

THE ROCKSPUR ELEVEN

Burt L. Standish

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The Rockspur Eleven
A FINE FOOTBALL STORY FOR BOYS

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

AUTHOR OF
"The Merriwell Stories"



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The Rockspur Eleven

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CHAPTER I. A BOY WITH A TEMPER.

Danny Chatterton came up the street whistling a merry tune, while Don Scott lay under an apple-tree back of his father's house, munching an apple and scowling blackly, although the September afternoon was pleasant and sunny enough to put any boy in an agreeable humor. Judging by the sour expression on Don's face one might never have fancied the half-devoured apple in his hand was sweet.

Spying the boy beneath the tree, Danny stopped, leaned on the fence, and called:

"Hullo, Scotty! What you dud-dud-dud-doing?"

"Can't you see?" growled the boy addressed. "I'm eating an apple."

"Dud-does it hu-hurt ye much?" grinned the cheerful lad at the fence. "What do you eat it for if it makes you fur-fur-feel so bad?"

Don's answer to this bit of persiflage was a still blacker scowl and sullen silence. Danny kicked the fence and whistled, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Say, gimme an apple," he entreated. "You'll mum-mum-mum-make yourself sus-sick trying to eat the ho-ho-whole of 'em."

The boy under the tree picked up an apple and threw it viciously at the sarcastic fellow outside the fence, who caught it with one hand, crying:

"Judgment! Out! Gug-gug-great work!"

Then he gave the apple a wipe on his jacket and took a trial bite out of it, his manner being suspicious till he had tested it, upon which his face betrayed satisfaction and he immediately took a still larger bite.

"Ji-ji-ji-jimminy!" he stuttered, speaking with his mouth full and chewing and talking at the same time. "It's sus-sus-sweet! I never knew that was a sus-sweet apple tut-tut-tree, and I thought it must be sus-sour or bub-bub-bitter from the way you looked. If I'd known——"

"Better not come round here for apples after dark," grimly warned Don. "Pat sleeps over the kitchen, and his window looks right out onto this orchard. He's got a gun loaded with rock-salt, and he'd shoot just as quick as he'd take a drink of water."

"If that's the case," grinned Danny, "judgin' by the cuc-cuc-color of his nose, there ain't no great danger that he'll ever dud-do any sus-sus-sus-shooting. But say, ain't you coming up to the field for pup-pup-practice?"

"No!"

Don replied in such a short, savage manner that Chatterton paused with his mouth stuffed full and stared.

"Hey?" he exclaimed. "Wh-why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Well, that's a gug-good reason, but it ain't mum-mum-much of an explanation. We cuc-cuc-can't do our bub-best without the whole eleven, and we've got to pup-put in some hot pup-practice if we expect to cuc-cuc-cut any ice with them Ha-Highlanders next Saturday. Sterndale will lul-look for every mum-man this afternoon."

"Let him look and be hanged!" snapped Don, sitting up and clasping one knee with both hands. "He'll find out there is one fellow who won't stand to be called a chump and a duffer by that cheap city dude, Renwood."

Danny threw the apple-core backward over his shoulder.

"But Renwood is our cuc-cuc-coach, you know," he said. "He knows all abub-bub-bub-about playing football."

"He says he does, but I don't believe he knows half as much as he pretends to, and I'll bet he's a great bluffer. Anyhow, he can't shoot off his mouth at me. What's the matter with Sterndale? He's captain, but he permits this Renwood to run things. He makes me sick!"

"So that's what ails ye, is it? I knew it was sus-sus-something. You gug-gug-gug-got mad because Renwood mum-made some talk to ye when you fur-fur-fumbled his pass last night."

"I didn't fumble it!" snarled Don. "He was to blame himself, for he didn't pass it right, and then he tried to lay it all on to me. I won't take that kind of talk from anybody, I don't care who it is!"

"Bub-bub-bub-but the rest of us have to tut-tut-take it," chattered Danny. "He even gave Sus-Sterndale a bub-bub-brushing up abub-bout his kicking."

"And the more fools you for standing it! Just because he's lived in Boston and played football on Boston Common, he takes us for a lot of chumps down here. No stuck-up city chap can lord it over me, and don't you forget it!"

"But he's our coach!" said Danny, again. "We don't know much about fuf-fuf-football, and he knows everything. Highland has a reg'ler college player for a cuc-cuc-coach, you know."

"That's all right. He doesn't play with the Highlanders; he only coaches them; and he knows his business. If we had such a fellow as that——"

"You'd get mum-mum-mad the first tut-time he tut-talked straight to ye. You're always gug-gug-gettin' mad and sus-sulking so you sus-sus-spoil everything you go into. That's what's the mum-mum-matter with you."

Don sprang to his feet, his face turning pale and his eyes gleaming. With his hands clenched, he advanced toward the fence.

"You better go along about your business, Chatterton!" he grated. "I won't take that kind of talk from you, either! You can run your old football team without me, and you're all a lot of soft-headed chumps to let Renwood lord it over you. Now,

don't make any back talk to me! Go on and tell them what I think of them."

Danny backed away from the fence and sidled off, as Don came forward threateningly.

"I don't know but we'll get along bub-bub-better without ye," he declared, with a taunting grin. "You're always rah-rah-raising a rah-rah-row."

Don had reached the fence, and, in a sudden burst of rage, he tore off a broken picket and flung it after Danny, who skillfully dodged the missile and then hastily scudded away, still laughing.

"That's right—run!" snarled Don, glaring after the little fellow. "If I had hold of you, I'd make ye laugh out of the other corner of your mouth!"

He kicked the fence savagely, and then retreated to the apple-tree once more, in anything but an agreeable humor.

Pat, the Irish hostler and man about the place, came round to the front of the house, leading Dr. Scott's horse, attached to a light driving carriage. The doctor, medicine-case in hand, appeared at the front door; but, instead of descending the walk and entering the carriage at once, he came down the steps and turned into the orchard back of the house, where his son was still sulking under the sweet apple-tree.

"My boy," said the doctor, a gravely handsome man with iron-gray beard and dark eyes, which now seemed strangely sad, "sitting there at my window just now, I happened to overhear your conversation with that other lad."

Don flushed a little, but continued to scowl, though he had risen to his feet and was standing in a respectful attitude of attention before his father.

"I noted," said the gentleman, "that you were in a very bad humor, and your words told me why you were angry. I also observed that you flew into an unreasonable passion at the close of your talk. Now I am not going to lecture you, Don, but I wish to warn you. You must learn to govern your temper, my son, or it will control you, to your sorrow and everlasting regret."

"But, father, there are times when it's impossible not to become angry," protested the boy.

"Perhaps it may seem so, but every time a person gives way to a fit of anger he weakens his self-control and makes himself less capable of successfully coping with the trials and emergencies of life."

Don made a swift, impatient gesture.

"I can't help getting mad!" he cried. "It's no use for me to try to restrain my temper; I have tried, and I can't do it."

"It shows how much your will-power is weakened already when you make such a confession," said the doctor, regretfully. "I once thought the same about myself."

"You, father?" exclaimed the boy, in surprise. "Why, I never knew you to lose

your temper. I didn't suppose——”

“Because I was taught to control my passions at any cost, and a bitter lesson it was, my son. When I have noted how quick and choleric you are, I have sometimes been tempted to tell you the whole sad story, but it is something of which I do not like to think or speak, and so I have refrained. Perhaps I will do so some day; but, in the meantime, I urge you, Don, to struggle with yourself to get the mastery of your temper at any cost, which I sincerely hope may never bring to you such sorrow as an act of mine, done in a moment of anger, brought upon me.”

The doctor spoke with such earnestness that Don was greatly impressed, and he immediately promised:

“I'll try, father—I'll try, though I am afraid I cannot succeed.”

“You can and must, my boy. Be sure you have my sympathy, for I know you inherited your passionate temperament from me. Do not fear to come to me for sympathy and encouragement any time.”

With those words, the doctor turned away, leaving Don standing there beneath the tree, watching him depart. The gentleman entered his carriage, and, with a wave of one gloved hand to his son, drove away. Don followed the retreating figure with his eyes till it disappeared from view, and then he earnestly murmured:

“It doesn't seem possible that he ever could know what it is to be really and truly angry, for he is the best and kindest father in the whole world. For his sake I'll do my best to control my temper—I'll do my best.”

CHAPTER II. ANOTHER BOY.

Don's musings were broken in upon by a familiar voice, which cried:

"Hello there, old man! What's the matter with you—in a trance? Come out of it!"

Looking up, Don saw Leon Bentley stopping outside the fence. As usual, Leon was smoking a cigarette. He was dressed in a padded football suit, with his cap set rakishly over one ear, and his manner was that of one possessed of unlimited conceit and an overwhelming sense of his own importance.

Don had never liked Bentley but his dislike had not been particularly noticeable, for he was a fellow who, on account of his quick temper and sulky moods, had few associates and no close companions among the boys of the village.

Bentley had a strong taste for flashy clothes and cheap jewelry, being inclined to swagger and boast and use profane language, so it was not strange that any thoroughly self-respecting boy in the village did not care to be regarded as his intimate friend.

At one time close friendship had seemed to exist between Leon and Rob Linton, a lad whose bullying inclinations had caused him to be disliked secretly by those who openly professed admiration and regard for him; but even Linton, awakened at last to his own faults, sickened of Bentley and fell to avoiding him as far as possible, which left Leon casting about for another associate.

Remembering the words of his father and his own resolution to try to control his temper, even though Linton's free-and-easy manner around within him a feeling of resentment, Don held himself in check, nodded shortly, and said:

"Hello, Bentley. Going to practice?"

"Sure thing," returned Leon, airily. "Got to do it, I suppose, though it's a horrid bore. Fellow has to practice to keep in the swim and be a real athlete; and he has to be an athlete nowadays, or take part in athletic sports, at least, in order to stand any show with the girls. If he isn't right in it they'll throw him down for some fellow who is, even though that fellow may be as long, lank, awkward and clownish as that duffer John Smith. Why, even a girl like Dora Deland, proud as she is, has fallen to raving over him since he happened to turn out something of a baseball pitcher. You must show your skill, old man, if you hope to cut any figure with Zadia Renwood."

Bentley fell to laughing over his final words, as if he regarded them as a good joke; but he stopped suddenly as he saw Don step quickly toward the fence, scowling his fiercest.

"Have a care with that tongue of yours, Bentley!" Scott almost snarled. "Because I happen to be acquainted with Zadia Renwood does not give you license to make cheap talk, and I won't take it from you."

Leon whistled softly, and then hastened to declare:

"I didn't mean anything, Scott, so what's the use to flare up and get mad like that! You ought to take something for that temper of yours. At the smallest spark you go off like a flash of powder."

Don paused, and his flushed face suddenly began to pale, for he realised how soon he had flown into a passion after vowing to do his best to control his temper, which filed him with shame and vexation over his own weakness.

With an effort, the boy cast out from his soul the anger that had seized upon him, and he actually forced a faint smile to his face, which made it seem rather handsome in a dark and cloudy way.

"You're right, Bentley," he said; "I was a fool to become angry over your careless words, but neither Zadia Renwood nor any other girl is anything to me, for you know I dislike girls. They're all silly creatures."

"They may be silly, but they're sweet," Bentley grinned, in a manner that was decidedly repulsive to the other boy. "I tell you, girls are great inventions, and I know you'd like them, old man, if you'd just overcome your foolish prejudice against them. And Zadia Renwood is a peach, too! I'm sure she's struck on you, and you only have to brace up——"

Don stopped the speaker with a gesture.

"That will do, Bentley!" he exclaimed, harshly, holding himself in check. "Even if I cared for girls, I'd steer clear of Dolph Renwood's sister."

"You don't like him?" questioned Leon, pulling out a package of cigarettes and selecting one, which he proceeded to roll gently between the palms of his hands, all the while watching Don with a curious, cunning look in his washed-out gray eyes.

"I hate the cad!" broke out Scott; but he suddenly seemed to remember his failing and got a firm hold on himself. "He puts on too many airs, Bentley, and he makes a great bluff that he's a football expert; but it is my private opinion, which I am willing to express publicly, that he doesn't know the rudiments of the game."

"I think so, too," eagerly nodded the lad outside the fence, as, with his yellow-stained fingers, he nervously pulled a little of the filling from one end of the paper wrapper. "And Sterndale is a fool to let that city fop run things the way he does. Never knew Dick to be so soft before, but I suppose we'll have to stand it if we wish to play the game. Come, it's time we were on the field now."

Don hesitated. "I don't think I'll go," he said, in an unsettled manner.

"Oh, rats!" cried Leon, lighting the prepared cigarette from the stub of the one he had finished, which he tossed aside. "Come along, Scott, for you're needed, and it's your duty to play for the honor of Rockspur."

"By your own words a few moments ago, you confessed that you are not going into the game for any such reason, but simply to win admiration from the girls. I

do not believe any fellow who plays football for such a reason can do his best and be of real value to the team.”

A suggestion of color mounted to the sallow cheeks of the cigarette-smoker, and he laughingly retorted:

“That was talk, Scott; of course I’m going into the game to help the home team win. We can’t afford to lose any good man, and so you’ll come along with me. As for Renwood, we’re not the only ones who are sick of his high-handed style of lording it over us, and we may be able to bring about a change, if we go at it in the right manner. Get your suit and come on.”

Plainly undecided, Don leaned on the fence.

“My suit is in the dressing-room under the grand-stand,” he said. “I did make up my mind not to have anything more to do with the team as long as Renwood was coaching——”

“That was when you were mad, old man. Of course, I don’t blame you, but don’t let your temper cause you to go back on your own town. Renwood doesn’t really belong here, anyhow; he’s only just moved here since his father, seeing that Rockspur is bound to become a famous summer resort, has bought up the East Shore land as a speculation. I don’t believe in letting such an outsider come in and run things. If you and I combine against him, we can bring enough of the others to our way of thinking to set him back into the place where he belongs.”

Don did not fancy the idea of forming such an alliance with Bentley, but he sought to justify it by telling himself that it was for the good of the Rockspur football team, and that there was no harm in uniting with Leon on such an issue.

“I’ll not become friendly with him,” thought Don, “simply because we both think the same way about this matter. A man is likely to find it needful to have business relations with another whom he would not accept as an associate, and this is purely a matter of business.”

He was soon to learn that such relations are always to be avoided when possible, and that, justly or unjustly, a man or a boy is judged by the company he keeps.

“Come on,” urged Leon. “We’ll talk it over on our way to the ground.”

“When I was angry I declared I wouldn’t play on the team with Renwood,” Don mentally said; “but it is my duty not to let my anger control me.”

Then, vaulting over the fence, he joined Bentley, and they set off together toward the football field.

CHAPTER III. THE FOOTBALL FIELD.

The Rockspur baseball ground, leveled and fenced through the energies of Dick Sterndale, captain of the village nine, was also to serve as a football field. Already Sterndale and Renwood, assisted by others who were interested and enthusiastic, had measured and lined off the field and erected the goal-posts at each end.

The marked-off field was three hundred and thirty feet long and one hundred and sixty feet in width. The measurements had been obtained by the aid of a tape, and then lime-lines had been drawn with a marker to indicate the actual field of play. Outside this field and inside the fence was a varying amount of room. At one point the fence was only eight feet from the boundary of the playing field, and this was the smallest permissible amount of space.

Having obtained the outer boundaries of the playing field, the tape was run down the side-lines and wooden pegs were driven into the ground exactly five yards apart. When the pegs were all down, the tape was stretched across the field from a peg on one side to a corresponding peg on the opposite side, and the lime marker was run over the tape, so the field was marked off with twenty-one lines between the ends, or twenty-three lines if the end lines were included.

Then the fifth line out from the end, or the twenty-five yard line, the point of kick-out, was made broader than the others, so it could be plainly distinguished. This was done at both ends of the field, and then the exact centre of the field, on the eleventh five-yard line, was marked with a large round spot to indicate the place of kick-off.

With this accomplished, the field was fully laid out, and the setting of the goal-posts, the most difficult task of all, followed. Sterndale selected four cedar posts which were long and straight and obtained two cross-bars which satisfied him in every particular. The posts were cut to a length of twenty-three feet, which gave an allowance of three feet to be sunk into the ground, and the cross-bars were somewhat more than nineteen feet long, as the posts were to be set exactly eighteen feet and six inches apart, it being necessary for the cross-bars to overlap, so that they might be securely spiked to the posts.

In setting the posts, the tape was stretched across the end of the field and the middle of the line marked, which was a distance of eighty feet from either side. This done, with the middle mark as a starting point, nine feet and three inches were measured off in opposite direction along the line, the two points for the posts being thus determined. Holes nearly three feet in depth were excavated at these points and the posts erected in them, the ground being packed solidly about them, causing them to stand securely without braces, which are needless and dangerous, as a player might trip over them or be forced upon them and injured.

When Scott and Bentley reached the field they found all the members of the newly-organized Rockspur Eleven were present, besides a number of youthful

spectators and a few who were anxious to be classed as substitutes.

A little at one side from the others, Dick Sterndale, the handsome, manly-looking captain of the team, was essaying the drop-kick, coached by the boy Don Scott disliked, Dolph Renwood. Renwood was rather slender, although just now, in his padded football suit, he did not look so, and he had sharp, blue eyes, which to the village boys often seemed full of laughing scorn and contempt even while he spoke to them in a most serious or friendly manner. It was those eyes which caused the Rockspur lads to distrust Dolph for all of his apparent sincerity and interest in their sports and pleasures; and those eyes had done not a little to arouse the resentment of quick-tempered Don Scott, who bore half-hidden ridicule with less grace than open contempt.

