I must admit that he has several points in his favor. I have told him I would bring the matter before you. I might add that the sweater worn by the person the farmer saw was dropped in flight. I—er—I have it here,” and Doctor Meredith unwrapped a small bundle. He held up to view a sweater—of a deep purple tint, with yellow stripes on it. It was an atrociously-hued garment, such as only a student would dare wear.

Once more that gasp, for several of the students at once recognized the garment. There were but two in the college. One like it had been worn by Tom Fairfield, and the other by Sam Heller.

“Does—er does anyone wish to claim this sweater?” proceeded the doctor, “and—er—and state how it came to be on the premises of Mr. Appleby?”

In spite of their self-control, nearly all eyes were turned in Tom’s direction. He felt the hot blood leap to his face. There was a roaring in his ears as he arose and said:

“I think that is my sweater, Doctor Meredith. At least I had one like it and-----”

“You *had* it?” asked the doctor, emphasizing the word.

“Yes, but I disposed of it some days ago.”

“How did you—er—dispose of it?”

“I would rather not state—unless I am compelled to.”

“You may have to, Fairfield. But of that more later. You say this is your garment?”

“I think so, yes, sir. At least there is only one other like it in this school, as far as I know, and that one-----”

“Belongs to me!” interrupted Sam Heller. “I have mine here,” and, opening his coat, he showed, beneath it, the brightly-colored sweater.

This time there was not an eye but what was turned on Tom. He felt the gaze and straightened up.

“But I wish to state, Doctor Meredith,” he said quickly, “that I had nothing to do with the poisoning of the horses, and I did not know of the occurrence until I saw the account in the paper.”

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"Very well, we will note your denial, Fairfield, but about this sweater. It is rather damaging evidence, since you yourself admit that it is yours."

"I do, but, as I said, I had disposed of it some time before."

"And you do not care to state to whom?"

"No, sir, except to say that it was not to any one connected in the most remote way with Elmwood Hall."

Again there came a murmur, quickly hushed.

"Is there anyone who can throw any light on this rather important subject?" asked the head master. "I must not conceal from you that this is a serious matter. Mr. Appleby threatens to go to the police with it, unless the guilty one confesses, and unless reparation is made. Even then, it will be in the nature of compounding a felony unless certain legal action is taken. Is there anyone who wishes to say something?"

For a moment there was silence, and then Sam Heller slowly arose again.

"Since this matter has assumed a certain phase," he said, speaking calmly, "and since it is a question of the identification of a certain garment, of which I own one, I wish to state that I was not at the farm, nor have I ever been there as far as I can recollect. At the same time, in justice to myself, I must state that I saw a certain student from this school on the lane leading to the farm, night before last."

"I will not ask you to state now who that was," said the head master, quickly, "as it would not be fair, and you may be called on, in a court of justice, to give evidence."

"But I prefer to state now!" almost shouted Sam. "I have a right to clear my own name. I saw Tom Fairfield, wearing that sweater, leave his dormitory on the night the horses were poisoned, and, a little later, I saw him heading for the lane leading to the farm!"

"That's not true!" cried Tom, leaping to his feet.

CHAPTER XV

TOM'S SILENCE

There were subdued murmurings from every student in the chapel. Never, in the history of Elmwood Hall, had there been such an occurrence. An implied charge against one of the school lads—a serious charge; the denial on the part of one to whom suspicion might point, and the retort direct from another. It was unheard of.

Silence followed Tom's dramatic announcement. He remained on his feet, looking at Sam Heller, who also stood, and then the gaze of our hero wandered to the troubled, but still serene, countenance of Doctor Meredith.

"Young gentlemen," began the head of the School gently, "I must ask you to be calm."

"But, Doctor," said Tom respectfully, "I must deny the charge that has been brought against me. I never had the most remote connection with setting the hay stacks afire, nor in poisoning the horses. I cannot make my denial too strong."

"No one has accused you of either crime, my dear boy," said the doctor. "You are a bit too hasty, I fear."

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"But Heller has seen fit to say that he suspects me," went on Tom, looking his enemy full in the face.

"No," said Sam, and he could not conceal the triumph in his voice. "I did not say that. What I did say, and what I repeat was, that on the night the horses were poisoned I saw Tom Fairfield leave the dormitory, wearing a sweater like mine, and later I saw him near the lane leading to Mr. Appleby's farm. That's all I care to say."

"And what do you answer to that, Fairfield?" asked the doctor gravely. "Were you or were you not there?"

"I do not see how that affects the matter at all," said Tom, trying to speak calmly. "I, or anyone, might have been in the vicinity of the farm without having had a hand in the poisoning of the horses."

"That is true, but will you answer the question. Were you there?"

"I was not, sir," exclaimed Tom, steadily. There was a breath of relief from Jack and Bert.

"I saw him!" insisted Sam doggedly.

"Are you sure?" asked Doctor Meredith. "Remember this is a serious matter, Heller."

"I am sure, Doctor."

"Perhaps Fairfield can throw more light on the subject," went on the puzzled head master. "Is there any way you can account for Heller's seeming identification? Could anyone else have worn your sweater?" and he looked at Tom.

Once more there was a silence. Tom seemed strangely affected. He took a long breath, and then stammered:

"I—I do not care to state, Doctor Meredith."

"You mean that someone else had your sweater?"

"I prefer not to answer."

"You realize what that means?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It means that I will be suspected of having done these things."

"I am afraid so, yes, Tom, my boy," and the doctor, dropping his more formal tone, addressed Tom almost as if he were his own son. "Not that I believe you guilty," he

added. "Far be it from me to suspect one of my students when he has assured me that he is innocent. I have never yet known an Elmwood Hall lad to tell an untruth!" and the doctor drew himself up proudly.

"Therefore, I believe you, Tom," he went on, "but I am in duty bound to point out to you that many will believe you had a hand in this unless—unless you can account for your sweater being worn by someone else, on the night in question, near the farm. Can you?"

Once more a silence. Then Tom said:

"I prefer to say nothing, Doctor."

"Very well. Then this painful scene had best end. I request you all to keep silence on this matter. I will see Mr. Appleby, and explain that all of my students deny having had a hand in this occurrence. That should be sufficient for him."

The doctor paused a moment, and then, holding out the gaudily-colored sweater, asked:

"Do you wish to claim this, Tom?"

"Yes, sir, it is mine," and with a steady step Tom walked forward to get the garment. As he went down the aisle toward the rostrum there were one or two faint hisses, that seemed to come from the section where Sam Heller and his cronies sat.

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"Silence!" cried Doctor Meredith, in a ringing voice.

The noise subsided. Tom took his garment, and turned back to his seat. As he passed Sam he looked him full in the face, and there was that in the glance which boded no good to that sneaking coward when the tables should be turned.

Had it not been in chapel, and had Tom not held himself well in hand, there might have been a session then and there that Sam Heller would not have liked. His gaze quailed before the steady look of Tom, and as the latter sat down he heard Nick Johnson whisper to Sam:

"Are you sure of what you saw, old man? He might make trouble for you."

"Of course I'm sure. I saw him as plainly as I see you now. He can't bluff out of it. I've got him just where I want him!"

"You think so, do you," murmured Tom to himself. "Well, we'll see, Sam Heller! I've got pluck enough to stand out against you, I think. You can't drive me from Elmwood Hall."

"Young gentlemen, you are dismissed," said the voice of Doctor Meredith, and the students filed from chapel to their various classrooms.

Jack and Bert made a rush for their chum as soon as they were outside the building. Each grabbed an arm, while several of Tom's other friends grouped about him. But it was noticed that some, with whom he had been quite intimate, held aloof, and hurried away. Tom was, but he only smiled.

Another group surrounded Sam Heller, some of whom had never troubled to make his acquaintance before. But they were either curious to hear more of that of which he had spoken, or else were ready to enlist under his banner, as it were.

"By Jove this is bad!" half groaned Bruce Bennington, as he noticed the school split, in the ranks of Sophomores, more especially. "There'll be two factions among the second-year men now if something isn't done to head it off."

"That's right," agreed Reddy Burke. "Confound Tom's stubbornness, anyhow! Why doesn't he say if it was someone else who wore his thunder-and-lightning sweater?"

"Did someone?" asked Bruce, significantly.

"Of course he must have, and Tom is shielding him, I'll wager. You don't s'pose he poisoned those horses; do you?"

"Well—er—Oh, of course not!"

“Then forget it. Things’ll come out right sooner or later.”

“Later, I’m afraid. And look at the damage that will be done in the meanwhile.”

“Well, it can’t be helped,” and Bruce and Reddy strolled away, not altogether happy.

“Tom, old man!” exclaimed Jack, slipping his arm about his chum, “what’s got into you, anyhow?”

“Nothing, Jack.”

“Then why don’t you come back at Heller and make him out the prevaricator he is?”

Tom did not answer.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” demanded Jack. “Are you going to keep quiet about that sweater?”

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“I am afraid I’ll have to,” said Tom quietly, as he turned aside. “But if you fellows think-----”

“Say, if you intimate such a thing as that we believe you guilty I’ll punch your face!” cried Jack, with a laugh, in which there was no mirth. “Won’t we, Bert?”

“We sure will! Now come on to Latin class;” and with their arms still about their chum, showing their loyalty to him in his time of trouble, the boys passed on across the campus, followed by many eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

TOM SEEKS CLEWS

“Well, Tom, what’s the answer; anyhow?”

“Don’t talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Thus Jack and Bert spoke as they entered their room with their chum shortly before luncheon on the day of the sensational disclosures in chapel.

Tom looked at his two friends, and then sank down rather wearily in a chair.

“I don’t mind talking about it,” he said, with an attempt at a smile. “In fact I was going to propose it myself. I’ve got some hard work ahead of me.”

“What kind?” asked Jack quickly. “Let us help you.”

“Sure,” chimed in Bert. “Count on us, Tom. What are you going to do?”

“Clear my name, that’s what I going to do. And I’ve got a hard job ahead of me.”

“Not with us to help you!” exclaimed Jack.

“That’s the worst of it,” spoke Tom ruefully. “You fellows can’t help me.”

“Why not, I’d like to know,” came from Bert quickly.

“Well, there are certain reasons. Look here, fellows, I’d tell you in a minute, if I could, but I can’t. I’m bound to silence in a way, and I can’t speak as I’d like to.”



“But surely it oughtn’t to be so hard for you to clear your name,” insisted Jack. “All you’ve got to do is to prove that you weren’t near the farm at the time the horses were poisoned, nor were you when the stacks caught fire. That ought to be easy.”

“And surely you can show that if it wasn’t you wearing that sweater, at the time the farmer saw you, it was someone else,” went on Bert. “It was someone else; wasn’t it, Tom?”

“Say, don’t ask me any more questions,” begged Tom. “I can’t answer ’em all, and I don’t want to get tangled up. All I can say is that I didn’t have the first thing to do with those crimes, and I’m going to work to prove that I didn’t. It’s harder than it seems, but I’ll do it.”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Jack. “You’ve got pluck enough Tom, old man.”