The players' bench used by the baseball team had been moved aside to make room for the football field, but it stood back by the rail in front of the bleachers, and Don walked toward it, passing close to Sterndale and Renwood. Having seated himself on the bench beside two small boys, he was able to overhear Renwood's instructions to the captain of the team, although he pretended to be giving them no attention whatever.

"There are three ways to make a drop-kick," Dolph was explaining. "You can't do it any old way, Sterndale. In the first place, you must take hold of the ball right."

"How's that?" the big captain meekly asked.

"You may hold it with one hand, like this, with the point toward the goal, and drop it that way, taking a somewhat side-swinging kick; or you may hold it precisely the same with both hands and drop it; or, finally, you may hold it with both hands in this manner, pointing it away from the goal. It must never be dropped flat or directly upon the end. Now watch."

The "coach" dropped the ball and kicked it handsomely, sending it sailing through the air in a long, graceful arc. It was pursued and captured by some small boys, who had a scrimmage over it, out of which one broke with it hugged under his arm and came running back toward Dick and Dolph.

"In kicking the ball," Renwood went on, "you must hit it squarely with the toe the very instant that it rises off the ground. Now let me see you try it."

Sterndale took the ball from the panting youngster who brought it up, held it with both hands as directed, and dropped it. In kicking he was a trifle too quick, and the result was anything but satisfactory.

"No, no!" exclaimed Renwood, impatiently. "Don't kick it after it hits the ground. Can't you understand that? Your toe must hit it just the instant it rises from the ground. Try to fix that in your head."

"Is that Sterndale?" Don Scott asked himself, in amazement. "Can it be that he'll let anybody talk to him in that tone of voice?"

Dick was the acknowledged leader of the village boys and their accepted commander in all things. As captain of the baseball nine, he had seemed to know

everything worth knowing about the game, and he had been skillful in imparting his knowledge to others and in handling his men to the very best advantage. When the Rockspur lads decided to organize a regular football team for the first time, Sterndale was unanimously chosen captain, although he confessed that he was almost unfamiliar with the game.

The boys regarded it as a piece of good fortune when Redwood offered to coach them, claiming to have been a member of the Hyde Park A. A. C. and to have played in a large number of football games in and around Boston; but Scott and Bentley were not the only ones who had been annoyed by the city lad's supercilious ways and condescending airs, although the others held their resentment in check, feeling that they could not afford to antagonize Dolph as long as he was instructing them in the arts of the game they wished to learn.

Again Sterndale tried the drop-kick, and this time he was successful, sending the pigskin sailing through the air in handsome style, so that Renwood declared:

"That was good. Try it again."

When the ball was returned, the captain made a still better kick, and again received an expression of approval from the coach.

"Now," said Dolph, "all the members of the team seem to be here, so I think we'd better get them together and put in some practice on signals. They bungled things terribly last night. I think you'll find some of them are no earthly good."

As he said this, he turned and looked at Don Scott, who felt on the instant that the words were meant for him, and a pang of anger shot through his heart, causing his hands to clench savagely and his jaws to harden.

"We have the best fellows in the village on the eleven," asserted Sterndale, loyally.

"Good fellows do not always make good football players," said Dolph, knowingly. "But get them together, and we'll see if they can do any better than they did last night."

Observing Don, Dick called:

"Come on, Scott. Where's your suit?"

"Don't need it," returned the boy on the bench. "I'm not going to practice."

"What?" exclaimed Dick, walking over. "Oh, come, that's nonsense! You aren't sick, are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's different," said the captain, quickly. "If you're sick, I don't expect you to practice."

Don rose to his feet.

"Yes, I'm sick," he hoarsely declared. "I'm sick of that fellow Renwood and his airs and insults. I've stood them just as long as I can. I know he meant me when he

said some of the men on the team were no earthly good, and——”

“I know you’re mistaken,” cut in Dick, quickly. “Now, wait a minute, Don. It was only a short time ago that we thought of getting the team together for practice, and he observed that you were not here, and that Bentley had not arrived. He said we’d better wait, for, while we might get along without Bent, we needed you in your position as half-back. That was not all. He said that, whatever changes were made on the team, he believed you had been given the right position and should be kept there.”

For a moment Don found himself at a loss for words, but he finally muttered:

“He didn’t mean it. It was just some of his sarcasm.”

“I am sure it was nothing of the sort. He was in earnest.”

“Then why did he make such talk to me last night? And why did he look at me in such a way just now when he said some fellows on the team were no earthly good?”

“He didn’t talk to you any plainer than he does to any of the fellows. They say professional coaches sometimes swear at the men they are training and are as bad as slave-drivers. You must remember that he has been coached by a professional on the team he played with in Boston, and I suppose he considers that the proper way to talk to men. Now, Don, old man, you know we can’t get along without you on the eleven any more than we could have made the record we did if you hadn’t been on the nine. I know you’re loyal to Rockspur, and you’re going to help us down those Highlanders. Don’t mind the way Renwood gives his instructions, but just get right into gear and show what you can do. I’m depending on you, Scott.”

Dick had a hand resting on Don’s shoulder while speaking, and there was deep persuasion in his manner and the inflection of his voice. It was this quality of inducing others to do as he desired that had made Sterndale a leader.

Don wavered a moment, the thought coming to him once more that he must do his best to conquer his temper and that this was another occasion for him to prove his self-control, whereupon he said:

“All right, Sterndale; I’ll do it for you. But I can’t stand everything from Renwood. I’ll get into a suit in a hurry.”

Then he trotted off toward the dressing-room beneath the grand-stand, while Dick, following him with his eyes, muttered:

“Confound your surly temper! I’d like to tell you just what I think of you, but it isn’t policy now, for we need you on the team.”

CHAPTER IV.

DON LEAVES THE TEAM.

It did not take Don long to get into his football suit. Danny Chatterton met him as he was coming from the dressing-room.

"So you ch-ch-ch-changed your mind?" grinned the little fellow, winking in a taunting manner. "Must have cuc-cuc-cooled off sus-some after I left ye. Or was it Bub-Bentley gug-got you to come along? He-he'll make a real good ch-ch-chum for you! Tell you what, I'd rather be fuf-friendly with a stuck-up city chap, as you cuc-cuc-call Renwood, than to only have a ch-chum like Bub-Bentley."

"You mind your own business, Chatterton!" harshly advised Don. "I'm not making a chum of anybody."

"Well, there's a pup-pup-pup-pretty good reason for that," returned the aggravating little rascal, as he sidled away. "If you had a ch-chum, you'd gug-get mad and eat him inside of th-th-three days."

Scott bit his lip, assailed by a sudden conviction. "That's the reason I've never had a real chum," he thought. "It's my temper. I have no one but myself to blame, I suppose."

He was actually feeling humiliated and humble when he joined the others, who were grouped about Renwood and Sterndale. Dolph and Dick were talking over the code of signals and the simpler plays to be learned.

"Of course," said Renwood, "when we become familiar with the common and conventional plays, then we can study up new formations and new moves in the game. Until we've seen just what kind of material we have and what sort of a team it forms as a whole, we cannot decide upon our general style of playing. If the men prove to be fast and light on their feet, we'll see what we can do in the way of running and surprise plays. If they are not fast, but are dogged and heavy enough, we'll see what kind of a bucking team they'll make. Or it is possible we may find that we have a great kicking team. But, no matter what general style of playing may be decided upon, after getting into a game it may be found expedient to change to another style in order to best assail the weak points of the opposing team."

This was plain, sensible talk, and the boys, with a single exception, listened to it attentively. The exception was Roger Ford, a deaf-mute, surely a peculiar fellow to have upon a football team. Ford, however, was a real athlete, a great runner and wrestler, and a fellow of nerve, so that, at his own solicitation, he had been given a place on the eleven, Sterndale having decided to try him, for all of the fear that his deafness might prove a serious detriment.

"Mr. Sterndale, your captain," continued Dolph, "has familiarized himself with the signals and certain plays that we are to try to-day. I presume the rest of you have studied the signal code, so that you will know just what to do on every

occasion. If you wish to have the team succeed, you must always do your level best to obey any signal given. The fellow who is looking for individual glory and an opportunity to show off will prove to be a disadvantage and an encumbrance to the eleven."

As he spoke these words his eyes seemed to rest meaningly on Leon Bentley, whose thin lips curled and who turned away contemptuously.

When Renwood had delivered this little lecture, Sterndale called for the men to line up, which, with some confusion, they proceeded to do at the centre of the field. The line-up was as follows:

Sterndale,

F. B.

Scott,

Mayfair,

R. H. B.

L. H. B.

Renwood,

Q. B.

Smith, Linton, Sprout, Chatterton, Ford, Bentley, Murphy,

R. E. R. T. R. G. Snap-back. L. G. L. T. L. E.

Among those selected as possible substitutes was Thad Boland, the laziest boy in town, who, in mockery of his habitual slowness of movement, was generally called "Old Lighting." Thad was a big fellow, besides being wonderfully strong, and, could he be aroused to action, it was thought he would prove a perfectly irresistible thunder-bolt in the line; but only something of a most remarkable or alarming nature could arouse Thad to display his dormant energies, although he enjoyed watching others indulge in athletic games and contests, and was almost invariably on hand when anything of the kind was going on.

The best runners had been placed in the ends of the line. During the baseball season which had just closed John Smith had shown to his doubting companions that he was a fellow of courage, nerve and coolness, and Sterndale had insisted on giving him a position of prominence on the eleven.

At John's side was Rob Linton, his former enemy, now his enemy no longer; while next came Jotham Sprout, nicknamed "Bubble," who was generally regarded as the weakest man in the line, although it was hoped that his blundering might turn to the advantage of the team, as often had been the case in games of baseball.

Danny Chatterton had been placed at centre, where, on the signal, he was to snap the ball back to Renwood, who would pass it according to the pre-arranged plan.

Danny was rather quick in his movements, and Sterndale had been convinced that he would be the best man for the position.

On the left of Chatterton was the deaf-mute, Ford, who had been given a position where the plays were nearly all of a simple nature. Bentley, the cigarette-smoker, was left tackle, and Dennis Murphy, a gritty and somewhat beligerant Irish youth, stood on the extreme left end.

Taken all together, the material that composed the team was as good as most small country towns could furnish. It remained to be demonstrated what Sterndale and Renwood could make of the material.

When every player was in position, the ball was placed on the ground between Chatterton's feet, and the crouching men waited for the signal.

"I want you to form and run forward with the ball ten or fifteen feet, just the same as if you were in a game," said Dick, now taking command of them. "Ready!"

They crouched in anticipation, and then Dick quickly called off several numbers, whereupon, with a skillful movement, Chatterton snapped the ball into Renwood's hand and he passed it to Mayfair, who started like a flash, hugging it under one arm and plunging after the men who formed in front of him and rushed forward as interferers.

Jotham Sprout seemed rather bewildered, and, as a result, he blocked Linton and fell over his own feet, while the others surged across his body, giving him several knocks and kicks, which caused him to sit up and howl.

"Say, what in time do you fellers take me for? Ev'ry dinged one of you kicked me or stepped on me! I bet a dollar my wish-bone is dislocated!" he moaned, rubbing his fat stomach.

"You'll have to keep awake if you're going to play this game," sharply declared Renwood. "Better try that over again, Captain Sterndale."

"Line up again," ordered Dick. "Now mind your p's and q's. You'll have to start quicker, Bubble."

"I can't start as quick as Chat," confessed Jotham; "but it's going to take more to stop me when I get going."

When the men were lined up again, the signal was repeated and the play was carried out in a far more satisfactory manner. Then the signal was changed so the ball was passed to Scott for practically the same kind of a play.

It is possible that Don was nervous, for he fumbled the pass the very first time, and the ball quite escaped from his clutch. This made him so angry that he sprang after it and gave it a fierce kick. In a moment Sterndale was at his side.

"That won't do, old man," said Dick. "Any of us is liable to make a fumble, so don't _____"

"Mayfair didn't!" panted Don, his face flushed and his eyes flashing. "It wasn't my fault! I don't propose to be made a show off!" He gave Renwood a savage look.

"Steady!" warned Dick. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do! It was the same way yesterday. Put another fellow in Renwood's place and I'll guarantee to get the passes all right."

This was enough to arouse Dolph, who promptly said:

"Don't try to blame any one else for your own fault, Mr. Scott. I passed you the ball in exactly the same manner that I passed it to Mayfair. He took the pass cleanly."

"And by that you call me a fumbler, do you? All right! I knew what would happen!" He took three steps toward Renwood. "I knew you meant me when you said there were some men on the team who were no earthly good," he went on, his anger blazing forth unrestrained. "You don't like me, because I won't bow down and let you walk on my neck. I'm not one of the bowing kind, Mr. Renwood, and I'm just as good as you are, if you have played football in Boston. You come down here with your airs and expect to overawe us because we live in the country, but you are nothing but a stuck-up——"

Sterndale grasped with crushing force the arm of the angry and excited speaker, and he sternly said:

"Stop right where you are, Scott! You are making a spectacle of yourself by letting your unreasonable anger run away with your judgment. Renwood is our coach, accepted by unanimous consent, and as such he has a right to instruct and criticize us. We should feel under obligations to him for his kindness, and——"

"His kindness!" snarled Don. "Bah! He has found an opportunity to show off, and he's making the most of it. It is my opinion that we might do better without his instructions and without him on the team. If we've got to have him, let him go up into the line and take his chance with the others. He chose his own position, where he'll always have something important to do, yet where there is little danger of being hurt, for he never runs with the ball and he's not in the front with the interference. I can see through him, if the rest of you do not."

He would have said more, but Dick stopped him again.

"Not another word of this, Scott!" he cried. "You've lost your head entirely, and you'd better——"

"Oh, I'll get out!" grated Scott. "Hands off me, Sterndale! You are not my master! You can keep your city cad on the team, and I'll leave! That will settle it."

He tore himself from Sterndale and strode away. Renwood was angry now and would have followed him, but the boys stopped him.

"Let him go," said the captain. "No one can reason with him when he gets that way."

"I don't want to reason with him," muttered Dolph, who was pale round his mouth; "I want to hit him!"

But Dick used his influence, and Don was permitted to walk away, while Thad

Boland was called in to make up the eleven. Boland was given Smith's position on the end, Smith being brought back to the place made vacant by Don.

Sitting alone on the bleachers, Don Scott saw the boys line up again and continue practice without him. He saw them try a number and variety of plays from signals, and he heard Renwood give them instructions in forming a wedge and in mass-play. He ground his white teeth together as he watched them, and the hot fury within him seemed burning and consuming his very heart. He noted that they seemed to get along quite well without him, and it was plain that they were beginning to understand some of the difficult strategy of the game, even if they could not execute it rapidly. The formation for sending a runner round the end was tried several times, and then the "criss-cross," or double-pass, was essayed until Smith and Mayfair, working together, seemed to have obtained some skill at it.

It was gall-and-wormwood for the fiery-tempered youth, who, having put aside all desire to restrain and control his anger, now entertained the most bitter and revengeful thoughts. He was angry toward Bentley, too, for not speaking out and siding with him in his outburst against Renwood.

There was quite a gathering of spectators who watched the practice, but Don noticed them very little, failing to observe that among them were three girls who were much interested.

At last the practice was over, Sterndale announcing that they had done enough for one day. Then, as Renwood was giving them some instructions about dieting and getting into good condition, Don leaped down from the bleachers and strode out upon the field. When the group broke up, the coach found himself face to face with the lad who had withdrawn from the team.

The rather handsome face of Don Scott was sullen and scowling, and there seemed to be a gleam in his black eyes.

"I have a few more words I want to say to you, Renwood!" he said, his voice hoarse and unsteady.

"And I have something I want to say to you!" Dolph flung back instantly. "A fellow with such a beastly temper as you have isn't fit to play football, and the team will be better off without you."

With a cry, Don sprang forward and drew back his clenched fist, intending to strike Renwood full in the face; but a pretty girl with gold-brown eyes stepped between them, and he saw before him the sister of the fellow he hated.

CHAPTER V. AN UNFORTUNATE COMPACT.

Don's hand dropped instantly and he fell back a step, gasping and trembling, startled and abashed.

The slender left hand of the girl rested on the breast of her brother, while her right was lifted with the open palm toward his angry enemy, upon whom her eyes were turned with an appealing look in their gold-flaked depths.

"Don't!" she said, shrinking a little before the clouded face of the angry lad.

"Zadia!" exclaimed Dolph. "This is no place for you!"

She would not let him put her aside. "No, no!" she almost panted; "you shall not fight! Please, Mr. Scott, don't fight with Dolph! Promise me you will not—for my sake."

Renwood flushed with shame, thinking the others might fancy he was seeking protection from his enemy behind his sister's skirts; and he begged her to go away, but she remained firm.

"I am sure it is all a mistake, and there is no reason why you should be enemies," she said. "Anyhow, you must not fight. You must promise me, Dolph, that you will not fight with him."

"I can't do it," muttered Renwood. "If he's bound to fight, I shall not run away. He'll get all he wants."

Immediately the girl turned appealingly to Don.

"Then you must give me your promise," she said. "Please do!"

It was hard to resist such an appeal from such a source, and Don stood there biting his lip, silent and uncertain. She stepped up to him boldly, and placed her hands on both his arms, looking up into his flushed face in supplication.

"Please promise me!" she breathed.

He drew a long breath. "All right," he said, "I'll promise; but don't ask any more of me—don't expect anything more!"

"Thank you."

"Oh, I don't deserve any thanks! I shall take care to avoid your brother, as the easiest way to keep from breaking my promise to you. I—I'm sorry anything happened—for your sake."

His voice that had been harsh seemed to soften with the final words, but he gave his head a toss as he turned away; and then, without stopping or heeding anybody, he hurried from the field.

"I suppose they'll all say I'm to blame," he muttered to himself, as he walked swiftly past the academy and hastened down the hill. "I don't care if they do! I

couldn't stand it from that fellow, and that's all there is to it."

He had gone some distance before he noticed that he was wearing the football suit and had left his own clothes in the dressing-room beneath the grand-stand. When he made this discovery, he paused a moment, tempted to go back at once.

"No," he finally said, shaking his head; "they'd be there, and some of them would be changing their clothes. I don't want to see any of the fellows now—I don't want to talk it over."

So he went on.

Had he returned, he might have arrived at the gate in time to hear an interesting bit of conversation between three girls. Zadia Renwood was talking with the two companions who had accompanied her to the field, Dora Deland and Agnes Mayfair.

"I'm sorry," said Agnes, with genuine sympathy expressed on her sweet face and in her dark eyes. "I'm sorry your brother should have trouble with any of the boys, Zadia, and I'm sure Don Scott will be sorry when he gets over being angry."

"I'm not very sure about that, myself," Dora laughed, with curling lips. "He has a frightful temper, which he never tries to restrain, and I think he's just perfectly horrid. I can't bear him. Of course he was entirely to blame, and I think——"

"Perhaps he was not wholly to blame," interrupted Zadia, generously. "Even though Dolph is my brother, I know he is not perfect."

"I think he's perfectly splendid," smiled Dora; "and I know Don Scott must have been to blame, for he always is. So there!"

"I shall tell Dolph that you were his champion."

"Oh, don't—not for the world! But I don't like Don Scott; I never did. He scowls so, and he looks as if he'd bite anybody."

"Now," said Zadia, with a little laugh, "if I were to confess the truth, I'd tell you that I think him a handsome fellow—really and truly I do! And he looks the handsomest when he is angry. I don't believe he'd be afraid of anything, and I'm sure he'd become a natural leader if he could master his temper."

"Goodness, Zade!" cried Dora. "I really believe you are struck on him!"

"Oh, no!" protested Dolph's sister, though she flushed betrayingly. "But I can't help liking him, for some reason."

Little did Don dream how the sister of the lad he so disliked felt toward him, and he was convinced in his heart that she must despise him, which, although he would not confess it even to himself, made him all the bitterer.

Concealed by a thick hedge near his home, he saw the boys trooping down the street from the football field, chatting and laughing. They seemed to have forgotten about him, and he clenched his hands and ground his heel into the ground as if crushing out a life beneath his foot.

"They're a lot of soft things!" he muttered. "Not one of them has a mind of his own or any real spirit. I despise them all!"

The three girls seemed to have found companions suited to their tastes, for they had paired off with three of the boys. In advance were John Smith and Agnes Mayfair, the tall lad looking rather awkward beside the graceful, dark-eyed girl. Just behind them were Dolph Renwood and Dora Deland, Dora seeming very well satisfied with her conquest, if conquest it was.

"They make a good pair," declared Don to himself, with curling lips. "She's called the prettiest girl in the village, and it has spoiled her, for she thinks every fellow who sees her is struck on her. She has an idea that the village boys are not good enough for her, so she always smiles on strangers. Just because Renwood comes from Boston she has an idea that he's a superior sort of person. Bah! He is welcome to her, and she's welcome to him."

Following Dolph and Dora were Dick Sterndale and Dolph's sister. The lips of the watching lad tightened and his brows lowered.

"So she has taken up with Sterndale," he whispered. "I expected she would, for he has a way of getting round any girl; but she's too good for him, even if she is Renwood's sister. If she'd ever heard him joke about his mashes, as I have, she'd take care. She'd better keep away from him if she values her good name."

For all that Dora Deland was the belle of the village, in Don's eyes she did not compare at all favorably with the city girl, who carried herself with more grace and whose clothes had a certain something about them that bespoke better taste. In fact, there was that marked difference between the two girls that always distinguishes the city-bred from those reared in the country.

Dick's hearty laugh rang out as his companion made some observation.

"Yes, that is where he lives," said the captain of the eleven, with a motion toward Don's home.

The boy behind the hedge neared Dick's words, and then Zadia said something he did not hear, but Sterndale laughed again in his hearty way.

"Talking about me!" grated Don, his teeth clenched. "She is laughing, too! I suppose she thinks I'm a common country fool! What do I care for what she thinks!"

Still he watched them as they passed onward down the tree-lined street, and his heart was hot in his bosom.

"Perhaps she'll not think so much of herself after she's been round with Sterndale a while," he muttered; "for just as sure as she lets him hang round her she'll discover people are talking. Everybody knows Sterndale, and still it's the strangest thing in the world that almost any girl in the village would be glad to take up with him. He has a way about him that makes them like him, no matter what he does; while something about me makes folks dislike me, no matter what I do. It's my luck to be just as I am! I can't help it! It's no use for me to try!"

His father drove up to the door, having just returned from his afternoon calls; and Don took pains to keep out of sight while Dr. Scott surrendered the horse and carriage to Pat and entered the house, for he was in no mood to meet his father just then.

When he was satisfied that all the boys had passed, he went round to the back of the house and threw himself on the ground beneath the sweet apple-tree, giving himself up entirely to bitter thoughts.

He was mistaken, however, about all the boys having passed, for he had not been reclining beneath the tree two minutes before Leon Bentley appeared, slowly following the others.

At sight of Bentley, Don sprang up, calling sharply:

"Look here, Bent, I want to see you. Come over here, where we can talk."

Bentley crossed the street and vaulted the fence. The expression on his sallow face was anything but pleasant.

"Yes, and I want to see you, too," he said, apparently paying no attention to Don's scowl of anger. "This is our chance to have a little talk where no one will hear us."

"I want to know one thing," said Don, "and that is if you meant what you said to me here before we went up to the field to practice."

"Of course I meant anything I said," declared Leon, flinging himself in a comfortable position on the ground. "What are you driving at, old man?"

"You said you did not fancy Renwood's style of lording it over us."

"Well, I'll stand by that, you can bet your life!"

"You spoke about combining against him."

"Don't you think it about time to do something of the sort?"

"And yet," flared Don, "when he gave me a call-down on the field and we had our little trouble, you never opened your head. You kept closed up, like a clam, and it looked as if you sympathized with him. Why didn't you stand by me? Why didn't you show your colors? What ailed you?"

"Now don't fly off the handle," grinned Leon, producing a package of cigarettes, "You need something to soothe your nerves. Have a cigarette?"

"No! I don't smoke them."

"I know; but you'll find them mighty soothing to the nerves, and you need something of the sort. Try one."

"No; I don't like the smell of them."

"You will after you smoke a few. They're great, old man. Just try one, now."

"I'm too mad to smoke or do anything else but fight. Take the things away! Why don't you answer my question?"

Leon selected a cigarette and prepared it for lighting. Don found it hard to

restrain himself while the fellow was doing all this. When Bentley had lighted the cigarette, he took a deep pull at it, inhaled the smoke, and let it escape from his mouth in little puffs as he asked:

"What was your question?"

"I asked you why you didn't show your colors and stand by me when I had my quarrel with Renwood."

"I didn't consider it policy just then, Don."

"But you saw I was all alone. Everybody seemed against me. If you had put yourself openly on my side just then I'd appreciated it."

"Sometimes it is best not to be too open in such affairs. The matter with you is that you're too open in everything. If you hate a fellow, you let him know it right off, so he's prepared for any move you make against him. Now, I don't believe in that. If I hate a chap, I just keep still till I get a good chance to soak him, and then I can take him by surprise."

Leon said this with a foxy smile that was rather repulsive to the other.

"No, I don't fancy that way of doing things," admitted Don, promptly. "If I hate a fellow, I want him to know it. It's a satisfaction to have him know just what I think of him."

"And it puts him on his guard against you. That's not my style. I'm just as sore on Renwood as you are, but I felt that I might hit him harder if I kept still. I'm onto him, and I know he's down on me. He wants to chuck me off the eleven, so I wasn't going to play right into his hands by siding openly with you and giving him a good excuse to turn Sterndale against me."

"Confound Sterndale! I'm sick of him! He is letting this city cad manage him."

"Of course he is, but he'd get hot in a minute if anybody told him so."

"What makes you think Renwood wants to get you off the eleven?"

"Why, he's been throwing out hints. He's said there were some fellows on the team who were no earthly good."

"I heard him say that!" grated Don; "and he meant me, too!"

"He may have meant you for one, but I am the other."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I took pains to get near enough to overhear some things he was saying to Sterndale after you left the field. They didn't see me, but I heard this sneak Renwood say outright that he thought the eleven could be strengthened by filling my place with somebody else. I felt like punching his head then and there, but I just kept still and didn't let anybody know what I had heard."

"I couldn't have kept still."

"That's where you're foolish. He said I smoke too many cigarettes. Just as if that

had anything to do with my playing! What rot! And he even declared that I lack nerve, so that I would weaken in a hard game."

At another time Don Scott might have realized that he had entertained similar convictions regarding Leon, but just now he exclaimed:

"And you never did a thing? Why, I'd walked out to him and showed him if I lacked nerve!"

"And got chucked off the team for your pains. But I'll show him! I'm going to stay on the team, and I'll bet ten dollars Mr. Dolph Renwood will get kicked off."

Don looked at his companion with new interest.

"How do you propose to bring that about?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know just now, but I'll do it. I have an idea that Renwood doesn't care a snap whether Rockspur beats Highland or not."

"Then, why is he coaching the team?"

"Just to show off what he knows. I tell you, Don, if you and I stand together, we can floor that fellow."

"But I'm out of it; I'm no longer on the team."

"I am, and I'll report to you anything that may be of interest. I'm going to lay some snares to trip Mr. Renwood, and I may need your help. If I do, can I count on you?"

"I don't know," was the doubtful answer. "It makes a difference what you are going to do."

"I'll let you know about that later," said Bentley, rising. "I want you to know that I'm your friend, and I sympathize with you in this affair. We'll stand by each other to the end. Here is my hand on it, Scott. We'll make a compact against Dolph Renwood, and we'll throw him down, too. Shake!"

He held out his right hand, the first two fingers of which were stained a sickly yellow.

Don hesitated, something within him revolting against forming a compact with a fellow so unscrupulous and crafty; but, for all that he would not confess as much even to himself, he desired sympathy and friendship from some one, and Leon seemed to be the only one to whom he could turn.

"Come," cried Bentley; "I'll stick by you through thick and thin, old man, and you will come out on top, too. You'll find me the best friend you ever had, Don."

The best friend! Never had he known what it was to have a real boy friend, and now he felt that it would be churlish of him to refuse the proffered friendship of this lad whose hand was extended to him in his time of trouble. It was true there were many things about Leon that he did not admire, but was there not about himself many things that almost any other lad might dislike? In such a time as this he must not be too particular.

Don took Bentley's hand, but something like a shiver ran over him when he felt Leon's cold fingers rest in his hot palm. On the instant he was almost sorry that he had formed such a compact, but he fancied it was too late to withdraw. The die was cast, and he could not retreat then.

CHAPTER VI. WORDS OF WISDOM.

When Bentley had departed, Don entered the house, intending to go directly to his own room and change his clothes, after taking a bath. He had reached the foot of the stairs when his father called to him from his office, the door of which was standing open.

Don paused, a sudden thought assailing him and giving him a shock. He remembered now that his father had returned shortly before the appearance of Leon and, without doubt, he had been in his office at the time the two boys were forming their compact beneath the apple-tree. If so, he had overheard all that passed between them, as, earlier in the day, he overheard his son's talk with Danny Chatterton, in which case he must be aware that Don had given way to a burst of anger, for all of the promise to try to restrain and govern his temper.

But that was not all. Despite himself, Don could not help feeling that there was something censurable, almost reprehensible, in his compact with Leon Bentley, formed for the purpose of working injury to a lad whom they hated. For this reason, his face flushed and he was seized by a sudden dread of his father's kindly yet searching eyes.

"Don!" again called that voice.

"Yes, father," he answered.

"Come here a minute. I wish to speak with you."

The boy felt like running away, but he summoned his courage and entered the room which served Dr. Scott as an office.

The gentleman was sitting at his desk close by the window, which was screened and curtained.

"Sit down," said the doctor, motioning toward a chair.

"I'll stand, if you please, father," said Don. "I am in my football suit, which I wish to change as soon as possible, for I'm rather sweaty."

"Then you changed your mind about not playing on the eleven? I'm glad you did so, for I like to see my son interested in the honest and manly sports which interest other boys of the village."

Don was silent.

"Football is a rather vigorous game, to say the least," smiled Dr. Scott, gently. "Some say it is rough and brutal, but, if played strictly according to the present rules, it is hardly brutal, and it develops in the player alertness, decision, resolution and courage, qualities of paramount value to every man who would rise in the world above the common level of humanity."

But for the dread of what he anticipated was to follow, Don himself might have

smiled, thinking as he did how few fathers regarded thus favorably the game in question.

"I have taken pains to investigate this matter," the doctor went on, "for I have noted the outcry against football coming from various quarters, and I wished to determine if it is a game suitable for my son. Baseball meets my hearty approval, although a clean, healthy sport like that may be carried to excess, and even amateur players should be properly trained and hardened so that no evil effects may follow the exertions of the game, which call for sharp runs, straining, jumping, and so forth. In baseball it occasionally happens that a player is severely or seriously injured, but the timid lad who avoids the game because of this is pretty sure to lack courage to fight the battle of life to a successful consummation."

The waiting lad wondered that his father should say all this, for it had been understood between them that baseball was a game in which Don might indulge to his full inclination, as long as he did not permit it to interfere with his studies or other duties.

"Having taken pains to investigate the records in regard to football," continued the doctor, "I have found that there are a large number of accidents in connection with the game, but I have also found that these accidents and injuries generally fall to the lot of the untrained and unprepared. A race horse cannot be kept in running condition unless he receives proper grooming, diet and exercise. Every day it must be 'let out' for speed, but judgment must be used to work it up to a proper condition for the great test of the race, when every nerve must be strained in order to win. Almost any horse could be ruined by putting it into a single race without proper training. Yet some young men are foolish enough to fancy they can go into a game of football without preparation and exert themselves with impunity to their very utmost, running, kicking, pushing and tackling. Every boy or man who does such a thing takes his life in his hands. If he is not killed, he stands a good chance to be injured for life. And it is these unprepared and foolish persons who receive the most of the injuries. Some lads should never play football, being physically unfitted for such a game; but, with proper training and preparation in all cases, I believe accidents and injuries may be diminished one-half, at least.

"Now, my son, I am telling you this because I have observed that you are inclined to be careless. You are impulsive, and you would not hesitate to take part in a match game of football utterly without proper training and preparation. Not only that, but, having taken part in practice that exerts you and covers your body with perspiration, you are careless of your health. As soon as possible after leaving the field, you should have removed your clothes, which were damp with perspiration, taken a bath and a rub-down and donned dry clothes. Instead of that, you lay down on the ground out there beneath that apple-tree, where you spent considerable time talking to another boy."

"But, father," said Don, seeking an excuse to get away, "you are keeping me from

my bath now.”

“If you are to take cold this time, the injury is done already. I chose to talk to you right now, while the matter was on my mind. Had I put it off, I might have forgotten all about it. With proper care, Don, there is little danger that you will take cold, even though you exercise, practice and play football in any and all kinds of weather. It is neglect after such efforts that works the injury. In the future I wish you to be careful, just as I wish you to go ahead and take an active interest in making the Rockspur Eleven a strong country team. If possible, I shall take pains to witness one or two of the games, and I hope to see you doing your level best on the team.”

It was on Don's lips to tell his father that he was no longer a member of the Rockspur Eleven, but, seeing the doctor scrutinizing him closely and realizing that he must make an explanation in regard to his withdrawal from the team, which meant a full confession concerning his loss of temper on the field, he hesitated and was silent.

Apparently, Dr. Scott had paused to give his son a chance to speak if he wished, and there was something like a look of disappointment on his fine face when Don failed to say anything. At least, Don fancied that his father looked disappointed.

“In order to become a successful football player, Don,” said the doctor, breaking his silence when he saw the boy did not intend to speak, “you must receive instructions from those who know more about the game than you do, and you must take pains to follow the instructions as fully and faithfully as possible. A good soldier obeys his commander implicitly, without question or rebellion. A good football player should be as obedient as a good soldier. On the field, in practice and in play, you must let yourself be governed by your superiors, even though at times you find it necessary to hold yourself hard to keep from rebelling or from doing things the way you, yourself, fancy they should be done. No successful organization ever existed that did not have a commander who was obeyed, and the best commanders are those who have themselves learned well the lesson of exact and faithful obedience. If you ever expect or hope to rule others, my son, first learn the lesson of obedience and learn to rule your own disposition.”

Don's face was flushed now, for, although his father had not referred to it directly, he felt that the open window had betrayed the exact condition of affairs. The doctor had chosen this indirect method of reproving his son for permitting himself to be ruled by his anger.