“And I may need some luck, too,” added our hero. “If I have that I think I’ll be all right.”

“Not a bad combination,” commented Bert. “Pluck and luck. With ’em both you can do a heap.”

“That’s right,” admitted Tom. “And now I’m going to do some boning, and get ahead with my work so I’ll have a little time to hunt for clews.”

“Clews?” murmured Jack.

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"Yes, clews as to who poisoned these horses and set the hay on fire. You see it's not enough to say that I *didn't* do it. I've got to find the person who *did*."

"Well, I wish you luck," murmured Jack.

"And if there's anything we can do, don't hesitate to let us know," added Bert, at which his chum nodded.

"Don't let this get on your nerves so you can't play football Saturday," suggested Jack.

"I guess it won't," laughed Tom.

But whether it was the suspicion hanging over him, or because he was nervous, certainly he did not play well in that first gridiron match of the season. Nor was he the only one of the eleven who did poorly.

From the very first it was seen that Elmwood Hall had met her match. Her opponents scored a touchdown in the first five minutes of play, and this rather took the heart out of Tom and his chums.

True they braced, and prevented any more scoring for the next two periods. Then came a chance fer them to rush the ball over the line. Tom worked to his limit and managed to gain much ground. Then came a fatal fumble, just when he might have been shoved over for the tying of the score.

In his own heart Tom felt that Sam had deliberately passed the ball to him short. Tom had to lean forward to grab it, his foot slipped, and the coveted pigskin was grabbed by an opposing player. It was run out of danger before the man was downed, and then it was too late to make good the loss. Tom groaned in anguish, and for one wild moment he felt like accusing Sam openly.

"No, that would never do," he reasoned. "They would all say I did it for spite, and because he gave that information against me. I've got to grin and bear it."

Nor was Tom much surprised when he was shifted to the scrub at the next practice.

"I hate to do it, old man," said the coach, "but you seem to have gone a bit stale. You aren't overtrained; are you?"

"I don't think so," said Tom bitterly.

"Well, maybe a change will do you good. I'll give you a game later on, if you pick up."

And, deeply regretting what he felt he had to do, the coach went off to talk to the captain about some other changes.



“Say, this is sure tough!” complained Jack to Bert, that night in their room. “Tom off the team!”

“And with this cloud hanging over him,” added his chum. “Where is Tom now, anyhow?”

“Give it up. He said he was going for a walk.”

“He feels bad I guess. I don’t blame him. Say, what do you think of this thing, anyhow, Jack?”

“I don’t know, Bert, it—well, hang it all, it looks mighty queer. I might as well say it as think it.”

“What! You don’t believe Tom guilty; do you?”

“Of course not, and yet he’s so plagued stiff he won’t say anything, or let us help him. Who do you suppose he’s shielding, anyhow?”

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"Give it up. If he would only tell a fellow," and Bert stalked about the room in something of a rage against his absent chum.

"While I don't for a second believe Tom had anything to do with this business," went on Jack, "it's up to us, as his friends, to look the thing squarely in the face."

"Yes, I suppose so. But what do you mean?"

"I mean we ought to consider the evidence against him as well as in his favor."

"I suppose so. Well, what's the worst?"

"There are some things we know, that other people don't know," said Jack slowly. "For instance, we know he was out on the night the hay stacks burned."

"Yes, that's right," admitted Bert.

"And he came in, smelling horribly of smoke."

"So he did, but the hay wasn't ablaze until long after he was in, Jack."

"Hay would smoulder a long time. Mind!" Jack added quickly, "I'm not for a minute hinting that Tom did it. I'm only considering what his enemies would say."

"That's right. Well, what else?"

"Well, he was out on the night the horses were poisoned, and he wore that horribly-colored sweater. I don't see what possessed him to buy such a scream of a thing."

"Me either."

"He went out with it," went on Jack slowly, "and he came in without it."

"By Jove! So he did!" cried Bert. "I'd forgotten about that. It begins to look bad."

"Not at all!" cried Jack quickly. "I'm only considering a possible case, mind you. And there's one other point."

"Out with it. We might as well have the worst and then we can begin to work to help him."

"Well, you know that day we came in, and found him doing some experiments?"

"Yes. He was monkeying with-----"



"Cyanide," broke in Jack. "The very stuff the horses were poisoned with."

"So he was!" whispered Bert in tense tones. "But for the love of heaven don't tell anyone!"

"No danger. I'm only saying this to show how bad it might be made to look for Tom in case anyone put all these things together."

"But no one will."

"I hope not. And now let's see how we can help him."

"Say, what about the school pin?" asked Bert. "Have you really lost yours?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then why-----"

"It's this way," went on Jack. "I saw that Tom's was gone, and, fearing that it might look bad for him, I pretended it was a common thing for us to lose or mislay our emblems."

"You did?"

"Sure. I wasn't going to make it look too bad for Tom."

"That's right. But are you going to mention it to him?"

"I am not—not until this thing is cleared up, anyhow."

"Jove! It looks bad!" murmured Bert.

The two chums talked the matter over from several different standpoints, and the only conclusion they arrived at was that unless Tom gave them more information as to who, if anyone other than himself, wore the sweater on the night in question, they could do nothing.

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"Except keep still," suggested Bert.

"Sure," assented Jack.

Several days went by. The first excitement over the implied charges against Tom had died away. Farmer Appleby had wanted to cause the arrest of the lad against whom his suspicions were directed, but his lawyer pointed out that he had such slight evidence that it would be a dangerous proceeding.

But Jack, Bert, George, Bruce Bennington and several of Tom's closest friends stuck to him most loyally. Of course Sam Heller was against our hero, but that was to be expected, and many sided with Sam.

"Fairfield ought to be run out of Elmwood Hall!" exclaimed the bully.

"That's what!" added his crony. "And if he doesn't withdraw soon we'll run him out."

"Will you?" cried Sam. "I'm with you. How can we do it?" and the two went off by themselves to plot.

As Bruce Bennington had feared, there were now two factions in the school, those who were for and against Tom. And it seriously interfered with the work of the eleven. For there were some who hated Sam cordially, and as he was the quarterback of the team there were internal dissensions, and such ragged playing, in consequence, that Elmwood lost many games she should have won.

"Say, this is getting fierce!" cried the coach after a disastrous gridiron battle. "What's to be done? We're in bad shape back of the line."

"Maybe we ought to put Tom back."

"We ought to, and yet I'm afraid if we do it will cause more trouble. But I've a notion to," and they discussed the matter in all its phases.

Meanwhile Tom went on seeking clews, wandering off by himself, lonely at times, but never giving up.

"I'll clear my name yet!" he said to himself, fiercely.

CHAPTER XVII

THE EMPTY BOTTLE

"Great Caesar's grandmother, Jack, why didn't you think of that before?"

"I don't know, Bert. It just seemed to come to me as I sat here thinking about it."

"Well, it's a good thing you think once in a while."

"Why don't you help out then, if you think I don't do enough of it?" asked Jack rather snappily.

"Oh, come now," went on Bert. "I was only joking. I sure am glad you thought of it. It's a wonder some of us didn't fall to that idea before this. We'll tell Tom, as soon as he comes in, and I'll wager that if we go about it right we can clear this thing up in a day or so."

"I'm sure I hope so," assented Jack. "It's getting on my nerves as well as on Tom's."

"Yes, and I guess every fellow in college will be glad to know the truth of it. Why, the team's going to pieces just on account of this miserable horse-poisoning case, and the burning of a little hay."

"Still, it did look black for Tom, especially when he had that quarrel with Appleby over the trampled corn, and made some remarks about getting even because he had to pay for it."

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"Yes, that was where Tom made a mistake. I guess he's ready to admit that himself," and Bert paced the room. "I wish he'd come, so we could tell him," he added. "Do you know where he is?"

"No, except that he said he was going off alone to take a walk, as he's done several times of late. I offered to go along, but he said he wanted to be by himself, so I didn't urge it."

"Off getting clews, I expect."

"Yes," assented Jack.

The two chums sat silent in the room, waiting for the lad whom they both loved even better than a brother. The past days had been trying on all of them—on every one in Elmwood Hall—from the most lordly Senior, or calm post-graduate, to the "fuzziest" Freshman, who thought he bore the weight of the whole school on his narrow shoulders.

For one and all felt the stigma that rested upon the institution—Tom most of all. True, as it happened, the affair was not as serious as had at first seemed. Only one of the farmer's horses died, and that was not a very valuable beast. The others had been very sick, though.

Fortunately, however, most of the fall crops were in, and the fact of not having his steeds to work for him did not seriously inconvenience Mr. Appleby. His neighbors helped him with the loan of their horses.

Still the farmer was a vindictive man, and he determined to have punished, if possible, the guilty person. That it was Tom, with whom he had quarreled, he had no doubt.

And, it might be added, though most of the students bore in mind the injunction of Dr. Meredith not to talk about the matter, and make useless accusations, Sam Heller and his cronies, did not observe that silence. Indeed, Sam even went to the trouble of repeating to Mr. Appleby all the evidence he had discovered against our hero.

"Oh, I know he's guilty!" the vindictive farmer had said, when Sam and his crony called at the house one day, ostensibly to ask for a drink of water, but in reality to talk of Tom. "I know he's guilty, but my lawyer won't let me have him up on charges. He says I might get sued."

"Oh, I guess you could win the case," asserted Sam. He was aching to see Tom humiliated further. But the farmer shook his head.

"I've lost a heap of money already," he complained, "an' I ain't a-goin' t' lose no more!"

And thus the case stood when Jack had his inspiration, as he sat in the gloaming with his chum Bert.

"Here he comes!" exclaimed the latter, as a footfall was heard in the corridor.

"Yes, that's Tom. Now to tell him."

"Well, Tom, how goes it?" asked Jack, as he arose to open the door in response to the code knock. "Anything new?"

"I don't know, yet, but I think—why, what's up?" he asked quickly, surprised at the looks on the faces of his chums.

"You tell him, Jack," insisted Bert generously. "You thought of it."

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"It's only this," said Jack modestly. "I've been thinking over this confounded thing, as of course you have, and I've come to the sudden conclusion that it was Sam Heller who poisoned those horses."

"Sam Heller?" cried Tom. "What makes you think so?"

"Several reasons," insisted Jack. "Sit down and I'll tell you about 'em."

"Now, to begin at the beginning, who else but Sam would want to throw the blame on you, Tom?"

"No one, I suppose, unless it was Nick. And even he hasn't the grudge against me that Sam has."

"Right. It was all to Sam's interest to make it appear that you were guilty, and things just fitted in with his scheme. There was your quarrel with the farmer, your threats to get even which you foolishly uttered in public-----"

"Yes, that's where I was wrong," admitted Tom with a sigh.

"And there's another thing, Tom," went on Jack. "About your school pin. Where is it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said Jack with a smile and a blush, "I loaned it to a girl I met at a dance. She took quite a fancy to it."

"Then you didn't drop it at the hay stacks?"

"No, indeed! Was that why you made believe you couldn't find yours?" asked Tom.