“That's all I have to say,” concluded Dr. Scott, “with the exception of one thing: Shun evil companions. Better no friends than the friendship of the bad and vicious. Any boy who seeks revenge on another in a secret, underhand manner is vicious, and his companionship will prove degrading. Now get your bath, my boy, and change your clothes.”

Don was relieved to escape from his father's presence, for his cheeks were

burning and his ears tingling.

CHAPTER VII.

A BATTLE IN A HEART.

"Hang it!" muttered Don, when he was alone in his room; "I didn't want him to know. I'd have given anything rather than have him know, and I'm sure he does know, from what he said at the end."

The bath-room was just outside his door, and he had started the water running into the porcelain tub. In a savage manner he began to strip off his football suit.

"He won't see me playing on the Rockspur Eleven this year," he said, harshly. "I'm done with that crowd, the whole of them!"

This caused him to think of Leon Bentley and his compact with the fellow, and he realized that he was not "done" with one member of the village eleven, at least.

"I rather father would have known about anything else!" he murmured, his cheeks burning again. "I was a fool to have anything to do with Bentley, and I'm beginning to think I'd better withdraw from that compact, even though it is backing out of an agreement. I hate Renwood, but I don't care about getting revenge on him in a sneaking way."

He stripped off his damp underclothes and hung them up to dry, after which he took a towel from a drawer in the dressing-case and started for the bath-room, which he was able to reach with almost a single step from his door.

The water in the tub was cool, almost cold, but he plunged in without hesitation. The bath was followed by an energetic rub-down with the rough towel, bringing a glow to his entire body and giving him a feeling of warmth, freshness and vigor. A mirror showed him a handsomely-formed lad, like the figure of a youthful athlete cut from pink marble.

Don returned to his room and dressed, thinking all the while of his father's words, which had impressed him deeply.

"It's all right to talk about obeying one's commander," he said to himself, "but Renwood is not my commander. Sterndale is manager and captain of the eleven. Now, if it had been Sterndale——"

He paused, assailed by the thought that, under aggravating circumstances of a similar nature, he might have rebelled against Sterndale. Besides that, in a certain sense, Renwood was his superior on the eleven, having been accepted as the regular coach of the team.

"Oh, of course I'm all to blame!" he half snarled, as he plunged into a fresh shirt. "Everybody will say so, even my own father."

But he softened again, realizing that, even though his father must have come to understand the truth from the conversation overheard outside his window, he had not uttered a single word of open reproach.

"At least," whispered the boy, softly, "he is my friend, and I must try hard to

please him. He has done enough for me, so that I must do what I can for him."

How few boys feel this way toward their fathers! The fact that Don Scott could think such a thing at such a time proved his heart was right, for all of his headstrong disposition and violent temper.

In his soul Don knew he had been hasty in his actions, though he tried to convince himself that he had done nothing wrong. However, esteeming his father as he did, he felt that it was his duty to make a sacrifice, even though it might be necessary to humble himself to a certain extent in order to do so.

"I'll go to him and tell him everything," he decided. "He will think better of me if I do, for it is almost certain that he heard enough of my talk with Bentley to let him know what has happened. As I kept silent when he gave me an opportunity to tell him, he'll think I did not attempt to keep my promise to try to control my temper, and I'll seem like a sneak in seeking to hide the truth from him."

Any healthy-minded boy dreads being thought a "sneak," and regards such an appellation as almost the greatest possible slur that can be cast upon him; so it was not strange that, imagining as he did, that his father might think such a thing of him, Don should wish to set himself right.

"I'll go straight to him as soon as I'm dressed," he resolved, hastily getting into his clothes.

He stood before the glass and carefully knotted a dark-red four-in-hand necktie, which was his favorite, having been presented to him by his aunt, sister to his father, who was housekeeper in the Scott home, and who had tried to be a mother to the doctor's son since the death of Mrs. Scott, which took place when Don was a little more than a year old.

Having knotted the tie with care and thrust a small gold pin through the knot, he buttoned on his cuffs, donned his coat and vest, and was ready to go downstairs.

At the door he paused, overcome for the moment by the thought of facing his father and making the confession, and there he stood some little time, forming in his mind the speech he would make. It required considerable courage on his part to keep from backing out and giving up his resolution then and there, but he would not permit himself to yield to such weakness; and so, with renewed determination, he left his room and lightly descended the carpeted stairs.

At the door of his father's office he paused, for the doctor was standing in the waning light that came from the curtained window, gazing earnestly upon a gold-framed miniature which he held in his hand. The boy could not see his father's face, but, having seen that miniature before, he knew it was the picture of his dead mother.

As Don halted in irresolution, a sigh and a half-smothered sob came from his father, who raised the miniature to his lips, murmuring:

"Mary, Mary, you forgave me at last, but I've never forgiven myself! But for my act of anger I might have you with me now. Heaven grant his temper may bring

no such sorrow to our son!"

As quietly as possible, Don stole away and sought his aunt, a rather stout, pleasant-faced woman, who was getting supper on the table.

"Goodness, Don!" she exclaimed pretending to be alarmed. "You came in so still that you frightened me. It's not your way to creep about like that."

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Aunt Ella," he said. "I came to tell you that I am going out."

"Not now? Why, it's just supper time, and I'll have everything ready in a few minutes."

"I don't want anything; I couldn't eat."

"Land! land! What in the world is the matter with you? You're a healthy, growing boy, and you generally have an appetite."

"I haven't any to-night, aunt. I couldn't eat anything; it would choke me!"

"Something is the matter! Don, you're sick!" She was alarmed in a moment. "I'll call your father."

"Don't aunt," interposed Don, stopping her. "I'm not sick—truly I'm not."

"Then what ails ye?"

"Nothing, only—I've lost my appetite. Perhaps if I go for a long walk, the exercise may give me an appetite."

"Haven't you had any exercise to-day? I saw the boys going to the ball ground to play football. Didn't you go?"

"Yes."

"And still you say you haven't any appetite! Now, I know there's something the matter with you. Won't you tell your old aunt all about it, Don? You know I'm interested, and——"

"It's nothing—noting at all!" declared the boy, somewhat impatiently. "I just don't want any supper, that's all, and I want you to tell father I've gone out for a walk."

"Don't you think you ought to tell him yourself before you go?"

"No; he's busy now. I've just come from his office, but I didn't go in when I saw he was busy. You tell him, aunt. Perhaps I'll have an appetite when I come back. Now, that's a good aunt! Don't get any queer notions into your head, for I'm all right, only I don't feel like eating."

He suddenly caught her in his arms and kissed her. Then he was gone, leaving her standing there with clasped hands. She listened till the sound of a closing door told her he had left the house.

"Just like his father!" she murmured, softly. "Just as his father used to be, but Lyman has changed greatly since he lost Mary. Will he never forget?"

Then she continued the preparations for supper.

Don walked swiftly away from the house, fearing his aunt might immediately tell his father, who would call him back. On reaching the sidewalk, he paused for a moment, glancing down the street toward the little square in the heart of the village. He saw two youths cross the square, passing the little fountain. They were Sterndale and Renwood, and he turned his back toward the square, hurrying up the hill.

He was grasped by a feverish desire to be all alone and walk, walk, walk; so he kept on up Academy Hill, passing the white building beneath the trees. When he reached the fenced-about football field, he turned to the right and took the road that led toward Wolf's Head Point.

He took off his hat to let the cool wind from the open sea fan his hot forehead as he strode along. All the while his thoughts were busy, and within his soul a battle was taking place.

The point was reached. He passed the home of the light-keeper, but, instead of approaching the light-house, which towered in a white column on the extremity of the point, he turned to the left and mounted to the ragged top of a mass of ledges, where he found a seat, with the rising tide murmuring and swirling amid the crevices and crannies below him.

Sunset's after-glow glinted the waves, but afar on the bosom of the sea lay a purple haze that seemed to blend with sea and sky and connect both; and out of the purple sea-mist loomed a white-winged vessel, headed for Rockspur Harbor, which it could not reach before darkness fell. Away toward the ledges by the harbor mouth some gulls skimmed the waves, uttering harsh and melancholy cries. Overhead a few vapory clouds were tinted with pink and edged with burnished gold.

Don gave little heed to his surroundings as he sat there in the ledge, staring down at the restless water that ran green and foamy over the broken rocks, but the expression on his mobile face indicated that the battle within him was waxing fiercer.

He had long known that the death of his mother had cast a great shadow on his father's life, but never till this day had he suspected that Dr. Scott held himself in any respect responsible for the loss of his wife.

Don had discovered that his mother's miniature, painted on ivory, was constantly carried near his father's heart. More than once he had, without being observed, seen his father gazing sadly and lovingly at that picture; but on this last occasion the doctor's murmured words, unintended for his ears, had given him an inkling of the truth of the great sorrow that had fallen upon his father.

Some act of the doctor, done in a moment of anger, had, as he firmly believed, hastened or brought about the death of his wife. For this angry deed he had never forgiven himself, and now he was filled with foreboding and distress because he

saw his son had inherited his ungovernable temper and because he feared the end to which it might lead.

"I have no right to cause my father so much pain," thought Don, self-reproachfully. "He's always been kind to me. I—I don't know about my mother, for he never told me. I don't suppose he could bring himself to talk about it. I must do something to relieve him—something to assure him that I am trying to govern my temper and master myself. But, oh, it is hard to humble myself before that fellow Renwood! How can I do it?"

The struggle within him continued while the light died slowly in the western sky, the pink and gold left the clouds dull and lead-colored, and the blue haze deepened into darkness.

"I'll do it!" he finally exclaimed, rising to his feet. "For father's sake, I'll go to Sterndale and say I'm sorry. I'll even ask Renwood's pardon, if I must; but that will be worse than swallowing red-hot iron!"

Darkness had fallen, but from the light-house on the point a light shone forth to guide the belated vessel lost to view on the bosom of the night-encompassed sea.

In the heart of the boy another light glimmered weakly, seeking to burst into a bright flame that should guide in the right course his passion-shrouded soul.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE CLUB-ROOM.

Nearly all the members of the newly-formed Rockspur Athletic Club, of which Dick Sterndale was the president and ruling spirit, had gathered in their recently-rented rooms in the loft of a two-story-and-a-half wooden building next to the post-office.

The upper floor of the building had been partitioned off into two rooms for some purpose, one being a small and the other a large room. The walls were ceiled up with plain boards, and the rafters of the sloping roof remained unhidden from view; but to the village boys it seemed an admirable place to meet their requirements for a gymnasium and club-room, having been obtained for them through the energies of Sterndale, who had organized the club and raised the needed funds.

It had long been Sterndale's ambition to form in Rockspur an amateur athletic club and build a club-house that should be appointed to meet the requirements of such an organization. It had seemed like a wild and foolish dream, but still he clung to it; and now, for the first time, he was revealing his desire in this line to his companions, who listened attentively and with growing enthusiasm.

"By jingoes! that's great!" cried Jotham Sprout, when Dick had finished. "I'd never thought of that myself. Fellers, let's go ahead and build that club-house."

"Yes, let's!" grunted Thad Boland, who was lolling in a lazy position on a wooden bench against the partition. "It won't cost more than two or three thousand dollars, and we're all millionaires, so that'll be a mere nothing to us."

"I didn't think about what it would cost," admitted Bubble, with a crestfallen air. "But of course it wouldn't be as much as that."

"Such a club-house as Sterndale has been talking about would cost twenty-five hundred dollars, at least," put in Rob Linton. "It's no use to think of such a thing."

"Bub-bub-bub-but it's a pup-pup-pup-perfectly lovely dud-dud-dud-dream!" sighed Danny Chatterton, opening his eyes and slowly looking around. "I just hate to wake up."

"Go to sleep again," advised Walter Mayfair. "You'll never be missed."

"It's a splendid plan," came, with enthusiasm, from Dolph Renwood, who was sitting on a rough table, the edge of which he was notching with his jack-knife. "It's a pity it can't be carried out, and I'm not so sure but it can be."

"HOW?" shouted all the others, as one person.

"If we could get the leading citizens of the town interested, they might contribute to a fund to——"

"Contribute to your Aunt Hannah!" grunted Thad Boland, derisively. "I don't think you know much about the leading citizens of this town, Mr. Renwood."

"But you must have some rich men who are public-spirited and can afford to help along such a worthy move? Now, there is Mr. Tuttle, for instance. They say he has dead loads of money."

"Old Tut-Tut-Tuttle!" exploded Chatterton, contemptuously. "Why, he lul-lul-lul-let his own bub-bub-brother die on the pup-pup-poor-farm! He's mum-mean enough to sus-skin a louse for its hide and taller!"

"Well, there is Eben Snood," ventured Dolph. "He pretends to take great interest in the welfare and advancement of the town."

"Snood is worse than Tuttle," asserted Rob Linton. "Before he will let go of a cent he'll squeeze it so hard that it looks as if it had been run over by a railroad train."

"I don't think," said Sterndale, "that we can expect any assistance from the people of the village till we show that we are in earnest by starting the fund ourselves."

"Hey?" gasped Old Lightning. "Well, I've got seven cents and a fish-hook that I'll contribute, if you're going to take up a collection."

"We'll not begin by taking up a collection," Dick declared.

"Then hu-how can we begin?" asked Danny, earnestly.

"By saving the money we take at the gate when we play football, baseball, or anything of that sort; by getting up athletic contests that will call out paying crowds to witness the sport; and by holding a series of entertainments in the Town Hall this winter. In that way we might be able to obtain the beginning of a fund that would in time become large enough for us to accomplish our purpose and build a club-house."

"It's too long to wait, b'ys," murmured Dennis Murphy. "Av we raised the money thot way, we moight get it in toime to build an ould men's home fer some av us, an' we'd be lucky at thot."

"That's right," nodded Leon Bentley. "I believe in getting some benefit from the money as we receive it, and I'm in for using it up. I want to spend my share."

"We haven't heard from you, Smith," said Sterndale, addressing a grave-looking lad, who had been listening without speaking. "What do you think?"

"I think it is a great scheme, if it can be carried out," answered John Smith. "I believe we should talk this over and investigate it fully. It does seem rather visionary now, but it may be practical."

"I tell you I don't take any stock in it!" exclaimed Bentley, rather pettishly. "We can't hold an organization together long enough to carry out the scheme. Why, just see how this Don Scott affair has broken us up already. We don't know where to get a good man to fill Scott's place. Something else may come up later, and the eleven and the club may disband."

"Dud-don't be forever cuc-cuc-croaking, Bent!" exclaimed Chatterton. "You're always expecting something bub-bad to happen."

Ford, the deaf-mute, was the only member of the party who had not expressed an opinion of some sort. He sat there among them, looking on, his eyes bright and keen, apparently enjoying their society, if not their conversation.

Renwood flipped his jack-knife, causing it to strike, point first and stand up in the soft wood table.

"If other men of the place would take an interest," he said, "I believe I could interest my father."

"By George! that's a handsome knife, old man!" Bentley observed, reaching over and taking it. "Pearl-handled and four-bladed. Got your initials on the handle, too. I'd like to have a knife like that. How much did it cost?"

"I don't know. Father gave it to me."

"Well, my old man wouldn't think of giving me a knife like that. He thinks any kind of an old toad-sticker is good enough for a boy."

Bentley seemed to regard the handsome knife with longing eyes, then he placed it on the table again beside Dolph.

"This Scott affair is unfortunate, to say the least," admitted Sterndale; "but I have no idea that it will cause the breaking up of the eleven. He is only one man."

"Mr. Renwood seems to think there are other men on the team who had better get off, or who will be fired off," said Bentley.

"How do you know I think so?" asked Dolph, quickly.

"Why, haven't you said as much?"

"No. I may have said that some were not much good, but I said nothing about their getting off or being fired off. If anybody is fired, it will be his own fault."

"Of course it was nobody's fault but Scott's that he got off the team?"

"Surely not. He's a hot-headed fellow, and he needs to be kept in his place. He's had his own way all his life, and he's spoiled. He insulted me, the coach of the team, on the field, and I should have demanded an apology if he had remained on the eleven. He made it plain that it would be impossible for him and me to pull together on the same team, and I'm sure we shall get along just as well without him."

There was a quick step outside the door, and Don Scott himself came into the room. The lowering expression on his dark face told that he had overheard Renwood's words, and his flashing eyes indicated that again he was aroused. Fixing his eyes on Dolph, he walked straight up to the table on which the city lad was seated.

"You are right, Renwood," he said, in a voice that quivered from the tenseness of his feelings, "you and I could never pull together on the same team. That is settled at last for all time, and I now give notice that I will withdraw from both the eleven and this club. Just as long as you are a member of either I shall stay out."

Don Scott had come there to say something entirely different, but again that day his passions were aroused, as he had overheard Dolph's final speech.

"I presume you are at liberty to withdraw if you like," said Renwood.

Don turned to the captain of the eleven.

"You may choose between us, Sterndale!" he cried. "I belong in Rockspur, I am one of the village fellows, and this chap is an outsider. I don't believe he really cares a rap whether Rockspur has a winning team or not. He simply likes to show off what he knows, or what he pretends to know. If he took a notion, I'll bet he'd throw a game to Highland in a minute, and I——"

Renwood sprang down from the table and seemed on the point of striking the insulting speaker; but, with a curl of his scornful lips, Don folded his arms, saying:

"Strike! You are safe, for you know I can't hit you back, having promised your sister that I would not fight with you. Strike!"

Dolph's fist fell at his side.

"Take back your promise!" he panted. "I demand it! You have insulted me, and you must give me satisfaction!"

With a show of contempt, Don half-turned his back on the quivering city youth.

"I've had my say," he declared. "You may take your time to think it over, Sterndale."

Then he walked out of the room, and they heard him descend the stairs.

For some moments all in the room seemed to remain motionless and breathless. Dennis Murphy broke the silence.

"D'yer moind now, thot b'y is a hot birrud!" he said.

"I couldn't hit him!" grated Dolph, still shaking. "He took refuge behind his promise to my sister. But he'll have to face me! I'll force him to do it!"

Then came comments and remarks from all quarters, and it was some time after Scott's departure before the boys cooled down. As he resumed his position on the table, Renwood discovered that his knife was missing.

"What's become of my knife?" he asked. "It was here on the table."

"Didn't you put it into your pocket?" asked Bentley.

Dolph shook his head. "No; I left it lying on the table. Scott came in just a moment after you put it back there."

However, he felt through his pockets, but did not find it. Then the boys searched for the knife, looking under the table and into all sorts of corners. Again Renwood searched his pockets, turning them wrongside out one by one, but with no better success than before.

The knife was not found.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

Straight from Wolf's Head Point to the club-rooms Don Scott had come, with a determination to have a talk with Sterndale, express his regret at what had happened that day on the football field and apologize to Renwood, if absolutely necessary. This he was resolved to do for his father's sake, not wishing to cause the doctor further worry and distress on his account.

By chance he had arrived at the club-room just in time to hear Renwood denounce him as hot-headed and declare they could not both get along on the eleven.

Don left the place in no enviable frame of mind, at once turning his face toward home.

"It's no use for me to try!" he muttered, furiously. "I can't have anything to do with that fellow, even for father's sake. I did think I would, though it was a bitter pill to swallow, but I give it up now. To-morrow I'll tell father everything, and I don't see how he can blame me very much."

When he reached home, he found his aunt had something on the table for him to eat, and she urged him to sit down. The doctor had been called out on a critical case, not a little to Don's relief, for the boy feared his father might question him.

Don did not wish to eat anything even then, but his aunt was persistent, and he sat down to please her.

"What can be the matter with you, Don?" the good woman asked, watching him closely. "You're awful pale, and your hand shakes. I'm afraid you're going to be sick."

He forced a laugh, difficult though it was to do so, and did his best to reassure her, though he could not fully allay her anxiety. It was with no small difficulty that he compelled himself to eat anything, for anger had robbed him entirely of his appetite.

As soon as he could get away, he hurried up to his room, where he paced the floor for a time, thinking unpleasant thoughts and muttering to himself.

"I said I was done with the whole of them," he grated, "and now I'll stick by it. Of course I know Sterndale will stand by Renwood. Oh, they're a fine set!"

He opened the closet door and dragged out his football suit.

"This belongs to the club," he said, "for it was paid for out of the general funds. I won't keep it another hour. My clothes are in the dressing-room under the grandstand, but I have a key to the lock. I'll take this old suit back and get my own clothes."

He made a bundle of the football suit, and, with it under his arm, slipped downstairs and out of the house.

Hurrying up the street, he climbed Academy Hill once more that day. The night was quite dark, for the moon had not yet risen. It was rather cool, too; but the boy minded this not, for his blood was running swiftly in his body.

Reaching the ball ground, he opened the gate and entered. With noiseless steps, he advanced toward the grand-stand. As he approached it, he suddenly stopped, fancying he heard a strange sound. After a moment, however, he advanced to the door of the dressing-room.

To his surprise, the door was standing wide open. He paused again, wondering at this, for it was a rule to keep the door locked.

"A piece of carelessness!" he thought. "Somebody ought to be shot for it! Why, there's plenty of stuff here that might be stolen. Somebody might have taken my clothes."

He was startled by the thought. Perhaps somebody had been there and carried away his clothes, leaving the door standing open. With a little cry of dismay, he sprang into the dressing-room, intending to light a match and look about.

In the darkness he collided violently against a human form, which caused him to reel backward.

Some one was in the dressing-room!

Don heard a smothered exclamation, and then the unknown attempted to dart past him and escape by the open door.

Quick as thought, Don dropped the football suit and clutched at the unseen figure, crying:

"Hold on! What are you doing in here?"

He grasped the other, who made a desperate effort to jerk away, but Don held fast, and directly a fearful struggle took place in the darkness of the dressing-room.

Finding that the sole object of the unknown seemed to be to break away and escape, Don was convinced that the fellow had been doing something crooked.

"Let go!" was panted, in a hoarse tone of voice.

"I guess not!" returned Don. "Just keep still, will you!"

But the other would not keep still, and Don felt for his throat, grating:

"Then I'll have to choke you till you do keep still!"

But he could not secure the hold he desired, for his antagonist fought him off. At last, getting a grasp about the fellow's body, Don tripped and threw him heavily, coming down upon him with crushing violence.

Apparently the fall had stunned the unknown for the moment, at least, as he lay quite still. Noting this, Don rose to his knees and felt in his pockets for a match, which he intended to light.

"We'll soon see who you are, my fine fellow," he thought, "and we'll learn what sort of a game you were playing all by your lonesome."

He was breathing heavily from his exertions and his hands shook somewhat, for the encounter in the dark with a mysterious antagonist had been decidedly trying to his nerves.

To his great disappointment, he failed to find a match in his pockets.

As he was wondering what he could do, the unknown made a sudden spring and tried to fling him off.

"No, you don't!" hissed Don, again grappling with the fellow. "I'm not done with you!"

The struggle was resumed with greater fury than before, for the mysterious visitor to the dressing-room seemed perfectly frantic in his desire to break from Scott's grasp and make his escape. They squirmed and twisted and thrashed about on the floor, both panting heavily.

Don's fighting blood was aroused, as he had recovered from the startled shock that assailed him when he discovered the intruder in the dressing-room, and somehow he took almost a fierce joy in this savage fight in the dark.

At last he found a grip on the throat of the unknown, determined to choke the fellow into submission; but then his antagonist struck out heavily, hitting Don's shoulder with something that caused a twinge of pain and produced a ripping sound.

Instantly Scott released the other's throat and grasped his arm and wrist, assailed by the conviction and fear that his foe was armed with a dangerous weapon. Down to the hand of the unknown Don's fingers slipped, and there he found a knife securely clutched.

Then he knew the fellow had struck at him with the knife, which he had felt in his shoulder!

Having made this alarming discovery, Don held fast to the hand that gripped the knife, not daring to release it for a moment, as the fear of being stabbed was on him. Up to the moment of finding the knife in the hand of the unknown he had not fancied he was in deadly danger; but now his blood was chilled by the horror of this struggle in the dark with an antagonist desperate enough to use an open knife, and his every energy was bent to the task of wresting the weapon from his foe.

In the midst of this fearful struggle the active brain of the boy pictured a tragic ending for himself. He fancied that his antagonist would wrest his knife-hand free and strike again and again with the keen blade, plunging it to the hilt each time, which must soon bring an end to the struggle. The night would pass, morning come, and then the searchers would find the dead lad there in the blood-bespattered dressing-room. His father and his aunt would grieve, but he wondered how many others would care.

This grewsome fancy seemed to give him tremendous strength, for he slowly forced the fingers of the other to unclasp from the handle of the knife. Once his hand slipped and he felt the blade slash across his fingers, but he did not pause to wonder how badly he was cut. Believing he was now fighting for his life, he lost not a moment.

At last, with a fierce wrench, he forced the knife from the hand of the unknown; but, having bent all his energies in this direction, he had given no attention to the task of holding his foe so he could not escape. With a sudden twist, the fellow flung Don off, then scrambled up.

"Stop!" panted Don; but, giving no heed, the mysterious fellow darted out through the open door and disappeared.

As soon as possible Don sprang up and followed him. Outside the door, he halted in the darkness, looking to the right and to the left, but seeing nothing of his foe.

"He's run for the gate," thought the boy, and he made a dash for the exit from the field.

As he reached the gate, he heard a scrambling and knocking sound against the boards of the fence at the farther side of the field, following which, for a single moment, he fancied he saw a dark figure rise to the top of the fence, being dimly discernible against the sky. An instant later the figure was gone, and Don knew his unknown antagonist had made good his escape.

But Don's bleeding fingers held the knife he had wrested from his mysterious foe.

CHAPTER X. THE TELL-TALE KNIFE.

Filled with wonder and speculation over his unexpected and thrilling adventure, Don returned to the dressing-room where the desperate encounter had taken place. The knife he had closed and slipped into his pocket, and he wound a handkerchief around his cut and bleeding fingers.

"I'd give something to know what this fellow was up to," he muttered, pausing outside the open door and shuddering as he thought of what had lately taken place within that room. "He fought like the very Old Scratch, but I don't think he tried to strike me with the knife till I got him down and choked him. Wish I had a match."

But another search through his pockets failed to bring forth the article he desired, and so, not without a slight shiver and drawing back, he again stepped into the darkness of the dressing-room.

Knowing exactly where his clothes were hanging on a peg against the wall, it was not difficult for him to find them. Having hurriedly gathered them and flung them over his arm, he lost little time in leaving the dressing-room, for he could not cast off the feeling that he might again be attacked in the darkness of that place.

Outside he paused long enough to close the door, which fastened with a spring lock, after which he walked swiftly from the inclosure, shutting the gate behind him.

As he reached the road, he heard the sound of voices, causing him to pause and listen, upon which he made the discovery that several persons were approaching from the direction of the village. The voices sounded natural, too, and he decided that, for some reason, a number of boys were coming toward him.

Not wishing to be seen by them, he hurried across the road and crouched behind a clump of bushes, which, together with the darkness, completely hid him from view.

As the party approached, he recognized the voices and learned that it was made up of Sterndale, Mayfair, Murphy and Chatterton. Listening to their conversation, he heard Mayfair say:

"You're right about this thing, Sterndale, and it was a good thought of yours, for we can take care of the stuff at the club-rooms now, and everything will be safe."

"It's mesilf that nivver left anything up here at all, at all," declared the voice of the Irish lad.

"And he was so bub-bub-blamed mad over it that there's no tut-tut-telling wh-what he might do," stuttered Chatterton. "I ru-ruther think you've got a right to tut-try somebody else in his pup-pup-pup-position, Sterndale."

"I've had my eye on Carter for some time," the hidden lad plainly heard the captain of the eleven declare. "He doesn't mingle with our crowd much, but he's a strong, hearty fellow, and he may prove to be a good man."

They passed on and proceeded straight to the gate of the fenced-in grounds. A moment later the sound of their voices told they had entered by the gate and were within the grounds, upon which Don rose from his place of concealment, reached the road and hastened toward home.

"They were talking about me!" he grated. "So they're going to put Harry Carter in my place! He's a fellow who never seemed to take much interest in baseball or anything else of the sort, yet they think he'll be as good a man as I am!"

From the disconnected and incomplete bit of conversation that had reached his ears, he reasoned that the boys must have been speaking of him; but just why they were visiting the ball ground at that hour was a question he could not answer. He had permitted all the suspicion, selfishness and jealousy of his nature to be aroused, and he fancied his erstwhile companions were ready to do anything to "spite" him.

His nerves were far from steady, which was not at all strange, taking into consideration the unexpected and violent struggle from which he had recently emerged. The mystery of that encounter continued to bewilder him, but he decided that the unknown must have been a common thief who had entered the dressing-room for the purpose of securing whatever plunder he could discover there.

Under any condition, Don thanked his lucky stars that he had escaped with his life, for the fellow had been fierce in his final efforts to strike with the open knife, having found the athletic boy was more than a master for him. Up to that time it appeared that his sole desire was to break from Don's grasp and escape; but, on being thrown down and choked, he had used the knife.

Don wondered when the unknown had drawn and opened the knife. It seemed that the rascal had scarcely been given time to accomplish such an action after Don's entrance, for the boy had kept him busy, and he had struggled madly to free himself and escape.

"I believe he had that open knife in his hand when I came in on him," Don finally decided.

So busy was he with his thoughts that he did not observe his handkerchief had slipped from his wounded fingers. He was nearly home when he made the discovery, finding his hand was wet and sticky with blood.

"Let the old handkerchief go," he muttered. "I'll find out how much I'm cut."

He succeeded in entering the house quietly, and was hurrying up to his room, when his father called to him:

"Is that you, Don?"

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"I thought you were in bed."

"I am just going to bed now, sir."

"Good-night, my boy."

"Good-night, father."

He did not wish to stand before his father again that day, for he felt that he could not carry out his determination to make a confession of the truth, and a discovery of his injury might lead Dr. Scott to ask him unpleasant questions.

In his room, he flung his clothes over the back of a chair, hurriedly washed the blood from his hand, and examined his fingers, finding that three of them had been cut, but not seriously.

"I can attend to them myself," he said, and he proceeded to do so, taking from a drawer an old handkerchief, which he tore into strips to bind about the bleeding digits.

When this was done, Don took off his coat and discovered in the left sleeve a long slit from the shoulder nearly to the elbow, made by the knife of his antagonist that now lay in his pocket.

This wound in his shoulder proved to be scarcely more than a scratch, and he easily attended to that with some strips of plaster.

"But he came near fixing that arm!" he exclaimed, picking up his coat and looking at the slit in the sleeve. "Jupiter! Just see that! My best coat, too! What can I tell Aunt Ella? It won't do to tell her just how it happened."

Happening to glance at a mirror, he found his face was very pale and that he still showed signs of agitation. He also noted that his handsome red necktie was gone, having, without doubt, been torn off in the encounter.

"I don't want to lose that necktie," he said. "I ought to go back, and look for it."

But at that moment he heard his father close and lock the front door, and he knew the house was being shut up for the night.

"I'll look for it in the morning," he decided. "It isn't likely I could find it to-night, anyway."

Having flung himself down on an easy-chair, he fell to thinking the entire adventure over from start to finish, it being of a nature to take his mind for the time from his trouble with Renwood. When he had reviewed it up to the moment when he concealed himself behind the bushes on the approach of four members of the village eleven, he speculated again over the cause of their visit to the football field at that hour of the night. Then he remembered that Mayfair had spoken of their being able to take care of some "stuff" at the club-rooms, and all at once it dawned on him that they were proceeding to the dressing-room under the grand-stand with the intention of removing to the club-rooms the paraphernalia

and suits of the football team.

Then his face hardened, and he sprang to his feet as he thought of Chatterton's words.

"So they had an idea that, because I was angry, I might do some sneaky thing!" he snarled, his eyes flashing. "I wonder what they thought I'd do? Did they fancy I'd steal the football and suits? That little cub, Chatterton, said I was so mad there was no telling what I'd do! I'd like to wring his neck!"

The village stammerer might have been handled roughly had he been within reach of Don Scott at that moment.

"I'd like to know what cause any one has to think such things of me?" the doctor's son muttered, walking up and down the room with quick, nervous strides. "Even if I have a temper, I've never played the sneak, and no one has a right to even suspect that I'll begin now!"

For a time these outraged thoughts prevented his mind from reverting again to the encounter with the unknown, but at length he came back to that, and once more fell to wondering over the identity of his mysterious antagonist. Then he thought of the captured knife, being seized by a sudden hope that it might reveal to him what he wished to know, or, at least, serve as a clue.

In a moment the knife was in his hand. It was covered with blood, and this Don proceeded to wash away, wiping the knife dry with a handkerchief.

"By Jupiter! it's a beauty!" he exclaimed, regarding it with admiration. "New, pearl-handled, four-bladed; don't look as if it'd be carried for a deadly weapon by a ruffian; looks more like a gentleman's knife. Hello! Here are the initials of the owner engraved on the plate in the handle. What are they? 'R. G. R.' Now, what do they stand for?"

He was silent for a moment, staring at the handsome knife that lay in his uninjured hand. Of a sudden, he panted:

"By my life, I have it! Those initials stand for Randolph Grant Renwood, and this knife belongs to Dolph Renwood!"

Then, seemingly bewildered by this startling discovery, he sat down and continued to stare at the tell-tale knife.

CHAPTER XI. SIGNS OF GUILT.

It is stating the case tamely to say Don was bewildered, for that does not at all express his state of mind. He was thunderstruck. Never till the moment of the surprising discovery had he in any way connected his desperate antagonist of the dressing-room with the lad whom he hated with all the intensity of his passionate nature, and even now it did not seem possible that the fellow who had fought him so furiously in the darkness of that place could have been Renwood.

"If it was he, what was he doing there?" was the question Don asked himself. "He must have been up to something crooked, else he would not have been so fierce to get away; but what it means is more than I can conceive."

A long time the boy puzzled over the singular affair, without, however, in the least satisfying himself concerning it. The knife that had fallen into his possession in such a strange manner seemed to settle the identity of his antagonist, but it did not betray Renwood's reason for secretly visiting the dressing-room under cover of darkness or reveal why he had fought like a wolf to escape without being recognized.

"Anyhow, he tried to stab me," muttered Don. "Is it possible he went there to steal my clothes? Perhaps he did, and it may be that he recognized me, even though I didn't recognize him. That may be why he fought so and tried to stab me."

He was not satisfied with this explanation, and at last, tired of speculating concerning it, he went to bed. After what he had passed through, it was but natural that he should dream, nor was it strange that his dreams were of sanguine encounters with the lad he so disliked.

Don slept late the following morning, which was the Sabbath; but he was aroused at last by his aunt outside his door, who told him he would have to make haste in order to get ready for church.