"Sure it was. I thought-----"

"You old Damon and Pythias!" cried Tom, obviously much pleased. "But it was a useless sacrifice."

"Then whose pin was it that Appleby found?" asked Bert.

"Give it up," spoke Tom.

"But then there's that sweater business," went on Jack, after a pause.

"If you'd only explain that," put in Bert. Tom shook his head.

"I can't—not yet," he said. "But go on. What other evidence have you that Sam is guilty?"



"No other direct evidence, perhaps," admitted Jack, "but, somehow I just feel in my bones that Sam poisoned those horses, and threw the blame on you. He must have seen you leave here with that sweater on, and come back without it. It was just pie for him to say what he did."

Tom slowly shook his head.

"What? Don't you believe Sam guilty?" asked Bert.

"No, I can't say that I do."

"But he is!" asserted Jack. "It was his sweater the farmer saw instead of yours. You're both about the same height and build. Of course Sam did it, Tom."

"No, I can't agree with you. I'll admit I did wear my sweater when I left here the night the horses were poisoned, and I came back without it, but-----"

"What in the world happened to it?" demanded Jack.

"That I can't say—yet."

"Will you ever be able to?" Bert wanted to know.

"I hope to in time—perhaps soon now. Mr. Appleby picked it up—that much I'll have to admit."

"And can you clear your name?" asked Jack, rather rueful that the fine theory he had built up was thus easily passed over by his chum.

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"I hope to, Jack."

"Have you any new clues?" asked Bert. "I presume that's what you've been looking for?"

"Yes, I did go off hunting for them," said Tom slowly.

"Well, did you find any?" burst out Jack. "Can't you relieve the suspense?"

"I found this," said Tom, placing an empty bottle on the table.

"Why—why, there's nothing in it!" exclaimed Jack, looking at it. "How can that form a clue?"

"Not because of what is in it but what was in it," said Tom with a smile. "Unless I'm mistaken this will help to prove my innocence—that is, if the experiment I'm going to try works out. We'll soon see. I wonder if the laboratory is closed," and he went out into the corridor.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE TRAIL

"What's he up to now?" asked Bert of Jack, as the two stood in the room, looking at one another.

"Give up. We'll have to wait and see. It's something important though, to judge by Tom's actions."

"Yes, but an empty bottle! What can he hope to do with that for a clue?"

"I don't know. Leave it to Tom."

The latter came back in a little while, carrying several bottles, test tubes and an alcohol lamp.

"Well, for the class's sake!" cried Jack. "Are you going to give us a demonstration of the action of liquids on solids?"

"No, I'm going to prove that mind is superior to matter," laughed Tom.

"Say, it sounds good to hear that!" cried Jack. "You haven't laughed before in two weeks."

"Well, I feel a bit like it now," said Tom. "I'm beginning to get a glimpse of daylight in this darkness."

He arranged his material on the table in front of him, having removed the books and papers. Then, taking a bottle of some colorless liquid which he had brought from the college laboratory, he poured some into the apparently empty bottle he had first exhibited.

"What's that?" asked Bert.

"Sterilized water."

"Say, where did you find that bottle?" demanded Jack.

"In Farmer Appleby's barn," was the calm rejoinder. "I picked it up just by chance, but it may mean something big."

"What?" cried Jack. "You don't mean to say you've been around there?"

"Surely. Why not?"

"Why, he might think you wanted to do away with the rest of his horses."

"He didn't see me. I took care of that. Besides that's the only place where I can consistently look for clues. I was sure whoever poisoned the horses must have left some trace behind him, and this may be it."

"The empty bottle?" asked Bert incredulously.

"It may not be altogether empty," replied Tom. "That's what I'm going to test for. I saw traces of some powder on the sides, and I want to see if my suspicions are true."

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"Then you think it contained——" began Jack.

"I'm not going to think anything until I finish this experiment," laughed Tom.

He shook the sterilized water about in the bottle, rinsing it well, and the contents he then poured into a test tube. This, after heating, he mixed with some other chemicals.

"Would you mind telling us what you're testing for?" asked Jack.

"Not at all," said Tom quietly. "I'm trying to see if this bottle had any cyanide of potassium in it."

"What! Cyanide?" gasped Bert.

"The stuff that killed the one horse and sickened the others?" asked Jack.

"That's it. I may find it—I may not."

Tom poured a few drops of another chemical into the test tube. There was a reaction, and at once he uttered a cry:

"There it is!" he fairly shouted. "I'm on the right trail at last! There was cyanide in the bottle!"

"There sure was," agreed Jack, who had seen the same test made in one of the classes a few days before.

"But I don't see what good that is," remarked Bert. "Everyone knew that cyanide was used on the horses. It's a common enough poison. Naturally whoever used it would have it in a bottle. Then you accidentally find the bottle in the stable, but that doesn't tell you who dropped it there."

"No, but this may," said Tom quietly, taking a small piece of paper from his pocket and smoothing it out on the table.

"What is it?" asked Jack, and then, before he could be answered he added. "Oh, I see, part of a druggist's label."

"Yes," admitted Tom. "It was near the bottle. It had been washed off, I imagine. I didn't show it to you at first, for I wanted to make sure of what the bottle had contained."

"And now that you're sure," began Bert, "I suppose-----"

"I'm going to the druggist who sold this, and ask if he can remember who bought it," went on Tom, for, though the label from the bottle was torn, there was enough of it left to show part of the firm name. And, as there were but three drug shops in Elmwood, it was not difficult to pick out the one represented.

"We'll go with you!" exclaimed Jack. "Hurray, Tom! I do believe you're on the trail at last."

"Sure," assented Bert. "Let's go at once."

"I'd like to have you along," explained Tom, "but I think maybe I'd better go by myself. I've got to go at this thing quietly, and if three of us trooped in the drug store, and began asking questions, it would make a scene. Besides, lots of our fellows hang out there for soda, and they'd see us. I don't want this talked about until I get it a little more cleared up. I don't want you fellows to feel that-----"

"Oh get out!" interrupted Jack. "You do just as you please, Tom, and we'll fill in, or play wherever you want us. This is your game, anyhow, though we want to help you all we can. Just say the word."

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"That's good of you," assented our hero. "I think it would be best if I went alone. I'll tell you later what I find out. I think I'll go now. It isn't too late."

"It's after hours," said Bert.

"Well, I'll take a chance," decided Tom, and putting on his hat and coat he prepared to leave the dormitory, first having ascertained that the coast was clear.

Tom was half way down the corridor of the building where he and his chums roomed, and he was thinking of what might come from his prospective interview with the druggist, when, as he turned a dark corner, he ran full tilt into someone who was coming with some speed in the other direction.

"Wha—what's the matter! Who—who are you?" gasped Tom, when he had recovered his breath.

"I—I—who are *you*?" came the quick retort, and the voice was suspicious. Whoever it was evidently was not going to be caught by a prowling monitor.

"George Abbot!" gasped Tom, as he recognized the voice of his chum. "What in the world is the rush? What's the hurry?"

"News! I've got great news!" cried George. "Cats! But you knocked the wind out of me all right. I—I was coming fast myself, I guess. Where are you going?"

"Out," replied Tom briefly. "But what's the news?"

"Better not go," advised George, speaking more composedly now. "There's been a lot of fellows cutting for it to-night, and just before I came in a bunch was rounded up by the proctor, and rushed to Merry's office. I just escaped. Don't you take a chance, Tom."

"No, I guess I'd better not. But was that the news you had to tell me. If it is, why——"

"It isn't that," cried George. "It's great. Sam Heller was just brought across the campus by old Farmer Appleby. He had him by the collar."

"Who had who by the collar?" demanded Tom, much excited now. "Did Sam have-----"

"No, it was the other way around. Appleby had Sam, and he was making all sorts of threats."



“Who was; Sam?”

“No, the old farmer. Can’t you understand? He had Sam, and he was begging to be let go.”

“Sam was?”

“Sure.”

“Say, George,” advised Tom. “Calm down and tell me the whole thing. There may be something big in this. I guess I won’t go out to-night after all,” and, grasping the human question box by the arm, Tom led him back toward the room of the chums.

CHAPTER XIX

DISAPPOINTMENT

“Hello! What’s up?”

“What’s the excitement, Tom?”

Thus his two chums greeted our hero when he entered with the human interrogation mark in tow.

“Something doing,” responded Tom briefly.

“Did you trace the empty bottle so soon?” asked Jack.

“No, I didn’t have time. But George here—out with it! Tell ’em what you told me.”

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"I was coming along," began George, "when Tom ran into me and knocked-----"

"Never mind those horrible details," advised Tom, reflectively rubbing that portion of his anatomy that had come in contact with George. "Cut along faster."

"Well, I was coming to tell Tom that I saw Sam Heller being taken to the doctor's office by old Appleby," went on George.

"Get out!" cried Bert, incredulously.

"Sam Heller!" gasped Jack. "I wonder if Appleby's found out that it was Sam who poisoned his horses, and set the hay on fire?"

"That's it, I believe," said George. "That's why I came to tell Tom. You're cleared all right now, old man."

His chums looked at him, but Tom only shook his head. "No such luck," he said in disappointed tones. "Sam may have been corralled by the old farmer, but it's for something else besides the fire and poisoning."

"What makes you think so?" asked Jack. "Why won't you believe Sam Heller guilty, Tom."

"Because I know he isn't."

"You do? Then you must know who is."

"No, that doesn't follow."

"Look here!" cried Jack, coming close to his chum, and placing his hands on his shoulders, the while looking him squarely into the eyes. "I can't understand you. Here you go and say Sam isn't guilty, and you know it. And yet you say you don't know who did the business. You didn't do it yourself, I'm sure, and yet-----"

"Say Jack," spoke Tom gently. "Believe me, if I was *sure* of what I only *suspect* now I couldn't really tell who poisoned those horses. There's a mystery about it, and I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. I want my name cleared more than anything else in the world, but I want it done in the right way. I don't want to cast suspicion on the wrong person. Now, George, tell us all you know about Sam being caught. It may help some."

"Well, I don't know an awful lot," went on George, as he accepted a chair that Jack pushed out for him. "I was coming in from a little trip to town when I saw, coming across

the campus, two fellows—at least I thought they were two of our fellows, but when they got under one of the lights I saw it was Sam and the old farmer. And, believe me, Appleby had hold of Sam as if he was a thief and him the constable.”

“As if Appleby was the thief?” asked Bert.

“No, as if Sam was. What’s the matter with you fellows, anyhow, that you can’t understand United States talk?” and George looked around half indignantly.

“The trouble is that you mix up your pronouns,” said Tom. “Go ahead. We got as far as that Appleby had hold of Sam as if Sam was a thief.”

“Yes, and Sam was demanding to be let go, while the old farmer was saying: ‘Now I’ve got ye! Consarn ye! I’ll teach ye t’ come sneakin’ around my place! I’ll have ye up afore th’ doctor!’”

The boys all laughed at George’s realistic imitation of the farmer’s talk, for it was quite correct.

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"And then what happened?" asked Jack.

"That's all, except that I came on here in a hurry, and Sam was fairly dragged into the doctor's office by Appleby."

There was silence in the room of the chums for a moment, and then Bert remarked:

"Well, Tom, what do you make of it?"

"I don't know," was the answer, slowly given. "It looks queer, and yet Sam may have only trespassed on Appleby's place by chance."

"Don't you believe it!" exclaimed Jack. "He had some object all right."

"And it's up to us to find out what it is," added Bert.

"No, I'll try it," insisted Tom. "This is my game."

"But we're going to help you play it!" exclaimed Jack. "What's the matter with you, anyhow? Don't you want us to help you clear yourself of this suspicion that's hanging over you?"

"Of course I do, but-----"

"'But me no buts,' old man. Just you let us help you out in this. Now it wouldn't look well for you to go around sneaking under the doctor's windows, trying to hear what's going on. But it wouldn't hurt either of us," and he indicated, by a sweeping gesture, himself and his two close chums.

"So, Tom, my boy," he went on, "we'll just see what we can learn. The doctor's sure to hold an audience with Appleby and Sam in the big front office, and he always has a window open, for Merry is a fresh air fiend, you know. Some of the talk will leak out and it may give us a clew."

"All right," assented Tom, after a moment's thought. "Go ahead. I don't believe it will amount to anything, though. Then I can go on with my drug store end of it," and he briefly explained to George where he had been headed for when the interruption came.

"Shall we all go?" asked Bert. "Won't it look sort of queer for three of us to be hanging around the doctor's house?"

"It will," assented Jack, "and, therefore, we won't all hang out in the same place. I'll get under the big office window; Bert, you can take the window on the other side, and George will guard the front door."

"Guard the front door? For what?"

"Well, just sort of drape yourself around it," suggested Jack, who had assumed the direction of matters. "Maybe you can overhear something as Sam and Appleby come out. I don't just like this sort of thing," he added, "but the end justifies the means, I think."

Tom nodded gravely. The stain against his name had affected him more than he cared to admit. The three lads went out and Tom sat down in moody silence to await their return. They were not long away, and came back together, rather silent.

"Well?" asked Tom questioningly, as his chums entered.

"Nothing much," answered Jack in despondent tones. "We were almost too late, but I did manage to overhear something. Sam and Appleby came out a short time after we got there. It seems that the farmer caught Sam sneaking around his barn, and as he's been suspicious, and on the watch ever since the poisoning of his horses, he rushed out in a hurry and collared him."

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"What explanation did Sam make?" asked Tom.

"All I could hear was that it was a mistake, and that he wandered off the road in the darkness."

"The same as we did when we got in the corn," said Tom. "So that's all there was to it?"

"Except that Appleby was ripping mad, and threatened to have the next school lad arrested whom he found on his property. We'll have to make a new course for cross-country runs after this I guess, for we used to run across his big meadow."

"Yes," assented Tom. "Well, I didn't think it would amount to anything. I'm much obliged, though."

"You wait!" insisted Jack. "This isn't the bottom of it yet, not by a long shot."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom curiously.

"I mean that Sam isn't such a loon as to get off the road on to Appleby's land just by mistake, or because it was dark."

"You mean he went there purposely?"

"I sure do."

"What for?" and Tom gazed curiously at his chum.

"That's what I've got to find out. He had some object, and I shouldn't be surprised but what it was you, Tom."

"Me?"

"Yes. He hasn't succeeded in driving you out of the Hall as he hoped, and now he's up to some more mean tricks."

Tom shook his head. He had a curious disbelief in Sam's guilt.

"Go ahead on that line if you like, Jack," he said. "But I can't agree with you. I'm going to follow my bottle clew to-morrow, and nothing the others could say would make Tom admit that Sam had a hand in poisoning the horses, or in setting the hay on fire."

"But look how ready he was to accuse you," insisted Bert.

"That was only to clear himself," said Tom. "The fact of his sweater being like mine was a strange coincidence, and he had to say something."

“He was ready enough to accuse you,” put in Jack. “Say, Tom, old man, why don’t you come out and tell us where you went that night—and why? Tell us what you did—how your sweater got away from you, and was found on the farm. Go ahead!”

“Do!” urged Bert.

But Tom shook his head.

“I can’t--not yet,” he said. “I promised Ray-----”

He stopped suddenly. His chums leaned forward eagerly.

“Well, I can’t say any more,” he finished. “Now let’s forget all this, and have a game of chess, somebody. It will make me sleep good.”

“I’m going to cut,” said George. “You fellows can play.”

Tom and Jack sat down to the royal game, while Bert got out a book, and for a time silence reigned in the apartment.

Tom made an early trip to town the next day. He went directly to the drugstore, the torn label of which was on the bottle he had found to contain a trace of poison.

Without going into details, but announcing who he was, he asked if the druggist could give him any information as to who had bought the cyanide.

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"Well, I can look at my records," said the pharmacist. "I keep a list of all persons to whom I sell poison, and make them sign a receipt for it. Of course I have no means of knowing that the names are true ones. There are some poisons I sell only on a doctor's prescription, but it is not against the local law to dispense cyanide, and it has many legitimate uses. I'll look it up for you."

He disappeared behind his ground-glass partition, to return presently, announcing:

"My clerk made that sale. He'll be in presently, and he can tell you who bought the stuff. The name signed is Jacob Crouse, however."

"Jacob Crouse," mused Tom, and he slowly shook his head. Yet there was a gleam of hope in his eyes. "Maybe it isn't him after all."

Tom spent a fretful half hour, waiting for the clerk to come in, and he was nervous lest some of the school lads enter and question him as to his presence in the place. For Tom was not anxious that his errand be known except to his chums. But none from Elmwood Hall came in, and shortly the clerk arrived. There was a whispered conference between him and the proprietor, and the clerk addressed Tom.

"You wish to know who bought cyanide, some time ago?" asked the young man.

"Yes," said Tom. "Can you describe Jacob Crouse?"

"I don't know that he gave me the right name," said the clerk. "In fact I suspect he didn't. But he was a young fellow, about your own age and build."

"He was!" exclaimed Tom, and his voice showed disappointment.

"Yes, but he was not so well dressed. In fact he was rather shabby. He said he wanted the stuff to kill rats, and asked the best way to prepare it. I tried to sell him some regular rat poison, but he wanted the cyanide. I told him to mix it with corn meal. He said there were lots of rats on his father's farm."

"He said that?" cried Tom.

"Yes. Oh, they make up all sorts of stories when they want to get suspicious stuff, though there's no law here against cyanide. Why, did some one of your friends poison someone, or commit suicide?"

"Oh, not as bad as that," replied Tom. "Is that all you can tell me about this—this person?"

[Transcriber's note: The next piece of text has several missing fragments, which seem to have been caused during printing. I have indicated the missing text with brackets.]



“Well, about all—hold on, though, he had a big scar on—let me see—on his left cheek. It extended from his eye almost to his [missing words] livid, ugly scar.”

[missing line]

[missing words] good! [missing words] I’m much obliged to you, and with a smile of hope our hero hurried from the drug store, followed by the curious glances of the proprietor and the clerk.

CHAPTER XX

MORE SEEKING

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Tom Fairfield hurried on back toward Elmwood Hall. His brain was busy with many thoughts. At first he felt a spirit of elation.

"A scar—a big scar," he murmured. "Then it couldn't have been him, unless he got hurt after I saw him. And yet if he had, it was too short a time for a scar to form. The clerk would have said a wound, and not a scar. And yet—oh, I'm not sure after all! It may have been him, and he may have gotten into a fight after he left me. He was desperate. And until I am sure it wasn't him I can't say anything, for mother's sake, as well as his. I can't bring disgrace on her, even though I suffer myself. Oh, hang it all! If I hadn't had that quarrel with Appleby they never would have suspected me, and I wouldn't have had all this trouble."

Poor Tom, hardly knowing what to do, or which way to turn, flung himself down on the couch in his room, and thought deeply. Neither Jack nor Bert was in and the apartment was quiet.

"If I could only reach him," mused Tom, "I could get him to explain, or even come here and clear me. And yet I can't even say I met him, and helped him, on account of my promise, and what saying such a thing would mean. But he might release me from my promise, and even help me to prove my innocence."

Then Tom thought of other things—of how much easier it would be to drop out of school entirely and let matters take their course.

"But I won't!" he exclaimed, sitting up and clenching his fists. "I'm in this fight to stay. I'm going to clear my name and do it in the right way. To leave now would be to do just what Sam Heller most wants, and I won't give him that satisfaction. I'll stick!"

Jack and Bert came bursting in, having heard from George that Tom was back.

"Any luck?" asked Jack, for they knew of Tom's trip to the drug store.

"Well, in a way, yes, and yet not. I found out who bought the poison."

"Was it Sam Heller?" asked Bert eagerly.

"No," answered Tom. "Haven't I told you that I'm sure he hadn't any hand in it?"

"You wait and see," advised Jack. "I think you're away off, Tom. But say, you want to come out to football practice this afternoon. Strict orders for everyone to be on the job."

"Oh, what's the use?"

"Lots! What's getting into you lately?" asked Bert.

“Oh, you know how it is. Sam is sure to try to make a fumble for me; and what’s the fun of playing when you don’t know what minute you’ll lose the game?”

“Why don’t you complain of him to Morse, or Mr. Jackson?” asked Jack.

“What good would it do? Sam would get on his ear, and say I was away off. Then, too, almost everyone would say I was doing spite work. No, I guess I’ll just keep out of the game.”

“No, you won’t!” exclaimed Jack with a laugh. “You’ll come out to practice, and Bert and I will watch Sam as a cat does a mouse. He’ll get no chance to try any of his tricks.”

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Thus urged, Tom gave in, and donned his suit. The practice was hard and snappy that afternoon against the scrub. The regular eleven, made desperate by the recent drubbings administered to it, played fiercely, with the result that several touchdowns were scored.

"This is something like!" exulted the coach.

"Yes, if they'll only keep it up and play like this on Saturday," assented Captain Morse Denton. "But I'm afraid of a slump."

"Oh, I guess not. Say! Look at Tom go through with the ball."

"Yes. He's playing better. I'm sorry he and Sam are on the outs. I'm always afraid of a clash."

"Yes, that's likely. See him go! Say! if he'll play that way Saturday we'll wipe up the gridiron with Holwell."

"Let's hope so!" exclaimed the captain.

Indeed, Tom was playing as he had seldom played before. And Sam was passing the ball to him accurately. There was not a fumble.

Perhaps it was because he realized that he was being narrowly-watched, not only by Tom but by Bert and Jack as well. In fact Jack, at the beginning of practice, had taken the opportunity to whisper into Sam's ear:

"None of your funny business now!"

"What do you mean?" asked Sam with a show of innocence.

"Oh, you know very well what I mean," insisted Jack. "If you fumble the ball when you're passing it to me, or Tom or Bert, I'll see you afterward, and it won't be a pleasant interview, either," and Jack playfully dug Sam in the ribs.

"Here! What are you doing?" demanded the quarterback.

"That's a sample of what to expect," said Jack grimly.