Of course, his first waking thoughts were of the unpleasant events of the previous day and the startling adventure which had capped them all. As he dressed the tell-tale knife lay on a table before him, and his eyes often sought it, while his heart was filled with triumph because he had, he fancied, wrested from his enemy's hand this proof of his identity.

Don gave his aunt no cause to complain about his appetite that morning, for he ate heartily; but there was a flush in his dark cheeks and his manner was strangely preoccupied, showing that his thoughts were wandering. However, he was thoughtful enough to keep his injured hand in his lap, so it did not attract attention.

The second bell was ringing when Don came down from his room to join his father and aunt, who were waiting for him to accompany them to church.

"Hello, Don!" exclaimed the doctor. "You have forgotten to put on your best coat."

"That one doesn't match your suit."

Don was confused, for he had hoped his father or aunt would not notice this, and he halted a bit as he said:

"I think I'll wear this coat to-day, father."

"Why should you? The other coat looks better."

"I know, but——"

"But what?"

"I—I—my other coat is—I can't wear it to-day," blundered the lad.

"Can't wear it? Why not? What is the matter?"

"I—I've torn it," declared Don, feeling his face burning.

"Torn it? That's too bad! How did it happen?"

"I caught the sleeve on a nail," fabricated the desperate lad, thus for the first time in his life telling his father an outright falsehood.

"Oh, well," smiled the doctor, thinking his son's confusion rose from his reluctance to confess that he had thus damaged his best coat, "accidents will happen, my boy. We all meet such misfortunes occasionally."

Don felt mean enough, and he regretted that he had thought of trying to hide the truth from his father, even though telling it might have led to a complete confession of his utter failure in the attempt to master his temper. His outraged conscience troubled and tortured him till he imagined guilt and shame must be written on his face so that all could see it and understand.

With this thought in his mind, he followed his father and aunt into the church, his face flushed and his eyes downcast. As he was about to pass through the second door, he distinctly heard these whispered words:

"There he is! Look at him!"

He lifted his eyes and saw a short distance away Dick Sterndale and Dolph Renwood, both gazing straight at him.

Scott's face had been red before, but now there was such a rush of blood to his head that it actually turned purple. Involuntarily, he half lifted his wounded hand which had wrested the betraying knife from his antagonist, but the bandaged fingers were hidden by a glove, which he had succeeded in wearing, for all the difficulty in drawing it on. Then he passed on into the church, but with the desire strong upon him to confront and accuse his foe then and there.

"He did it," said Sterndale, grimly, when Don had vanished. "His face gave him away."

"I don't like to think it of him even now," Renwood declared, in a low tone. "I don't like the fellow, but I didn't think he'd stoop to such a dirty trick."

"No more did I think so, but his nasty temper led him into it. He betrayed his guilt

plainly enough when he saw us.”

“What’ll you do?”

“Make him settle for the damage.”

“If he refuses—what then?”

“His father’ll have a chance to settle. Somebody must pay for last night’s work.”

Then they followed Don into the church.

To the doctor’s son it seemed that the sermon was aimed directly at him, and all through the discourse he sat with his cheeks alternately flushing and paling, looking neither to the right nor left. The text, taken from Revelations, was a body blow, causing the uncomfortable boy to start when it fell on his ears: “All liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.” The preacher was relentless in his denunciation of hypocrites and liars, so that Don was relieved to escape from the church when it was all over.

When he found himself alone at home, he sought to salve his wounded conscience and palliate his deception of his father by declaring to himself that he was not to blame for a falsehood that had been forced from him by such a combination of circumstances, and which he had told in order to avert the pain and distress which the truth might bring upon the doctor. The blame for this act he sought to shift upon his enemy, who had driven him into such a strait.

Not that Don had never before perpetrated a deception or uttered anything savoring of untruth, for, like the average boy, he was not perfect in this respect, but, up to this time, his intercourse with his father, whom he held in such deep affection, had been absolutely honest and truthful, for which reason the falsehood was like a poisoned arrow rankling in a wound.

“But I’ve got to keep it up, now that I’ve commenced it,” he told himself.

And thus it was that the first false step led to others, as almost unfailingly happens.

That afternoon Don sought to forget his troubles by reading, and for the purpose he resorted to one of Trowbridge’s most thrilling books, “Cudjo’s Cave.” Absorbed by the breathless flight of Penn, Virginia and Cudjo through the burning forest, he failed for some time to hear the whistled signal that came from beneath his window or the tiny pebbles that clinked against the panes.

At last, however, having reached the hair-raising climax of the chapter, where the fear-crazed horse, bearing the unknown rider, plunges crashing into the depths of the dark ravine, he paused to take a long breath and heard both the whistle and the rattle against the window.

Looking out, he discovered Leon Bentley below. A moment later the window was open and Leon was saying:

“Just going to give it up. Thought you must be asleep or dead. Come down.”

“Come up,” invited Don. “Father is out and Aunt Ella is lying down. I’ll let you in by the back door.”

His resolution to break with Bentley was forgotten, and, for the first time, he admitted the disreputable fellow to his home and his room.

CHAPTER XII.

WHO DID IT?

"Say, this is comfortable," remarked Leon, flinging himself upon the easiest chair and elevating his polished russet shoes to the top of a small table. "You've got a slick den here, though I don't like your pictures much, and I don't see what you want of so many books. It's a bother to read books, and the pictures in my room are of the dead game sort. Got 'em out of the sporting papers, you know. The walls are pretty near covered by pictures of prize-fighters, fast trotters and sporting men. Excuse me if I smoke. I'm dying for a whiff."

Without further words, he pulled out a package and selected a cigarette, which he coolly prepared and lighted. He was returning the package to his pocket, when Don held out a hand, saying:

"I believe I'll try one of those things just for fun."

Bentley let his feet fall from the top of the table to the floor, stared a moment at his companion, then handed over the cigarettes, laughing:

"That came near knocking me out. You were so set against cigarettes yesterday that——"

"You fancied I'd never change my mind. There is an old saying, 'it's only a fool who never changes his mind.'"

Don lighted one of the cigarettes, while Leon watched him with a sly, satisfied smile.

"You may not like the first one very much," said the inveterate smoker, "but you'll find they'll grow on ye, and you will like them more and more, till, after a while, you won't want to get along without them. I tell you they are great stuff."

With the lighting of that first cigarette, a reckless sensation of indifference stole over Don, and he began to feel that, considering the circumstances, he had not done anything worth worrying about in deceiving his father and telling him a falsehood. In a few moments he was telling himself that cigarettes truly were, as Leon had declared, soothing to the nerves.

"They're not so bad," admitted Don; "but I'll have to give this room a good airing, so aunt will not smell the smoke."

"And you better not smoke too much of the first one," Leon warned, craftily. "As you're not used to 'em, it might make your head feel queer. After a while, if you keep it up, you can smoke as many as you like without noticing it at all. In fact, one or two will be just no satisfaction; more of an aggravation."

"How long had you been outside?" asked the doctor's son.

"Ten minutes, anyhow. I wanted to have a talk with you. I'd come over last night after leaving the club, but I thought you'd be abed. I wanted to tell you about the nasty trick this fellow Renwood is playing on me. I knew he had it in for me, and I

tumbled in a minute when Sterndale proposed giving Harry Carter a trial in the line. I pinned him right down and asked him where he proposed trying Carter. When he said right or left tackle I knew what that meant, for Linton is solid as right tackle. If Carter shows up all right, I'm to be kicked out, and Carter goes in as left tackle. Renwood is at the bottom of it, the dirty cad!"

His companion's words brought a feeling of surprise to Don Scott, who immediately recalled the broken bit of conversation he had overheard the previous evening as he crouched behind some bushes directly after leaving the football field. Hearing Sterndale speaking at that time of giving Carter a trial on the eleven, he had felt certain the new man was to be given the position made vacant by his resignation from the team; but now Bentley's statement seemed to cast a new light on the captain's intention.

"Are you sure you're right, Bent?" asked the doctor's son, earnestly. "Perhaps they're not going to drop you; they may mean to give you another position."

"Not on your life! When I tumbled to the game, I just demanded to know what Sterndale meant to do, and I forced him to declare himself."

"How? What did he say?"

"Why, he said he'd keep me if Carter did not prove to be a better man. As if he thought I'd stand that!"

"What did you do?"

"I told him just what I thought about it. I gave him a piece of my mind, and don't you forget it! I told him I was done with his old football team the moment he dropped me off to give Carter or any other fellow a trial in my position. I tell you, I was mad! Then I got out and left them to do anything they liked. Now that you're not going on the team, Scott, I don't believe I care a rap about playing with that gang."

Leon made this final declaration in a manner which seemed to indicate that he regarded Don as his particular friend, for which reason, as Don had been treated shabbily, he was more than willing to withdraw from the eleven.

As he crouched behind the bushes near the football field, Don had heard Chatterton speak of somebody as being angry enough to do almost anything, and the listening lad then fancied the stammerer was referring to him; but now it seemed possible that quite another person had been the subject of the remark.

"I had a talk with Chatterton a while ago," Leon went on, "and I tried to pump him about Sterndale's intention in regard to me, but he pretended not to know what the fellow is going to do. But, say! he told me something that pretty near took my wind. You can't guess what happened last night."

"I won't try to guess. What did happen?"

"Somebody went into the dressing-room under the grand-stand and raised the dickens generally."

Don felt his heart give a great jump, but he tried to assume an appearance of calmness as he asked:

"Raised the dickens how? What did he do?"

"You know some of the fellows left their suits there, and the football was left there, too?"

"Yes."

"Well, somebody went in there and took a knife and slit the suits into ribbons and slashed the football all to pieces."

Don sprang to his feet with a cry, for Bentley's words solved a mystery that had puzzled him greatly, and now he knew why it was that the fellow detected by him in the dressing-room had fought so fiercely to escape without being recognized.

Leon stared in surprise at his companion, whose face flushed and paled and who seemed to be shaking with excitement.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Who did it?" panted Don. "Does Chatterton know? Who was sneak enough to do such a trick?"

"I asked Chat if he knew, and he winked and said they had found proofs enough to hang the fellow who did the job."

"What kind of proof?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He said the chap must have cut himself, for there was blood on the floor."

Don wondered if his visitor had observed his bandaged fingers; but, if so, Leon made no sign.

The doctor's son walked to the window and looked out. Having opened the window, he turned back, and there seemed to be a look of triumph on his dark face.

"Bentley," he said, "have you a suspicion who did that job?"

"Well, I've got a sneaking notion," answered Leon, with a foxy smile, as he lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Whom do you suspect?"

"I questioned Chatterton pretty closely," declared Bentley, wagging his head, "and I found out another fellow left the club-room directly after I did. It is my opinion that he's none too good to do such a trick, and I'll bet they'll find it out."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Somebody you and I love—I don't think."

"Renwood?"

"Sure thing."

To Bentley's surprise, his companion sat down, a sudden look of doubt and perplexity dawning on his face and growing swiftly.

"What reason have you to think Renwood would do such a thing?" questioned Don. "What could be his object?"

"I've heard something to-day that's given me an idea. Renwood is acquainted with Winston, the Harvard man, who is coaching Highland."

"What of that?"

"I've thought all the time that Renwood didn't care a snap whether Rockspur won or not, and now I'll bet my life he's working to have us lose to them."

"But I fail to see his object," declared Don. "Why should he want Rockspur to lose?"

"That may come out later. If he is a particular friend of this Winston, he may be playing into Winston's hands. Perhaps Winston wants to win a reputation as a coach; perhaps he's expecting to bet money on the game; perhaps a lot of things. Anyhow, I'll bet my pile that Renwood and Winston have it put up between them to down Rockspur."

Don shook his head. A short time before he had been eager to believe anything bad of Renwood; but, for all that, he was not satisfied with Bentley's explanation of Dolph's reasons for invading the dressing-room and destroying the football and suits.

"I can't see how such a trick would do him any good," averred the logical Don. "If he wants to make a lot of flub players out of the Rockspur crowd, so they will lose the game, I should think he could find a better way to carry out his purpose. To me it seems that the destruction of the suits and football was a piece of petty spite, and, much as I'd like to, I can't see any reason for such spite on the part of Renwood."

"Then you don't think he did it?" asked Bentley, in a disappointed way.

Don's eyes fell on something that lay upon the table, half concealed by a magazine, and he suddenly sprang to his feet once more, snatching up this object and crying:

"Yes, I believe he did the job, even though I can't understand why, and here in my hand is the proof against him!"

He displayed the handsome knife he had wrested from his antagonist of the previous night.

At sight of that knife Leon Bentley gave a start and turned pale.

CHAPTER XIII. DON ACCUSES RENWOOD.

Don could scarcely fail to observe his companion's strange agitation and pallor.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" he exclaimed, wonderingly.

"That knife!" gasped Leon. "Where did you get it?"

He snatched it from Don's hand and examined it closely, his fingers trembling a little, while his whole manner betrayed both astonishment and dismay.

"Have you ever seen that knife before?" questioned the dark-haired boy.

"I—I—why, I believe I have."

"When? Where?"

"Why, I—er—saw it last night."

"You did? Where?"

"In the club-room."

"Who had it?" cried Don, clutching Bentley fiercely by the shoulder.

"Don't!" begged the other lad, squirming and dropping his cigarette. "Great Cæsar! you hurt! Your fingers feel like iron!"

"Who had that knife?" Don again demanded. "If you saw it in the club-room, you must have seen it in the possession of some one. Who had it?"

"Why, it—it's Renwood's knife."

"How do you know? Did you see it in his possession?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, for I took it from him and examined it before all the other fellows. I told him I'd like to have a knife like that, and then I passed it back to him, and he took it. All the fellows saw me give it back to him," Leon concluded, impressively.

"That settles it!" grated the doctor's son, his eyes flashing and his face betraying triumphant satisfaction. "I'm glad they all saw this knife in that fellow's possession and that he claimed it as his own. Even though I cannot understand his motive for doing the dirty job in the dressing-room, there is no longer a doubt in my mind but he did it."

Bentley drew a long breath, looked wonderfully relieved, and a bit of color returned to his sallow cheeks. Had Don Scott been watching his visitor closely, he must have wondered somewhat at his manner.

"But how that knife came into your possession is more than I can understand," said Leon, picking up his half-smoked cigarette and looking at Don askance.

Then Scott told him the whole story of his adventure in the dressing-room the night before, and the other listened attentively, but with his eyes downcast, at times gnawing at his lips in a nervous manner.

"That beats the world!" he muttered, when the story was finished. "But I think it's a mighty unlucky thing that you turned up there last night, old man."

"Unlucky?" cried Don. "How is that? Didn't I catch the fellow right in the act?"

"Yes; but it might have been better if you had not caught him."

"I don't understand. How could it have been better?"

"Well, he—er—perhaps he might have—left a—a clew—there in the dressing-room," faltered Leon, lamely. "He might have dropped the knife, you know, and—er—forgotten it."

"Not at all likely! If I hadn't come on him just as I did, he'd done the job and got away without leaving a trace. No one could have sworn who did it, and any one else might have been suspected. Why, they might have suspected me!"

"I don't know but you're right," slowly admitted Bentley; "still, something tells me it would have been better if you hadn't run onto him."

"Why, you're daffy!" laughed Don, his eyes gleaming. "I have the fellow—have him foul!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Why, I'm going to expose him! I'm going to show him up to the boys! I'll show them what sort of a chap they have as coach for the eleven."

"That's all right," said Bentley; "but what if they don't believe your story?"

"They'll have to believe it! Here's the knife, and here are my fingers, cut in the struggle with him. More than that," he went on, striding quickly to the clothes-press, "here is my coat, with a slit from the shoulder to the elbow, just as he made it when he tried to stab me."

He held up the coat, and the visitor regarded it with no small amount of curiosity, whistling softly and observing:

"By gracious! he did come near carving you up."

"I believe he knew me!" Don savagely declared. "He must have recognized me."

"Oh, no! it was so dark in there that a fellow couldn't recognize any one—at least, you said it was," Leon hastily added.

"Still, I believe he knew me, and that was why he tried to cut me. I'll square the account with him! Wait till I show him up to-morrow!"

"Well, I hope you succeed," said Bentley, sincere in that wish, at least. "I think I'll be going. Your old man might come home, and I have a notion he doesn't like me."

Don did not object to the departure of his visitor, and, having lighted another

cigarette, Leon left, as he had entered, by the back door.

Don could scarcely wait for the following day, so eager was he to denounce Renwood. He pictured to himself the sensation his revelation would create, and in his mind he saw his enemy an outcast, scorned and taunted and shunned by the village lads.

It was barely eight o'clock the following morning when Don passed the fountain in the village square, being on his way to a grocery store to take an order for his aunt before starting for school. As he came out of the store, Dick Sterndale called to him from the opposite side of the street:

"Come over here, Scott, I want to see you."

"And you're the very fellow I'm looking for," said Don, promptly crossing over.

"I want you to come to the club-room for a short time, Scott," the captain of the eleven grimly declared, regarding Don in anything but a pleasant manner.

They climbed the stairs, Dick falling in behind.

"He means to give me a call-down for my talk to Renwood," thought the boy in advance, feeling in his pocket for the captured knife. "I'll make him change his tune in a hurry."

Reaching the club-rooms, they found Mayfair and Chatterton there, both of whom regarded Don coldly, not even nodding to him.

"Well, what do you want of me, Sterndale?" demanded the dark-haired lad, ignoring the others.