And so the practice went on, hard, and fast, and the hearts of the coach, captain and players were glad, for they felt that Elmwood Hall was coming back into her own. Even hazing, which went on intermittently, ceased in favor of football practice.

Meanwhile nothing more had been heard about the hay fire, the poisoning of the horses, nor about Sam's trouble with the old farmer. In regard to the latter, Sam had

boastingly explained to his chums, whence it sifted to our friends, that he had gotten the best of Appleby.

"The old codger!" Sam exclaimed. "I didn't hurt his land anyhow. It was so all-fired dark that I couldn't see where I was going."

"What were you doing over there?" asked one of his few admirers—one who hoped for a ride in Sam's auto.

"Oh, just out for my health," replied Sam, with a wink at his crony, Nick.

As to Tom's position, it was the same as it had been. No official action had been taken against him—indeed none could be, since there was no good evidence to connect him with the crime. And yet he was suspected, and could not seem to prove his innocence.

"It's the queerest thing why he won't tell about where he went that night when he came in, smelling of smoke, and later, how he lost his sweater," commented Jack to Bert. "If I didn't know Tom, I'd say he had some hand in the business."

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"And yet Tom didn't. And it wasn't his pin."

"Of course not. But a lot of the fellows think he's guilty. And Sam keeps his crowd on edge about it. He's always referring to Tom as the 'poisoner' and so he keeps the thing alive, when, if it wasn't mentioned, it might die out."

"That's right. The mean sneak! And yet I guess Tom would rather have it kept alive until he makes out his case, than to have it die down, and the suspicion still be against him."

"Oh, of course. And yet it doesn't seem as if he had a chance to make good."

"Oh, you leave it to Tom," said Bert. "He's got pluck, and if he has any decent sort of luck he'll pull out ahead."

"Well, maybe. Tom Fairfield's luck is proverbial you know. Look how he came out ahead in the shipwreck, and the finding of the treasure in the old mill."

The two chums were still discussing the case of their friend when they entered their room, and saw our hero busy writing letters.

"Who's the girl?" asked Jack, playfully.

"There doesn't happen to be any particular one," answered Tom with a smile. "I'm writing letters, trying to pick up a new clew to this mysterious case."

"Still seeking clews?" asked Bert.

"Of course. I'm not going to stop until I get what I want. Anything new outside?"

"Nothing much, except our football stock has gone up a few more points. Everyone seems to think we're going to do Holwell good and proper."

"I hope so," murmured Tom, as he bent over his writing. "I'm going to play my best, if they let me go in the game."

"Oh, I guess they will," said Jack; and then the silence in the room was broken only by the scratching of Tom's pen.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE STORM

"'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah! Elmwood!"

"Three cheers for Holwell!"

"Now, boys, all together, give 'em the 'Chase Down the Field!' song!"

"Over this way, Elmwood. We'll run through the signals again!"

"Over here, Holwell, for some snappy work!"

These were only a few of the many things heard on the Elmwood gridiron the Saturday of one of the big games. The grandstands were piling up with their crowds, many dashes of color being added by the hats and wraps of the girls, while the sweaters and cap-bands of their brothers—or perhaps other girls' brothers—increased the riot of color.

"Oh, what a fine looking lot of fellows the Elmwood Hall boys are," confided one girl to her chum.

"Do you think so? I think they look small compared to the Holwell players."

"Why Mabel, how can you say such a thing? There's Billy over there. Isn't he stunning? Did you see him kick?"

"Oh, there goes Fred with the ball!" and the other girl with her eyes on the Holwell contingent, never looked at her friend who had looks only for "Billy" who was lucky enough to play on Tom's team.

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There was a consultation of the officials and a toss for choice. Holwell got the kick-off, and Captain Denton was rather glad of it, for he had instructed his lads, in case they got the ball, to make the most of the early periods of the game, and rush the pigskin for all they were worth.

"If we can get a touchdown in the first period it will almost mean winning the game," he said to the coach.

"That's right. Well, play as fast as you can, for I think we're in for a storm, and there are too many chances on a wet field to make anything certain. Strike while the iron is hot. Slam-bang through for a touchdown, if you can, before the rain comes."

It was a raw, chilly day, with every promise of rain or snow, and though the crowds in the stands kept themselves warm by stamping their feet and singing, there was much discomfort.

Tom had been given his old position back of the line, and as he trotted out for practice he felt a sense of elation in the coming struggle.

"I'm not going to think about that miserable old business," he told himself, but his resolution received a rude shock when, as he passed where Sam was talking to one of the Holwell players, the bully was heard to say:

"Yes, lots of us think he dropped the poison in the mangers to get even with Appleby. But of course there's nothing proven."

"I see. A sort of Scotch verdict."

"Something like that. I should think he'd get out of the eleven at least, if not out of the school, but he sticks."

"Indeed I do!" murmured Tom, clenching his fists, and almost deciding to challenge Sam. But he knew a row would do no good, and would only hurt his case; so he kept silent.

"Line up!" came the call, and with the last of the preliminaries the practice balls were called in, and the new, yellow one placed on a little mound of earth in the center of the field.

There was that ever-inspiring thrill as the spheroid was booted high into the air. Tom had the luck to grab it and then, with fairly good interference, he dashed down the field.

"Stick to him, boys! Stick to him!" yelled the captain as he raced onward. But some of the Holwell school players broke through, and Tom was thrown heavily.

“Now, boys, tear ‘em up!” entreated Morse, as the first scrimmage was to come. Sam began on a signal that would have sent Tom through guard and tackle, but Morse, hearing it, quickly stepped to the quarterback, whispering:

“Not yet! Tom’s too winded. Give him a chance to get his breath. Try a forward pass.”

Sam scowled, but he had to obey. It had been his intention to play Tom fiercely until, out of weariness, our hero would have been [missing words] or would have played so raggedly that he would be sent to the side lines. But Sam’s plan was frustrated.

The forward pass was not much of a success, and a fake kick was called for. This netted a slight gain and then Morse again whispered to Sam.

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"Let Tom take the ball through now."

The signal was given, and, with head well down, Tom hit the opposing line on the run. It held better than he had expected it would, and he was dizzy with the shock, but he had made a good gain, and there came a yell of delight from the supporters of Elmwood Hall.

Then the game sea-sawed back and forth, with matters a little in favor of Tom's team.

"Get a touchdown! Get a touchdown!" pleaded the captain.

"By Jove I will!" thought Tom, grimly. "If I only get half a chance."

He got it a moment later. A fake kick was called for, but there was a fumble, and Tom grabbed up the ball on the bounce. Tucking it under his arm, he ran for a hole he spied in the other line. Hands reached out for him, but he eluded them, and the fullback of Holwell, having been drawn in fatally close, was not able to stop our hero, who was running well.

"Touchdown! Touchdown!" screamed the crowd, as Tom sprinted over mark after mark.

"I'll do it!" he cried fiercely.

Now the other players had disentangled themselves from the mass into which they had been hurled, and were after him. One of the fleetest was approaching our hero.

"I've got to out-distance him," murmured Tom, looking back over his shoulder, and he let out a little more of the speed he had been reserving. Then, panting and weary, he crossed the goal line-----and only just in time, for, as he leaped over it, the hand of the Holwell fullback was on his jacket.

"Touchdown!" gasped Tom, as he fell on the ball.

Then broke out a riot of cheers, cries and songs of victory! The goal was missed, owing to a strong wind, but the Elmwood Hall lads cared little for that. They were in winning luck, they felt sure.

The first period was practically over, and soon came the second, during which Holwell tried desperately to score. But she could not, though several of her players were injured in the fierce rushes, and two of Elmwood's lads had to be replaced by substitutes.

It began to rain shortly after the third period started, and it came down in such torrents that the field was soon a sea of mud and mud-soaked grass. Still the game went on, though many of the spectators deserted the field.

“Keep playing! Keep playing!” begged Captain Denton. “We can win if we only hold them from scoring.”

At first it looked as if this was not to be, for the Holwell team was heavier, and this told on a slippery gridiron. But Tom and his mates had pluck, and they held well in the rushes. Once there was a chance for Elmwood to make another touchdown, but Jack Fitch slipped and fell in a mud-puddle, the ball rolling out of his hands. Then a Holwell player grabbed it, and kicked it out of danger on the next line-up.

“Only a few minutes more,” called the coach encouragingly, as the fourth quarter neared a close. “Hold ’em, boys!”

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And hold Tom and his chums did. They had lost the ball on downs, and it was dangerously near their goal mark. But they were like bulldogs now—fighting in the last ditch. A touchdown and a goal would beat them. It must not be!

There was a short, sharp, quick signal, and one of the Holwell players seemed to take the ball around left end. But Tom's sharp eye saw that it was a trick play, and he cried to his mates to beware. They did not hear him, and nearly all of them rushed to intercept the ball. Tom, however, swung the other way, and headed for the player who really had the pigskin.

On the latter came with a rush. He was a big tackle, and Tom was much smaller. Yet he did not hesitate.

"Look out!" yelled the Holwell player, hoping to intimidate Tom, as he rushed at him. But Tom was not made of the material that frightens easily. Gritting his teeth, he braced himself for the tackle. He fairly hurled himself at the man, through a mist of rain, and he caught him. Down they went together in a heap, Tom groaning as he felt his left ankle giving way under the strain.

In vain the big tackle tried to get up and struggle on. Tom held fast; and then it was all over, for the other Elmwood players, seeing their mistake, hurried to Tom's aid, and a small human mountain piled up on him and the Holwell lad.

"Down!" howled the latter, ceasing his wriggling. The whistle blew, ending the game, with the ball but a scant foot from Elmwood's goal line.

"Good boy!" called Captain Denton into Tom's ear. "You saved our bacon for us."

"I'm glad I did," replied Tom, limping around.

"Are you hurt much?" asked Morse.

"No, only a bit of sprained ankle. I'll be all right in a little while, I guess."

"It was great! Simply great!" exclaimed Jack a few hours later, when he and Tom and Bert sat in their room, the smell of arnica filling the apartment, coming from Tom's bandaged ankle. "You sure played your head off, old man!"

"I know I nearly played my leg off," agreed Tom, with a wry face. "I can just step on it, and that's all."

"Never mind, we beat 'em," consoled Bert. "And you did it, Tom."

"Nonsense. It was team work. Sam played a fair game too. That helped a lot. I was afraid of him at first."

“He didn’t dare do anything,” said Jack. “I told him I’d have my eye on him.”

They talked over the plays in detail. Tom was just beginning to feel sleepy when there came a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called, for it was not yet the hour for lights to be out, and even a professor would find nothing out of the way. One of the school messengers entered.

“Here’s a note for you, Mr. Fairfield,” he said. “A special delivery letter.”

Tom read it quickly. A change came over his face.

“I’ve got to go out!” he exclaimed, crumpling up the missive. He reached for his raincoat limping across the room.

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"Go out in this storm!" cried Jack. "You oughtn't to!"

"Not with a lame ankle," added Bert.

"I've got to," insisted Tom. "It means more than you think," and telling his chums not to sit up for him, he hurried out into the storm and darkness.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RAGGED MAN

"Well, what do you think of that?" gasped Bert.

"Isn't he the limit?" demanded Jack. "Running off that way before you have a chance to draw your breath. But that's just like Tom Fairfield, anyhow."

"Isn't it? What do you imagine he's up to, this time?"

"Give it up. It must be something important, to go out in this storm, after a hard football game."

"And with an ankle that's on the blink, speaking poetically."

They looked at each other, and in the silence that followed their exclamation after Tom left, they heard the dash of rain on the window, and the howl of the wind as it scattered the cold drops about. For it was a cold November storm that had suddenly descended, not cold enough to snow, yet chilling.

"He said it meant more to him than we thought," spoke Bert, musingly.

"And that's only one thing," said Jack.

"You mean the poison business?"

"Sure."

"Maybe we'd better follow him," suggested Bert. "He may stumble or fall, and get hurt."

"Tom doesn't like anyone to follow him. I guess we'd better stay where we are until he gets back."

Jack got up to walk about the room and quiet his nerves that, all on edge after the football game, had been further excited by Tom's strange action. Suddenly he came to a halt and exclaimed:

"He dropped his letter, Bert. It's here on the floor."

Jack picked up the crumpled sheet. It had been wadded up with the envelope, and the latter showed the blue special delivery stamp.

"Had we better—Oh, of course we can't read it," said Jack. "Only I wish I knew what it was that made Tom go out in such a hurry."

He walked toward his chum's desk, intending to thrust the letter in it, but, as he did so, his eye caught a few words that he could not help reading. They were:

"Meet me down the lane. I'll explain everything. Sorry you had the trouble. I'm straight again."

"RAY BLAKE."

"Ray Blake," murmured Jack. "Ray Blake. I never heard that name before, and I never knew Tom to mention it. And yet—Oh, hang it all, Bert!" he ejaculated. "You might as well know as much as I know, though I couldn't help reading this much," and he told his chum what he had seen.

"What does it mean?" asked Bert.

"Give it up, except I think that this is the beginning of the end. Someone is evidently going to confess."

"And clear Tom?"

"It looks that way. I wish he'd taken us into his confidence. We might have helped him. Wow, what a night!"

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There came a fiercer blast of the storm, and a harder dash of rain against the window.

The two chums decided they could do nothing. They would have to wait until Tom returned. And they sat in anxious silence, until that should happen.

"What lane do you think was meant in the letter?" asked Bert, when Jack had placed the missive in Tom's desk.

"The lane leading to Appleby's farm, maybe."

"And if Tom goes there he may get into another row with the old farmer."

"Not much danger to-night. I guess Appleby will stay in where it's dry and warm. I wish Tom had."

Meanwhile the subject of their remarks was tramping on through the storm. His ankle pained him very much, and he realized that he would be better off in bed. But something drove him forward. He saw daylight ahead, even through the blackness of the night.

"At last!" Tom murmured, as he plunged on. "I'll see him, and get him to release me from my promise. Maybe he'll own up that he did the thing himself, and that will free me, though it will be terrible for mother. She never dreamed that Ray would get into such trouble.

"I wonder which of my letters reached him? And why did he have to pick out such a night to want to see me? Well, I give it up. I'll have to wait until I have a talk with him. I wonder what his plans are?"

Thus musing, and half talking to himself, Tom staggered on through the rain and darkness. He had to be careful of his ankle, for he did not want to permanently injure himself, nor get so lame that he could not play in future football games.

"Let's see," said Tom, coming to a halt after an uphill struggle against the November gale. "The lane ought to be somewhere around here." It was so dark that he could scarcely see a few feet ahead of him, and a lantern would have been blown out in an instant. "I hope Appleby isn't prowling around," he went on. "It would look sort of awkward if he caught me. I wish Ray had named some other place. And yet, it was here I saw him the other time. Maybe it will be all right."

Tom went on a little farther, stepping into mud puddles, and slipping off uneven stones, sending twinges of pain through his sprained ankle.

"I guess I'm there now," he murmured as he felt a firm path under his feet. "Now to see if Ray is here."

Tom had advanced perhaps a hundred feet down the lane that led from the main road to the farm of Mr. Appleby when he came to an abrupt halt.

“Was that a whistle, or just the howling of the wind?” he asked himself, half aloud. He paused to listen.

“It was a whistle,” he answered himself. “I’ll reply.”

He shrilled out a call through the storm and darkness, in reply to the few notes he had heard.

“Are you there?” demanded a voice.

“Yes. Is that you, Ray?” asked Tom.

“Ray? No! who are you?” came the query.

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Tom felt his heart sink. Had he made a mistake? He did not know what to do.

Through the darkness a shape loomed up near him. He started back, and then came a dazzling flash of light. It shone in his face—one of those portable electric torches. By the reflected glare Tom saw that it was held and focused on him by a ragged man—by a man who seemed to be a tramp—a man with a broad, livid scar running from his eye down his cheek nearly to his mouth!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PURSUIT

They stood staring at each other—Tom Fairfield and the ragged man, the latter holding the electric torch so that it was focused on our hero. And yet this did not prevent some of the rays from glinting back and revealing himself. He seemed too surprised to make any move, and, as for Tom himself, he remained motionless, not knowing what to do. He had come out in the storm expecting to meet a certain person, and a totally different one had appeared, and yet one whom he much desired to meet.

“Well,” finally growled the ragged man. “What is it, young feller? Was you lookin’ for me?”

“Not exactly,” replied Tom with a half smile, “and yet I’m glad to see you.”

“Oh, you are, eh? Well, I don’t know as I can say the same. What do you want, anyhow?”

“A few words with you.”

“And s’posin’ I don’t want any words with you?”

“I fancy it will be to your advantage to talk to me,” said Tom coolly. He was glad of a chance to stand still, for his ankle was paining him very much, and even though the rain was coming down in torrents, and it was cold and dreary, he did not mind, for he felt that at last he was at the end of the trail that meant the clearing of his name.

“Nice time for a talk,” sneered the tramp. “If you have anything to say, out with it. I’m not going to stand here all night.”

“I don’t fancy the job myself,” remarked Tom easily. “In the first place, you came here to meet the same person I did, I think.”

“What makes you think so?” asked the tramp uneasily, and he lowered his light so that it no longer pointed in Tom’s face.

"Well, I have reasons. Assuming that you did come here to meet a certain Ray Blake, what do you want of him?"

"I'm not going to tell you—how did you know I wanted to see Ray?" stammered the ragged man, hastily correcting himself.

"He told me so," replied Tom frankly. "Now I want you to let him alone after this. You've done him harm enough, and you have done much to ruin his life. I want you to promise not to make any more attempts to force him to lead the kind of a life you're leading."

"S'posin' I won't?"

"Then I'll make you!"

"You'll make me? Come, that's pretty good! That's rich, that is! Ha! You'll make me, young feller? Why it'll take more'n you to make me do what I don't want to do."

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"I fancy not," said Tom easily, and with a cautious movement he advanced a step nearer the tramp. The latter did not appear to notice it.

"Well, what else do you want?" asked the ragged fellow. "That's not sayin' I'm goin' to do what you asked me first, though," he sneered. His light was now flickering about on the rain-soaked ground, making little rings of illumination.

"Will you tell me how you got that scar on your cheek?" asked Tom suddenly.

Involuntarily the man's hand went to the evidence of the old wound. Up flashed the light into Tom's face again, and as it was held up there came this sharp question, asked with every evidence of fear:

"What—what do you know about that?"

"I know more than you think I do," said Tom, still speaking with a confidence he did not feel. Again he took a cautious step forward. He was now almost within leaping distance of the tramp.

"Well then, if you know so much there's no need of me telling you," sneered the ragged man. "I've had enough of this," he went on, speaking roughly. "I don't see why I should waste time talking to you in this confounded rain. I'm going to leave."

"Not until you answer me one more question," said Tom firmly, and he gathered himself together for that which he knew must follow.

"Seems to me you're mighty fond of askin' questions," sneered the tramp, "an' you don't take the most comfortable places to do it in. Well, fire ahead, and I'll answer if I like."

Tom paused a moment. He looked about in the surrounding blackness, as if to note whether help was at hand, or perhaps to discover if the person he had come out to meet was near. But, there was no movement. There was no sound save the swish of the rain about the two figures so strangely contrasted, confronting one another. Off in the distance, down the hill, could be seen the dim lights in the old farmhouse of Mr. Appleby.

"Well?" asked the tramp, in a hard voice. "Go ahead, an' get done with it. I'm tired of standing here." He had released his thumb from the spring of the electric torch, and the light went out, making the spot seem all the blacker by contrast.

Tom drew in his breath sharply. Taking a stride forward, and reaching out his two muscular arms in the darkness, he asked in a low voice:

"How much did you pay for that cyanide of potassium, Jacob Crouse?"

Tom could hear the surprised gasp from the tramp, he could hear his teeth chatter, not with cold, but from fright, and a moment later, with a half audible cry, the man turned and fled away in the storm and darkness.

“No, you don’t!” cried Tom, and with, a spring he sought to grab the ragged fellow. But the lad was just the fraction of a second too late, and though he did manage to grasp a portion of the tramp’s coat, the ragged and rotten cloth parted in his hand.

“I’ll get you yet!” exclaimed Tom fiercely, as he took up the pursuit in the darkness. He had been expecting this, and yet it had come so suddenly that he was not quite prepared for it. He had hoped to get near enough to the tramp, undetected, to grab him before asking that question which so startled the fellow. Now the man, on whom so much depended in the clearing of Tom’s name, was sprinting down the farm lane.

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"My ankle!" gasped Tom, as a sudden turn on it sent a twinge of pain through him. "If it wasn't for that I'd stand a better chance. And yet I'm not going to give up. I've got to get him, or all my work will go for nothing."

On he ran, the rain-soaked ground giving forth scarcely a sound save when he or the man ahead of him stepped into some mud puddle, of which there were many.

Tom, however, could hear the footfalls of the tramp, who was seeking to escape, and by their nearness he judged that the fellow was not very far in advance.

"He hasn't much the start of me," mused Tom. "But if he gets out on the main road he can easily give me the slip. I've got to corner him in this lane."

The lane was a long one, bordered on either side by big fields, some of which were pastures, where the patient cattle stood in the storm, and others whence fall crops had been gathered by the farmer. Tom glanced ahead, and from side to side, to see if the tramp had leaped a fence and was seeking to get away across some pasture. But he saw nothing, and was aware of a dim moving spot just ahead of him. It was as if the spot was a little lighter in darkness than the surrounding night.

"He's in the lane yet, I think," said Tom, to himself, trying to run so as to bring as little weight as possible on his injured ankle. "At least I hope he is. And the lane doesn't end yet for some distance."

A moment later he was given evidence that the fellow was still running straight ahead. There came a muttered exclamation, and the sound of splashing water. Then there shone a brilliant patch of light for an instant. The tramp had blundered into some puddle, and had flashed his electric torch to get his bearings. This Tom saw, and he also saw that the man had increased the distance between them.