"I have a few questions to ask you," said Dick, ominously, closing the door behind them; "and it's best for you to tell the truth, too."

"I am not in the habit of lying!" flared the doctor's son, his face turning crimson; "and I won't take an insinuation of the sort from you or anybody else, Dick Sterndale! You want to be careful!"

He was scowling fiercely, but the captain of the eleven, regardless of his threatening manner, sharply asked:

"Where did you go directly after leaving this room last night, Scott?"

"I don't know that it's any of your business," retorted Don, "but I don't mind telling you. I went home."

"Did you remain there?"

A sudden sensation of danger assailed Don, and his eyes swiftly scanned the faces of Sterndale and his companions. He discovered that he was being regarded with cold scorn, and an intimation of their thoughts fell upon him.

"Look here, Sterndale," he said, quickly, turning to the captain, "if you have anything to say to me, just say it at once, without beating round the bush. What are you driving at?"

From behind the door the captain took down three football suits that had been cut and slashed into ribbons, and he kicked out before Don the remains of a football which had been destroyed in a similar manner.

"Do you know anything about this job?" asked Dick, sternly and accusingly.

"Yes!"

They were somewhat surprised by Don's answer, and Chatterton whispered to Mayfair:

"Bub-bub-by Jinks! he's gug-going to own up!"

"Oh, you do?" exclaimed Sterndale. "Well, what do you know about it?"

"I know who did it," declared Don.

"No doubt about that," muttered Mayfair.

"Who was it?" demanded Dick, watching Scott closely.

Just then footsteps sounded outside and the door opened.

"That fellow there!" rang out Don's clear voice, as his finger was pointed accusingly at Dolph Renwood, who stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XIV. CHARGE AND COUNTERCHARGE.

Don's bold accusation astounded those who heard it, for it was wholly unexpected. Renwood seemed amazed, Mayfair and Chatterton sprang to their feet, and Sterndale uttered an exclamation.

"He's the sneak who did the dirty work!" cried the doctor's son. "He can't deny it! He slashed those suits and destroyed that football!"

"You're a liar!" retorted Dolph, quick as a flash.

It was well that Sterndale was between them instantly, else Don might have broken his promise to Renwood's sister. Finding Dick there, he restrained himself, laughed harshly and triumphantly, and said:

"That's all right; I can afford to take it off you just now. In short order I'll show you up as both a liar and a sneak. You followed me from this room last night, and you can't deny that."

"I don't wish to deny it. What if I did?" said Dolph.

"From here you went directly to the dressing-room under the grand-stand, where you used your handsome pearl-handled knife to slash these suits and cut up the football. Why you did such a low, sneaking trick is more than I can understand, unless you were possessed by the Old Boy himself."

Renwood laughed derisively.

"You have more gall than any fellow I ever saw!" he declared. "I compliment you on your nerve, Mr. Scott!"

"How do you know he had such a thing as a pearl-handled knife?" asked Sterndale.

"That knife slashed the sleeve of my best coat from shoulder to elbow," answered Don. "That knife cut these fingers," and he displayed his bandaged digits. "That knife is in my possession!"

With the final words, he took the knife from his pocket and held it up before them all, causing every one of them to utter exclamations of surprise.

"Let him deny that it is his knife if he can!" challenged the dark-haired lad.

"I haven't the least notion of denying it," said Dolph, immediately. "It is my knife, lost last Saturday night."

"Yes, lost in the struggle with me in the dressing-room, where I caught you just after you had finished your dirty work of cutting up the football and the suits. I left this suit of clothes I am wearing there Saturday afternoon, and I went up for it that night, after I was here in this room. I caught you there, and you fought like a fiend to escape without being recognized. When I had you down and was choking you into submission, you tried to stab me with the knife, and you did cut

my shoulder a bit, but I got hold of your hand and took the knife from you. Here it is, and it is proof that you are the fellow I found in the dressing-room."

Don seemed to fancy that he had fastened the deed on Renwood, and his air was one of satisfied triumph; but he was surprised to observe that Dolph showed neither confusion nor shame. Instead, the city youth laughed again, saying:

"That's a very clever fairy story, Scott, but you can't make anybody believe it."

"Hardly," agreed Mayfair. "It will not go down."

"Not mum-much!" scoffed Chatterton.

"If you had not confessed being in the dressing-room Saturday night," said Sterndale, regarding Don with mingled anger and aversion, "we had sufficient evidence to show you were there. We found this in the dressing-room." He held up to view Don's favorite red necktie.

"And this just outside the gate to the field," put in Mayfair, displaying a blood-stained handkerchief. "It has your monogram on it, Scott."

"Both necktie and handkerchief are mine," declared Don, without hesitation. "The necktie was torn off in the struggle. I had the handkerchief wrapped about my fingers, but lost it on the way home."

"Sus-sus-slick yarn," commented Danny, while the others, with the exception of Sterndale, smiled scornfully.

Then, for the first time, Don realized that his words had fallen on unbelieving ears and his attempt to expose the villainy of Renwood was a complete failure. More than that, it was plain to him that circumstantial evidence had convinced these fellows that he was the dastardly sneak who had destroyed the football and ruined the suits.

For a moment he turned pale; then all the fury of his fiery nature burst forth, and he raved against them like a person bereft of reason. His eyes glared and a white froth formed on his lips, while he shook all over. It seemed that in his senseless rage he would attack them all, but he did not.

The boys were awed by the spectacle, though Sterndale remained grave and firm, his face expressing no emotion.

"Fools!" snarled Don. "You're blind! Think I tore off my own necktie and left it behind so you might know I'd been there? How do you suppose I came into possession of that fellow's knife unless I obtained it just as I've stated?"

"That was easy," declared Renwood himself. "I had the knife Saturday evening just before you entered this room, and I was sitting on that table over there. The knife was beside me when you came in and walked over to the table; when you left this room the knife was gone."

"That's right," nodded Mayfair. "We all hunted for it and couldn't find it."

"And now we nun-nun-know why we couldn't fuf-fuf-find it," asserted

Chatterton, wisely.

“So you think I stole it?” grated the dark-eyed lad, showing his white teeth. “All right, think so, if you like! What do I care! You’re a lot of fools, and you’ll find it out before you are done with Renwood. As for him, he had better look out for me! I know he did the sneaking work Saturday night, and I will prove it against him so there will be no way for him to squirm out of it! Anyhow, I’ll fix him, and you may bet your lives on that!”

Don flung the handsome pearl-handled knife on the floor and started to walk from the room, Renwood having left the doorway free; but Dick Sterndale blocked his passage, putting out a strong hand to stop him.

“Wait, Scott,” said the captain of the eleven, grimly. “When are you going to pay for that football and those suits?”

The lips of the doctor’s son curled with scorn.

“When?” he cried. “Never!”

“Oh, yes, you will,” said Dick, quietly.

“If I do, I hope I may drop dead the next instant!” panted Don.

“If you do not,” warned the handsome fellow who blocked his path, “your father will.”

“What do you mean? You——”

“If you refuse to pay, I shall go to your father, tell him the whole story and demand payment from him.”

Don caught his breath, and it seemed that he would assault the captain then and there; but Sterndale showed no wavering nor alarm, and the attack did not come.

“Go ahead!” grated the dark-eyed lad. “Go to my father, if you like! You can’t drive me that way to pay for damage I never did! I’ll die before I’ll pay one cent!”

It was plain enough that he meant it then, but Dick said:

“Perhaps you will change your mind after you think it over. I’ll give you till to-night. If you do not agree to pay by that time, I’ll call on your father.”

He stepped aside, and the suspected youth walked to the door, where he turned for a last desperate fling at his accusers. His hands were clenched, his face flushed and his teeth showing as he looked back over his shoulder.

“You’re a soft crowd!” he sneered, with curling lips. “If you were not, you wouldn’t be ready to get down and crawl for a common city cad. Because his father has some money and he is from Boston, you are ready to take anything off him and believe any lie he tells. Oh, you make me sick!”

Then he went out.

CHAPTER XV. IN THE AUTUMN WOODS.

Don did not attend school that day, for he felt that he could not study, and he wished to be alone. He set out toward the academy, it is true, but kept on, paying no heed to the boys and girls who were gathered in groups about the steps and grounds of the white school building, passed the fenced-in football field, and struck off by a path that led toward the picnic grove in the vicinity of High Bluff.

The fields were showing brown in spots, while here and there a tree was tinted with crimson and gold, the gorgeous banners of advancing autumn. The sky was blue and cloudless, the air clear and still, transmitting distant sounds with a softened distinctness that was agreeable to the ear, while over all seemed to hang the delightful, dreamy languor that is typical of this season in the country.

Crickets were chirping merrily in the brown grass beside the path that led the feet of the unhappy boy toward the picnic grove, but he heard them not, for in his heart there was a tumult that drowned all other sounds. From a farm-yard far across the unrippled harbor sounded the crowing of a cock, mellowed by the distance, but the music of the sound did not seem to reach Don's ears.

In the heart of the grove he found a mossy bed, upon which he threw himself, giving way to the bitterest reflections. He lay there while the forenoon slipped away. Squirrels chattered in various parts of the grove. A mischievous-looking little chipmunk perched on a stub a few feet away and stared at the reclining lad, observing in an inquiring manner: "Kuk? Kuk? Kuk?" A bluejay lighted on a branch high above him, cocked its tufted head to one side, and shrilly screamed: "Wake up! Get up! Wake up! Come on!" Then, as the lad stirred, he shot away like a blue arrow from a bow, wildly shrieking: "Phe-phay! Phe-phay!"

These sights and sounds did not interrupt the tumultuous flow of the boy's thoughts, and he was not aroused till the whistles of the mills far across the river told him that the noon hour had arrived. Then he sprang to his feet and hurried from the grove, making great haste to get back to the village.

There was no one in the vicinity of the academy to observe him as he reached it and scudded past, but he found his aunt "sputtering" when he reached home.

"Goodness sakes! where have you been?" she impatiently exclaimed. "The other scholars went past twenty minutes ago, and I had dinner all ready then. Everything will be stone-cold."

"I—I staid behind," said Don.

"What for?" she questioned, curiously. "Was it something about your lessons that kept ye?"

And he answered: "Yes." Having taken the first step by deceiving his father and telling him a falsehood, he was surprised to find how readily this untruth came from his lips.

The doctor ate dinner with them, but his mind seemed to be occupied, so that he talked very little, which was decidedly to Don's satisfaction.

Leon Bentley was loitering past the house when Don came out, and he called:

"Hello, Scott, old man! Where were you this forenoon? Didn't see you at school."

"Shut up, you idiot!" hissed Don, hurrying down the steps and out to the sidewalk. "What do you want to come round shouting like that for?"

"Oh, ho!" grinned Leon. "I catch on! Don't want your old man to know, eh? Played hookey, did you?"

"I didn't feel like going to school to-day, and so I'm not going."

"Then you mean to stay out this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Well, say, I'm with you. Where'll we go?"

Don was not at all pleased, for he did not desire Leon's company; but that made no difference to Leon, and, discovering his companion was determined to hang on like a leech, the doctor's son said:

"I'm going anywhere out of the village. I feel like getting off by myself."

"Then, say, let's go over into the Powder Mill Woods. I'll get my rifle and we can have some fun popping at squirrels and birds. We might strike some partridges. What do you say?"

"I'd as lief go there as anywhere, but I don't care about tramping all the way round by the road."

"We'll get a boat down by Nutt's Wharf and row over. Let's turn round and go back for my rifle."

"I'm not going back, for we'll meet somebody on the way to the academy."

"Then I tell you what, you just go straight to the wharf, and I'll be along as soon as I can get that rifle. Will you do that? Will you go to the wharf and wait for me there?"

"Yes."

There was something about Don's manner of saying this that made Leon suspicious, and he quickly demanded:

"Do you mean it? Will you really wait for me at the wharf?"

Instantly the dark-eyed lad blazed forth:

"What do you take me for? Do you think I'm a liar, same as all the others think? Didn't I say I'd be there?"

"Yes, but I——"

"Well, get your old rifle and come along! Hurry up about it, too!"

"All right," breathed Leon, hastily. "I'll hustle, you bet."

He turned and ran down the street, while Don sullenly walked on, in anything but a pleasant mood. At the first corner, he turned to the left and made for the shore, considering himself lucky when he left the main streets of the village without meeting any of the scholars besides Bentley.

When Leon reached Nutt's Wharf, he found Don sitting on one of the old spiles, gazing moodily down into the water that was eddying round the barnacle-encrusted timbers. Hearing Bentley approaching, Don looked up, a frown still on his face.

"Well, where's your rifle?" he asked. "Couldn't you get it?"

"Sure thing," grinned Leon, unbuttoning his coat and displaying a small rifle with a detachable stock. "I kept it out of sight by tucking it under there. Just as well, for I ran into some of the fellows, and they would have asked questions if they'd seen it."

"Now, where's your boat?" demanded Scott.

"We'll take Jeff Tyler's old dory. I know where he hides the oars."

"Did you ask Jeff for her?"

"What's the use of asking?" chuckled Bentley. "I've used her more than once, and I never asked yet."

"Jeff might not like it if he knew."

"What do we care? He'll never know, for he's at work over in Lobsterville. Come on."

Don followed Leon, who drew out the oars from their place of concealment beneath some old timbers piled at one end of the wharf, and then led the way round to the tagging, slimy steps that enabled them to reach the dory. Don entered the boat first, Leon casting off the line and springing in a moment later.

"We'd better not pull straight across," said the doctor's son. "There goes the academy bell. We might be seen, so let's pull up the shore to Duffy's Nose and keep under the land till after school begins."

"All right," said Leon. "Go ahead. I've got to take care of this rifle."

He made a pretense of disposing of the rifle, while Don took the oars and rowed away up the shore. Bentley lighted a cigarette and found a comfortable position in the stern of the dory.

"This is great stuff," he nodded, with satisfaction. "It's a corking day. A fellow's a fool to mope away his time in school on such a day as this. Say, you can't guess what the fellows said about you because you failed to show up this forenoon."

"I don't give a continental what they said!" snapped Don.

"They said you were afraid," grinned Leon, exhaling a great breath of thin, blue smoke. "You stirred up a dickens of a mess when you accused Renwood of doing that job; but, say, didn't he come back at you with both feet! That must have

jarred you some.”

Don had stopped rowing, and his face showed how his companion’s words had aroused him.

“So they say I’m afraid?” he muttered, bitterly. “I didn’t think about that. If I had thought—— But what do I care what they say!”

“Of course you don’t care, old man. I’m your friend, and I’ll stick by you. If the whole town says you did that trick, I’ll never believe it. I know better.”

Leon said this with such evident earnestness that the unfortunate youth could not help feeling gratitude and showing it.

“Thank you, Bent,” he said, his voice being a trifle husky despite himself. “I’m glad to hear you say that, anyhow. I won’t forget it, either.”

“I don’t believe you are the kind to forget easily,” asserted the crafty Leon. “It wouldn’t be like you to forget that I was the only one to stand by you and believe in you when almost everybody turned against you.”

“No, I do not forget easily, and I’ll not forget Dolph Renwood! My turn will come, and I’ll soak him when it does! I suppose they were saying all manner of nasty things about me?”

“Rather. They said you put up a big bluff, but Sterndale was sure you’d come round and cave in before night.”

“He never made a bigger mistake in his life.”

“But he says he’s going to apply to your father for pay for the football and suits if you don’t fork over. You don’t want him to do that, do you?”

“I don’t want him to, but I’ll never pay to keep him from doing it. Not in a million years! If he thinks I will, he’ll find he’s awfully mistaken.”

Don was rowing again, and he pulled the boat up under the shelter of the high promontory known as Duffy’s Nose, where they lingered till they knew the afternoon session at the academy had begun. Then away across the harbor the boat went, with Scott laboring at the oars and Bentley lazily smoking in the stern. Into Crab Inlet they steered, pulling up as far as the bridge across Powder Mill Creek. Having tied the dory beneath the bridge, where it would remain hidden from view, they set off on foot toward the Old Powder Mill.

Leon put his rifle together and loaded it, having brought along a supply of cartridges, and began to look round for something to shoot.

“I wouldn’t mind taking a shot at a sheep or a cow, just for fun,” he grinned. “It would be sport just to wing somebody’s old cow enough to make her run and kick up.”

“I fail to see where the fun would come in,” growled Don.

At the Powder Mill Dam, where the water came rippling over in a shining sheet, they lingered a while, and Bentley fired at a swimming fish, but did not touch it.

Don would have been content to remain there longer, but his companion was eager to plunge into the woods and discover something to shoot.

The chatter of a squirrel caused Leon to hurry forward eagerly. They came in sight of the squirrel after a time, a handsome fellow, with a large, bushy tail, and Bentley began shooting, while Don looked on. After Leon had fired four times, the squirrel scampered off and disappeared, quite unharmed.

"Well, I have my doubts about your being able to hit a cow unless you put the muzzle of the rifle against her," said Don.

Leon flushed, chagrined at his ill success.

"It's a pretty good trick to hit a little object like a squirrel with this kind of a rifle," he declared. "I bet you can't do it."

"I don't see the fun in shooting squirrels, anyway," retorted Don.

"Oh, you don't?" grinned Bentley, tauntingly. "That's because you know you can't hit one. You don't dare to try."

He continued to talk in this manner till they came upon another squirrel, when he held out the rifle and invited Don to show what he could do.

"Get out!" retorted the dark-eyed lad. "I don't want to shoot him. See how handsome he looks, perched on that limb with his tail up over his back."