"He's going to get away from me if I can't do a little better sprinting work," murmured Tom grimly. "If I was making a touchdown I'd have to do better than this. I'll just pretend that I am out for a touchdown."

Clenching his teeth to keep back exclamations of pain, that, somehow or other, would force themselves out, as his ankle twinged him, Tom swept on. He fancied he was gaining a bit, for he could hear the labored breathing of the man ahead of him.

"Wind's giving out!" thought Tom, and he was glad that he was well trained. Undoubtedly the life of dissipation the tramp had led would tell on him. He could not keep up the race long. And yet the lane must soon end.

"I've got to get him! I've got to get him!" said Tom to himself, over and over again, and he lowered his head and raced on in the storm and darkness.

He came to the same puddle where the tramp had flashed his light, and the muddy water splashed high. It was slippery, too, and, in an endeavor to maintain his balance, Tom further wrenched his ankle.

"I'll be laid up for fair!" he groaned. "No more football for me this season. Well, I can't help it. This is more important. Oh, if I can only land him in jail where he belongs!"

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Recovering himself, he dashed on. He could still hear the lumbering footsteps of the tramp. And then suddenly, out of the blackness ahead of Tom there came a strange sound. It was like a grunt. Then the echo of voices.

"Look out where you're going!" someone exclaimed.

"Get out of my way!" snarled another, and Tom recognized the tramp's tones.

"Ray! Ray Blake!" cried Tom, as he again heard the first voice. "Hold that man! Don't let him get away. That's Jake Crouse!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CORNERED

Tom Fairfield heard the sound of a struggle ahead of him in the blackness. He heard the panting of breaths, heavily drawn, and the impact of blows.

"I'm coming, Ray! I'm coming. Hold him!" yelled Tom. "Don't let him get away!"

"I—I won't, Tom!" was the answer. "But—hurry up!"

Tom sprang forward, but it was almost his undoing, for he slipped in the mud and went down heavily. For a moment he lay in the slime and water, with the rain beating on him, and the wind whipping about him, half stunned.

"Worse than ever!" he murmured, making a wry face. "T've got to hop on and help Ray."

Just touching the toes of his injured foot to the ground, and hopping on his uninjured leg, our hero made his way forward to where he could hear the struggle going on between the tramp and the youth called Ray.

"Let go of me!" snarled the tramp. "I'll fix you for this!"

"You've nearly fixed me already, Jake," was the grim response. "I'm not going to let you go. Where are you, Tom?"

"Coming!" Tom hopped on, slipping and stumbling. As he neared the struggling figures he stepped on something round that rolled under his foot, and he picked it up. It was the tramp's flashlight, and an instant later Tom had focused the brilliant rays on the struggling figures. He saw that Ray had the man in a tight grip, while the ragged fellow was beating the lad in an endeavor to break the hold.

“That’ll do!” cried Tom, and, thrusting the electric torch into his own pocket, he clasped the tramp’s arms from behind. Then the battle was practically over, for the two lads could easily handle the man, whose breath was nearly spent from his running.

“Do you give up?” asked Tom, still holding the man’s elbows.

“I s’pose I’ve got to,” was the half-growled answer. “You’ve got me cornered.”

“And you’ll be cornered worse than this before I’m done with you!” said Tom grimly. “Are you hurt, Ray?”

“Not much. A few scratches and some blows in the face. But what’s the matter with you, Tom? You’re lame.”

“Yes, my ankle is on the blink—football game to-day; just before I got your letter. Oh, but I’m glad I reached you in time!”

“Yes, you just caught me. I’d been on my way West to-morrow. Oh Tom, I can’t tell you how sorry I am about it all!”

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"Never mind. It's all right now, and all can be explained, I guess."

"Of course it can."

"Say, when you fellows get through chinnin' maybe you'll tell me what you're goin' to do with me?" snarled the tramp.

"We surely will," said Tom. "We're going to tie you up, and then send for the police."

"You are! Not if I know it!" With an angry cry the man endeavored to break from the hold of the two lads. But they were too much for the fellow, though the struggle was not an easy one.

"We'd better fasten him in some way," suggested Ray. "Rip off his coat, Tom, and tie his arms in it. Maybe we'd better call for help."

"Where could we get any?"

"At Appleby's house. I fancy the old man would be glad to meet Mr. Crouse again," and Ray Blake laughed.

"Don't take me to him!" whined the tramp, now much subdued. "Take me to jail, but not to that old skinflint."

"I'm afraid we haven't much choice," said Tom. "No more fighting now, or we won't be so gentle with you."

It was a threat the tramp knew would be carried out, and he made no further attempt to escape. The two lads took off his ragged coat, and made it fast about the fellow's arms, tying them behind him. Then, walking on either side, while Tom flashed the electric torch at intervals, they turned back toward the farmhouse, our hero limping along as best he could.

"Hello! Hello, there Appleby!" yelled Tom, when they came within hailing distance of the building. It was still raining hard. "Hello there, show a light!"

There was a pause, and then a door opened, letting out a flood of illumination that cut the blackness like a knife. A voice demanded:

"What's th' matter? Who be ye, makin' a racket this time of night? What right ye got on my land, anyhow?"

"That's all right, Mr. Appleby," put in Ray. "I guess you'll be glad to see us. We've got a man you've been looking for."

The tramp said nothing, but he did not make an effort to escape. Probably he realized that it was too late, now. His young captors advanced with him into the lighted kitchen of the farmhouse.

“Jake Crouse!” exclaimed the farmer. “Good land, where’d ye git him, boys? An’ Ray Blake! Wa’al I never! Where’d ye pick him up?”

“In your lane,” answered Ray. “We thought you’d be glad to see him.”

“Me glad to see him?” exclaimed the puzzled farmer. “What for?”

“Because,” answered Tom slowly, “he is the man who poisoned your horses, Mr. Appleby, and, unless I’m much mistaken, he also set fire to your hay ricks. I’ve got the evidence for the first charge, and-----”

“I’ve got the evidence for the other,” interrupted Ray. “It’s all up, Jake. You’d better confess right now and save yourself heavier punishment.”

“Good land!” gasped the farmer. “Jake Crouse—the feller who used t’ work fer me—poisoned my horses—sot fire t’ my hay? It don’t seem possible!”

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"I'd a done a heap more to you if I'd had the chance!" snarled the tramp. "You're the meanest man in seven counties, and you cheated me out of my money. I said I'd get even with you and I did."

"Then you admit you're Crouse?" asked Tom eagerly.

"Might as well, as long as you've got the goods on me. I'll take my medicine now, but I'll get back at you later, Jed Appleby!" and he shot a black look at the farmer.

"It will be some time before he can carry out that threat," said Tom easily. "Now, Mr. Appleby, I suppose you haven't a grudge against me any longer, as it's been proved that I had no hand in your troubles."

"No, of course not. I—I'm sorry I made a complaint against ye. But it did look mighty suspicious."

"Yes, it did," admitted Tom, "and I couldn't say anything, for certain reasons. But they no longer exist."

"I don't exactly understand it all," said the still-puzzled farmer, "but it's all right, an' I begs yer pardon, Tom Fairfield, an' here's my hand!" and he held out a big palm.

"That's all right," said Tom easily, as he shook hands. "I'll explain everything soon."

"And I'll do my share," added Ray. "I haven't acted just as I should in this matter. But I'm on a different road now."

"I hope so," put in Mrs. Appleby, who had been a silent spectator of the happenings. "I allers said you had a good streak in you somewhere, Ray Blake, and if you had a mother-----"

"Please don't speak of her," the boy asked gently.

"Have you a telephone?" asked Tom, anxious to change the subject, for he saw that Ray was much affected. "If you have, we can 'phone for the authorities to call for our friend here," and he nodded at the tramp who, bound, sat in sullen silence.

"No, we don't have such luxuries," answered the farmer, "but I'll send one of my hired men into town. We can lock Jake up in the smoke house 'till the constable gets here."

This was done, Jake Crouse submitting sullenly. Then, when the hired man had driven off in the rain, the farmer and his wife insisted on providing dry garments for Ray and Tom, and in making them hot coffee.

In two hours the constable arrived, and only just in time, for the tramp had nearly forced open the smoke house door, and would soon have escaped. He was handcuffed, and driven to the town lockup.

"I'll appear agin' him to-morrow," said Mr. Appleby. "Now hadn't you boys better stay here all night? It's rainin' cats an' dogs."

"No, I must get back to the school," said Tom. "And I'd like Ray to come with me. I want him to help explain certain things to my chums. They know I'm not an incendiary, or a horse poisoner, but some others don't believe that."

"We'll soon make 'em!" exclaimed Ray.

"I'm with you Tom. I can't make up all you suffered on my account, but I will do all I can."

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“Wa’al, if ye will go back I s’pose I can’t stop ye,” said the farmer. “I’ll have Hank drive ye in, though.”

Mr. Appleby’s nature seemed to have undergone a sudden change. He was no longer mean and inhospitable. In a short time Tom and Ray were on their way in a covered carriage to Elmwood Hall.

CHAPTER XXV

EXPLANATIONS

“Look who’s here!”

“Back again!”

“Tom Fairfield, what in the name of the seven sacred scribes has happened, anyhow?”

Thus Tom’s chums—George, Jack, and Bert, greeted him about an hour later when he entered his room in the borrowed garments of the farmer. Ray Blake followed him into the apartment, a trifle embarrassed. The boys had managed, through the friendly offices of Demy Miller, the studious janitor, to enter the dormitory unseen by the proctor or any of his scouts.

“Yes, I’m here,” said Tom with a smile, as he limped to an easy chair. “Ray, have a seat. Boys, allow me to introduce my cousin, Ray Blake.”

“Your—your cousin!” gasped Jack.

“Yes. He’s the one who had my sweater,” went on Tom.

“Your sweater?” gasped George.

“Yes—that rather brilliant one that connected me with the horse-poisoning case.”

“But—but,” stammered Bert. “Did he—your cousin—?”

“No, he didn’t use any cyanide,” said Tom quickly. “Now for some explanations. But first shake hands, and then maybe we’d better stuff our keyhole so the light won’t show. No use being interrupted.”

“That’s already been attended to,” said Jack. “We always take those precautions,” and in turn he and the others shook hands with Ray.



“To begin at the beginning,” said Tom, “this is my cousin—a son of my mother’s sister. I haven’t seen him in some years, for he went West, where his parents died. How he managed to come to work as a hired man for Appleby I don’t know, but he did——”

“It was just chance,” cut in Ray. “Suppose you let me explain, Tom.”

“All right, go ahead. I’m going to rub some liniment on my ankle. It’s got to be treated, if I’m to play football again.”

“I might as well own up to it first as last,” went on Ray, “that I haven’t been altogether what I should be. When my mother died—I—I sort of went to the bad.” He choked up for a moment and then resumed.

“I got in with a lot of tough characters in the West and I lived a fast life. Then I drifted East, lost what money I had and went to work for Mr. Appleby. I didn’t know Tom was going to school here or I wouldn’t have run the chance of disgracing him.”

“If you had only let me know earlier that you were here,” said Tom, “everything might have been all right.”

“Well, I didn’t,” said Ray, with a smile at his cousin. “Things went from bad to worse. Appleby wasn’t the best man in the world to work for. Then Jake Crouse happened along. I had known him out West. He came of a good family, but he went to the bad and became a common tramp, though he had a good education. Crouse isn’t his right name, I guess.

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"Appleby treated us very mean—he does that way to all his hired men, I guess, and he used to fine us if we accidentally broke any tools, or made mistakes. In fact about all our money was eaten up in fines, so we had very little coming to us.

"Finally Jake Crouse got mad when he was heavily fined, and he said he was going to get even. He wanted me to go in with him, but I wouldn't, and I decided to skip out, and look for another place. I had no money, and then, accidentally, I learned that Tom was a student at Elmwood Hall. I heard Appleby mention his name as having gotten ten dollars from him for about a dollar's worth of trampled-down corn. Then I decided to appeal to Tom to help me get away.

"I sent him a note, and he came to see me. It was in a pool room in town—a place where I used to go for amusement, but I've dropped all that sort of thing now. There Tom gave me money enough to straighten up and begin life over again."

"Say!" interrupted Jack, "was that where you got so all smelled up with smoke, Tom?"

"I guess it was. I know everybody in the place seemed to be smoking," answered our hero.

"That was the night Jake Crouse set fire to the hay stacks," went on Ray Blake. "He fixed it so suspicion wouldn't fall on him, as he was away from the farm at the time. He used a sort of chemical fuse that would cause the fire several hours after it was set.

"After I met Tom, and got the money, and told him about the prospective hay fire," said Ray, "I sneaked back to the farm to get what few clothes I owned. Jake Crouse was waiting for me, and when he found out I was going to run away, and that I had some money, he threatened to implicate me in the burning of the hay. He had me in his power and I didn't dare—or at least I thought I didn't dare—refuse him. So I stayed on, and he got most of my money over cards. He wasn't suspected of the fire, and I never knew Tom was, or I'd have made a clean breast of everything.

"Well, things went from bad to badness. Appleby got worse toward us instead of better, and Crouse said he'd teach him a lesson. I suspected he would do something desperate so I made up my mind to get away. I laid my plans carefully, and, ashamed as I was, I decided to ask Tom for more money.

"I appealed to him, and he answered. He gave me all he could spare, and more too, I guess and I promised to reform. I made him promise he would never say anything about me, and he didn't. As much on his mother's account as mine, I guess, for my mother and his were sisters, and I knew my aunt would be broken-hearted if she knew how much I'd gone to the bad.



“Well, to make a long story short Tom fixed me up—he even gave me his sweater when I sneaked up and called on him in this dormitory, for I was cold and hadn’t many clothes—and I lit out. I guess I must have made some wild threats against Appleby before I left, for he had treated me mean.”

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"You did make all sorts of wild declarations," put in Tom, "and it was that which made me fear you had poisoned the horses when it was known that they had been given cyanide."

"But I didn't," said Ray. "I ran off that night, and later, as I passed by the barn, carrying Tom's sweater, I saw Jake Crouse going in with a package and a bottle. I got scared and ran as fast as I could, fearing he would see me and force me to have a hand in the crime. But I got away, though I dropped Tom's sweater, and didn't dare go back for it."

"I went to New York, and I've been there ever since, until recently. I stayed with a man I had known in the West, but I never knew Tom was in such trouble on my account. What happened here, after I left, I don't know, except as Tom has told me. But the other day I got a letter from him, asking me to release him from his promise to keep silent about my presence here, and about what a life I had led, and I came on. I couldn't get here until to-night and I sent word that I'd meet him near the Appleby house and explain everything."

"In his letter Tom told me about how he was suspected of the poisoning, and how he wanted to clear his name. The reason I appointed the lane near the farm house was because I intended to go with him to Mr. Appleby and explain everything. I never thought it would storm so, but it was too late to get word to Tom, so I kept the appointment."

"And so did I," added Tom. "How Jake Crouse got there is a mystery."

"Not much of one, I guess," said Ray. "I fancy he was mad because he didn't kill all the horses and he was going to try it again. Then too, foolishly, I wrote him a final letter, saying I was going to see you and I guess he went there to meet me."

"At any rate he was there," said Tom, "and we both had a run-in with him. He's now safely in jail, having confessed to both crimes. So my name is cleared."

"Yes, by the plucky way you kept after the clews," said Jack.

"And the luck he had of running into Jake," added Bert.

"No, Jake ran into me," explained Ray, with a laugh. "Well, I've released Tom from his promise of silence. Perhaps it was foolish to bind him to it, for I should have been willing to take my medicine. But, for a time, I could not bear the thought of his mother knowing how low I'd fallen—I didn't want anyone to know how nearly I'd disgraced Tom's family."

"That's why I couldn't say anything about to whom I gave my sweater," explained Tom. "And, for a time, I feared Ray was guilty of poisoning the horses. His threats, and the

fact that he had some time before experimented with chemicals, with me, made me suspicious. So I had a double motive in keeping silent.

“At last I could stand it no longer, and I began to try and trace my cousin. I had accidentally found the clew of the bottle, and I knew that someone giving the name of Crouse had purchased the poison. But even then I was afraid Ray had given the tramp’s name to shield himself. Though when the drug clerk said a man with a scar had bought the cyanide I had my doubts. Still I was not sure but what Ray had been hurt in a fight.”

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"I was a pretty wild character," admitted Tom's cousin, "but I'm done with that sort of life now."

"So I wrote several letters," went on Tom, "asking my cousin to come and explain things. It was some time before one reached him, as I sent to his last known address out West."

"But I finally got one," put in Ray, "and then I came on, as soon as I could. It's all explained now, and Tom's name is cleared."

"How do you suppose Sam Heller saw you—or thought he saw you—with your gay sweater on—at the barn?" asked Jack.

"Give it up," said Tom. "Maybe we'll find out that too."

They did—the next morning, when Tom and his cousin, in an interview with Doctor Meredith, told the whole story. But it had leaked out before that, and when Sam Heller was sent for he was not to be found. He had left Elmwood Hall in a hurry.

In order to clear himself of any part in the unjust accusation against Tom, Nick Johnson made a clean breast of the whole affair. To him Sam had confided a plan of throwing suspicion, of some mean act against Mr. Appleby, on Tom. Sam's plan was to go to the barns, and damage some farm machinery, at the same time leaving behind some object with Tom's name on it to implicate him. Nick would have nothing to do with this, and Sam went off by himself.

That was the night the horses were poisoned, and Sam, seeing Crouse and Ray about the barns, became frightened and sneaked off without playing his mean trick. It was Ray he had seen wearing the sweater, leaving the dormitory after Ray had borrowed it, and Sam thought it was Tom, for the cousins were much alike. And it was Ray whom Mr. Appleby had seen, though the empty package of poison was dropped by Crouse, and not by Ray, so in that the farmer was mistaken. And Sam testified against Tom, at the time believing him guilty.

Later, though, in one of the resorts of Elmwood, Sam overheard Crouse boasting to some boon companions of what he had done, but, instead of telling what he knew, and clearing our hero, Sam kept silent, letting the blame rest on Tom. And it was Sam's school pin the farmer found near the hay.

And it was also Sam and Nick who had bribed the farm boy to send Tom and his chums on the wrong road, thus leading them into the cornfield and causing the quarrel with Mr. Appleby.

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” said Tom’s cousin a few days later, when he made ready to go back to the West, where he promised to begin a new life. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am Tom, for the trouble I made you.”

“Never mind,” answered our hero. “It’s all right.”

“Tom’s pluck and luck won for him,” said Jack, and Tom was the hero of the school, for Doctor Meredith publicly commended the youth for his action, and Mr. Appleby was fair enough to beg Tom’s pardon before the whole school.

“But we’ve got to have a new quarterback,” said the perplexed football captain as the time approached for the last big game—that for the championship.

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"Yes," admitted the coach. "Better a new one than that sneak Sam Heller. I'm glad he's gone. Is Tom's ankle fit for him to play?"

"He says he'll play, anyhow!"

"Good for him. Well, I guess we can make a shift."

The football game was one long to be remembered. It was played on a cold, crisp day, and a record-breaking crowd was in attendance. For the first three quarters neither side scored. There were brilliant runs, sensational kicks and tackles, brilliant passing, and good plays generally, but the teams seemed too evenly matched.

Then came the last quarter. Foot by foot the ball had been worked to within striking distance of the rival's goal.

"Now, boys, a touchdown!" cried the captain.

Smith, the new quarterback, gave the signal for Tom to take the pigskin through center, and Tom, with lowered head and fiercely beating heart, leaped forward. There was a crash as the two lines of players met, and then, struggling forward, tearing himself loose from restraining hands—pushed, shoved and all but torn apart, Tom forced his way onward.

His vision became black! His breath was all but gone, and then, with a last mighty heave, he shoved the ball over the last line.

"Touchdown! Touchdown!"

"Tom Fairfield's touchdown!"

"Elmwood Hall forever!"

"Three cheers!"

"Three cheers for Tom Fairfield!"

The players and spectators went wild, and the game came to an end a few minutes later, with Tom's team the champions.

"Well, old man, we did 'em," said Jack some hours later, when the chums, and as many of their friends as possibly could crowd into the room of our heroes, had gathered there. "We did 'em."

"Good and proper," added Bert.

"How's the ankle, Tom?" asked the captain anxiously. "We don't want to permanently cripple you, for there'll be more games next year."

"Oh, I guess I'll be all right by then," said Tom, with a smile. "Jack, pass those sandwiches," for an impromptu banquet was under way.

"Yes, and don't hold that mustard for a loss," added George.

"Pass those pickles up this way for a touchdown," begged Reddy Burke.

"Well, Tom," asked Bruce Bennington in a low voice, "are you glad or sorry you didn't insist on having a row with Sam, right off the bat?"

"Glad," answered Tom. "It came out all right anyhow."

"Sure it did. He's gone, and you're here," said Bruce.

"A song, boys! A song!" called Jack Fitch, and a moment later, in spite of the danger of a visit from the proctor, there swelled out the strains of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow!"

But the proctor did not come. As he heard the forbidden sounds of gaiety he smiled grimly.

"It Isn't every day that Elmwood Hall wins a championship," he remarked to Doctor Meredith.

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"No, indeed," agreed the head master. "And so young Fairfield made the winning touchdown?"

"Yes. As plucky a lad as we have in the school. He played the game with an injured ankle."

"Oh, it isn't alone physical pluck that Fairfield has," remarked the head of the school thoughtfully, as he remembered what Tom had endured.

Those had been strenuous times for Tom, but other happenings were still in store for him, and what some of them were will be related in another volume, to be called "Tom Fairfield's Hunting Trip; Or, Lost in the Wilderness," in which we shall see how Tom's pluck was put to the supreme test.

"All ready for the grand march!" cried one of the boys, and soon a big line was formed, and the boys began to march around the school buildings. And here we will say good-bye to Tom Fairfield.

THE END