Leon sneered and scoffed, persisting that Don did not wish to shoot because he knew he could not hit the squirrel, till, with an angry exclamation, the doctor's son caught the rifle from his companion's hand, took careful aim and fired.

From the limb an object dropped toward the ground, which it struck with a sodden plump.

"You got him!" shouted Leon. "Why, you're a crackajack!"

He ran forward, and Don followed slowly with the rifle, a strange look on his face. There was a rustling beneath the tree, and Bentley made a forward dive, crying:

"Great smoke! he's trying to get away! You broke his back!"

The other boy stood still, his eyes following the crippled squirrel that was trying to drag itself away to a place of concealment. Leon headed off the wretched little creature and began poking it about with a stick he had picked up.

"Stop that!" snarled Don, springing at his companion, with his eyes blazing. "Why don't you kill him? Can't you see he's suffering?"

Then he caught the stick from Leon's hand and struck the squirrel till the tiny animal lay motionless and dead at his feet. This done, Don straightened up and stood staring down at the work of his hand, his lips quivering queerly, while something seemed to swell up in his throat and almost choke him.

"Hoop-la!" shouted the other lad. "You're a mighty hunter and a dead shot, but I'll bet you a quarter you miss the next one you shoot at."

"Take your old rifle!" palpitated Don, thrusting the weapon at Leon. "I wouldn't shoot at another one for fifty dollars!"

"Why, it's sport!" laughed Leon. "That's what we came over here for."

"It's not sport for me, and I didn't come here for anything of the kind. I'm going back to the dam."

"Not now? Why, we're going to hunt through the woods for partridges."

"You may go where you like," said Don, turning away. "When you get ready to go home, you'll find me down by the dam."

His thin lips curling, Leon stared after Don, who talked swiftly away. Bentley scornfully muttered:

"He's got a soft spot about him, after all, or he'd not act that way over a common squirrel."

Alone by the dam, Don lingered in the sunshine, listening to the plashing water and the rustling whispers of the wind amid the trees. His face, that had been hard and angry, was sad and shaded with sincere regret.

CHAPTER XVI. TEMPTER AND TEMPTED.

"What kind of an excuse are you going to make for being absent from school?" asked Leon, as they were pulling homeward across the harbor late that afternoon.

"I don't know," answered Don, shortly.

"You'll have to tell something."

"Yes."

"Why don't you do same as I do?"

"How is that?"

"Why, I just write an excuse for myself and take it to old Alden. He never knows the difference."

"I should think he could tell your writing."

"Not much! I imitate the old gent's writing, and I bet it would fool the old gent himself. Then I put his name to it, and everything is all slick."

"I can't do that," said Don.

"I might do it for yer, if I had a sample of your old man's penmanship. It would be dead easy."

"I wouldn't like to do anything like that."

"It's a blamed sight better than being pulled over the coals for playing hookey, I tell you. Tell you what, I'll come round this evening and whistle out back of your house, and you can let me in, same as you did yesterday. Then, if you want me to, and you can find something your governor has written, I'll fix you up an excuse."

"You needn't bother yourself. I shan't want anything of the kind."

"All right," grinned Leon; "just as you say, old man. But don't give me away, so your dad will report that you were out with me."

"Don't be afraid of that."

Down past Duffy's Nose they slipped, creeping along the shore toward Nutt's Wharf, the oars clanking in the rowlocks. Seeing no one in the vicinity of the wharf, they pulled up to the steps and made the dory fast.

"Bring the oars," directed Leon, as, with the rifle buttoned under his coat, he sprang out and started up the steps.

"Come back and get the oars, if you want them," came sharply from Don. "I've done the rowing, and now you may take care of the old oars, or they'll stay in the boat."

Leon came back and took them as Scott passed them out, observing:

"You're in a jolly good temper! Any one 'd never suspect you'd been playing

hookey and having a good time.”

“Well, I haven’t been having a good time,” muttered the doctor’s son, as he followed his companion up the steps.

He did not wait for Leon, but at once set off toward home. As he reached the corner of Academy street, he met Sterndale, who was coming down from the football field.

“One moment, Scott,” said Dick, stopping him. “I want to know if you mean to pony up for that football and those suits.”

“If I do,” flared Don, his face flaming red, “I hope I’ll be struck by lightning!”

“You’d better,” threatened the captain, grimly, “if you don’t want me to go to your father at once.”

“Go to him, and be hanged! You can’t make me pay for damage I didn’t do, Sterndale, and I didn’t do that piece of dirty work.”

Dick’s eyes seemed trying to read his thoughts, as if they would probe his very soul. With indignation, scorn and defiance in his look, Don met his gaze squarely.

“All right, Scott,” said the big fellow, after a few moments. “I did hope you would be reasonable, and you’ll have no one but yourself to blame if your father learns everything.”

Not a word in return for these did Don deign to speak, but again went onward toward home, leaving Sterndale staring after him in mingled anger and perplexity.

It was not necessary for Don to make excuses for arriving home late, as he was in time for supper. He found his father in a particularly agreeable humor, and he was forced to simulate good nature himself, although it was a difficult and repugnant task.

“Well, my boy,” said the doctor, sipping his tea, “how have things gone with you to-day?”

“Pretty well,” was the somewhat hesitating answer.

“He had to stay behind at noon on account of his studies,” put in Don’s aunt. “That’s what made dinner late. I’m afraid he’s studying too hard, Lyman.”

“Nonsense,” laughed Dr. Scott. “He likes outdoor sports too well to let study do him any damage. He’s one of the shining lights of the great Rockspur football team, and I expect he’ll make a record to be proud of when the eleven meets Highland.”

Don’s eyes were fastened on his plate, and he felt his face beginning to burn.

“They do say that football is an awful game, Lyman,” anxiously said Aunt Ella. “And I’ve read in the papers about how many players get hurt at it every year. Now, if Don should be killed——”

“There is not much danger of that,” assured the doctor, still laughing. “He is

training regularly, and he will be in good condition for the game. A boy who studies hard in school should be permitted to balance it up by good, healthy sport out of school, and there is seldom any danger that he will hurt himself."

"But it was different when we were young—it was different then," sighed the good woman, pouring another cup of tea. "Times have changed, Lyman."

"I think so," nodded Don's father, "for the better. Don didn't miss a day at school last term, and, unless he is ill, I do not expect him to miss a day this term. Now, a lad who sticks to his studies like that deserves to be indulged in his ambitions for athletic games that will build up his body and strengthen him physically. If I find an opportunity, I shall attend the first football game in Rockspur, and so encourage the eleven by my presence."

Don was feeling decidedly mean and wretched when he left the table. Once during the conversation he had sought to summon courage to confess about remaining out of school that day, but the talk flowed on and his resolution weakened. The opportunity passed; after that he could not bring himself to bluntly declare the truth.

"Anyhow, he'll find out about it soon enough," thought the miserable lad. "Sterndale will come round and give the whole thing away."

But the evening passed on and Sterndale did not appear. In his room, after darkness had fallen, Don tried to read; but he found Henty dull, Optic tame, Alger insipid, and not even that master of all writers for youth, Trowbridge, could hold his attention and chain his restless mind.

At last he heard a sound that caused him to start up. It was a soft, peculiar whistle beneath his window, and he knew Bentley had arrived.

For some moments Don stood irresolute, then, as the whistle was repeated, he slipped down the back stairs and admitted Leon to the house.

"Well," said the visitor, bringing out cigarettes the moment they were in Don's room and the door was closed, "you're dead lucky, old man, and don't you forget it."

"Lucky?" sneered the doctor's son, derisively. "Well, I'd like to know how! I think I'm just about the unluckiest fellow on the face of the earth."

"I don't suppose you know anything about it," said Leon, having struck a match and lighted a cigarette, "but Sterndale's wilted."

"Wilted? In what way?"

"He's backed down; he ain't going to tackle your old man to make him pay for the football and suits."

"How do you know?" gasped Don, in astonishment.

"Got it straight from Chatterton. I can always pump him. He says Sterndale talked it over with the fellows. Most of them wanted to carry the thing through, but Dick said no, and he agreed to pay the damage himself. You know, he always has

his own way, and so that settled it.”

Don drew a deep breath and sat down, feeling that some of the load had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Have a smoke,” invited Leon, grinning. “It will soothe you.”

Don took a cigarette and lighted it.

For a long time the boys sat and chatted in low tones. Don told how his father fancied he was still on the eleven, and how he had failed to confess about playing hookey.

“I don’t know how you’re going to keep the old man from finding out you’re not on the eleven,” said Leon, “but he needn’t know that you hooked away from school. All you have to do is to get me some paper and a sample of his writing. I’ll fix it. Just let me show you what I can do. You don’t have to carry the excuse if you don’t want to, you know.”

So Don went softly down the carpeted front stairs, discovered his father was not in his office, slipped in and took an old letter and some paper from the open desk, and scudded noiselessly back to the room where his tempter was smoking his fifth cigarette.

“Well, this is all right,” chuckled Bentley, as he prepared to write at Don’s desk. “You’ve brought some of the doctor’s letter paper, with his name and office hours printed at the top. Why, with that, and this letter to copy from, I can write an excuse that would fool the greatest handwriting expert in the country. I’ll have to practice a little and get on to the style of your dad’s chirography.”

The doctor’s son watched Leon imitating the formation of the letters and the general style of Dr. Scott’s handwriting, and then, after a while, saw the visitor slowly and carefully write out on one of the sheets of letter paper an excuse for Don’s absence from school signing it with the doctor’s name.

“There,” said the youthful rascal, surveying with great pride his handiwork. “I rather think that will do. Bad headache, stomach out of order, feverish symptoms, thought it best to let you remain away from school. Isn’t that a bird, old man?”

“It’s very clever,” admitted Don, “but you had better take care what you do in this line. Your skill in imitating the writing of other persons may get you into trouble some day.”

“Get out! I’m not a fool! Take that to old Alden to-morrow, and he’ll accept it without a word. That’ll keep your old gent from finding out anything now, and something may prevent him from taking in any of the games, so he won’t know you’re not on the eleven. It’s best not to hurt his feelings by telling him everything. I reckon I’d better be skipping out.”

When Leon was gone, Don picked up the forged excuse and looked it over critically.

“It would fool me, that’s certain,” he muttered. “The imitation of father’s writing is perfect. But I can’t carry this to Professor Alden.”

He took hold of it, as if intending to tear it up, but hesitated, paused, wavered, then laid it down on the desk.

The following day, he took it to school and gave it to the professor.

CHAPTER XVII. THE TACKLING MACHINE.

Even without a football, Renwood succeeded in getting some profitable practice out of the eleven. Early on Monday morning he went to a certain carpenter's shop in the village and placed before the proprietor the plan of a somewhat novel arrangement, consisting of two upright timbers, with guy-ropes and pullies and running lines.

"It's rather out of my line to make anything of the sort," said the carpenter; "but I guess I can do it if I can git Enos Berry, the sail-maker, to help me. He knows more about splicin' ropes and riggin' up tackle than anybody round here. If I had anything else to do, I wouldn't touch it, but I'll see what can be done."

"I want it all done by to-night," said Dolph. "We must have it to-night, and it must be set up on the field."

"Well, I don't agree to have anything to do with your dummy and weight."

"I have those over home, and I'll send for father to have them brought here. I'll come in at noon and see how you're getting along. By that time I ought to be able to show you just how to fix it so it will work."

At noon he visited the shop and found the two men had progressed in a most satisfactory way with the work, although they were a trifle foggy in regard to the manner in which the machine was operated. Dolph carefully and fully explained this to them, and gave them some final instructions, departing in high spirits.

But, to his disappointment, when school was over that afternoon, instead of finding the arrangement set up on the football field, as he had hoped it would be, it was not completed, another complication having arisen. So Renwood was not on hand when the boys gathered after supper for such practice as they could obtain without a ball, and Sterndale was obliged to do what he could unaided by the coach. This sort of work was very unsatisfactory, and after a time the boys gave it up and left the field, all of them wondering what had become of Dolph.

The field had not been deserted long when Renwood appeared upon it, accompanied by the men he had employed, and there they labored till nearly dark.

Almost all the members of the eleven were in the club-rooms when Renwood appeared there.

"Come on, fellows!" he cried. "I have something to show you."

"Where?" demanded several.

"What is it?" asked others.

"You'll all find out if you follow me," answered the coach, mysteriously.

"Is it fur?" yawned Thad Boland, wearily.

"No, it isn't fur that I'm going to show you," laughed Renwood. "What are you looking for—a bearskin coat?"

"I mean is it fur off," explained Old Lightning. "'Cause I'm too tired to walk fur."

"You're alwus tired," asserted Jotham Sprout. "You was born that way."

"Don't try to be funny, Bubble," advised Thad; "for when you try to be, you ain't funny at all. Sometimes, when you don't mean to be, you're really funny."

"Well, are you coming?" demanded Renwood. "If you want to see it to-night you'll have to hustle, or it will be too dark."

"What is it?" was again asked.

"Something worth seeing," was his mysterious assertion, which aroused their curiosity, and he soon had them following him down the stairs, even Old Lightning lumbering along grumbly and wearily in the rear.

Straight to the field he led them, persistently refusing to enlighten them on the way.

"You'll find out what it is when you see it," he said.

On the way they picked up Danny Chatterton, who had been talking with Leon Bentley.

"Bent is sore as bub-bub-blazes," declared Danny. "He says Sus-Sterndale's gettin' to be an old wo-woman, for he lets somebub-bub-body else ru-run the eleven and ch-changes his mind about mum-making Scott's father pup-pup-pup-pay for the fuf-football and suits. He sus-says he'd ha-ha-had to pay if he'd done it, and he thinks Sus-Sterndale ought to bub-bub-back up his threat to gug-go to Scott's fuf-father."

"I wouldn't have too much to say to that fellow, Chat," advised Dick. "You'll be just as well off if you keep away from him."

When the football field was reached, Renwood led them through the gate. It was already quite dark, and rapidly getting darker.

"Look there!" he said, with an outward fling of his arm.

They looked, and what they saw caused some of them to utter exclamations of astonishment, not unmingled with alarm. Before their eyes, dimly seen through the gloom, something dangled in the air. And that something very much resembled a human being, hung by the neck, with its feet lifted just clear of the ground!

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Rob Linton.

"Pwhat is it, Oi dunno?" gasped Dennis Murphy.

"A mum-mum-mum-man!" fluttered Chatterton. "Hu-hung up by the nun-neck! Oh, gug-ginger!" His teeth began to chatter and he backed away.

"It does look like a man," admitted Water Mayfair.

Renwood burst out laughing, then suddenly ran forward, flung himself at the dangling object, clutched it with his arms and came down to the ground with it immediately.

“Fair tackle!” laughed Sterndale. “Boys, I know what it is. I’ve heard of them. It’s a tackling machine.”

“You’ve hit it,” acknowledged Renwood, getting up, whereupon the human-looking object that he had dragged down rose like a thing of life and once more dangled upright in the air, bobbing slightly, as if dancing on nothing. “I’ve had this put up so that I may teach you fellows how to tackle correctly without getting you all bruised and battered and sore in the last few days before the game.”

“Oi breathe again!” murmured Murphy, in great relief. “Oi wur about to take to me heels an’ run fer it.”

“Run for it!” gurgled Jotham Sprout. “By smoke! I was just getting ready to run the other way.”

The boys went forward and examined the tackling machine with great interest. They found two upright timbers had been erected about twenty feet apart, being connected by a strong rope from the top of one timber to the top of the other, and held in place by guy-ropes attached to stout pins that were driven into the ground. On the connecting rope ran a pulley-truck with an iron hook that held another and smaller block-pulley, through which passed the rope that suspended at one end the dummy to be tackled and at the other end the weight that lifted the dummy clear of the ground. This weight was arranged to drop just low enough to lift the dummy to the proper distance and then stop. When the dummy was tackled and brought down, the weight went up, the rope running through the lower and smaller block. To the upper block a second rope was made fast, running to small pulleys attached to the upright timbers a few inches from the top, so that by pulling on either end of this rope the dummy could be set in motion, drawn along swiftly, stopped suddenly, and caused to retreat in opposite direction. The dummy was a stout, heavy figure, made to represent a man dressed in a padded football suit, but having neither arms nor feet.

All this was very interesting, and the boys poured out their questions in single shots, scattering fires and volleys, so that it was not possible for Dolph to immediately answer them; but he explained that the dummy was one he had brought with him from Boston, having been purchased for him by his father, and the machine in a general way resembled the one invented by Captain Garret Cochran, of the Princeton University Football Team.

Then they were eager to try it.

“Clear the road!” bellowed Jotham Sprout, bracing himself at a distance of about twenty feet and pulling his cap down over his fat head. “I’m going to show ye how to tackle the old thing. Just watch me do it.”

Renwood immediately caught hold of one end of the rope that drew the dummy along, while the boys stood aside to witness the fat lad's tackle. Jotham charged furiously and flung himself at the dummy with outstretched arms, but Dolph gave a sharp pull on the rope, and the figure moved aside, so that Sprout clutched nothing but empty air, and crashed to the ground like a fallen elephant, his breath being driven from his body in a great grunt of astonishment.

The boys shouted with laughter, while Jotham sat up and stared in disgust at the swaying dummy, wheezing:

"The blamed thing dodged!"

"Oh, Bubble!" shouted Mayfair. "It's a wonder you didn't burst when you struck the ground. Ha! ha! ha!"

"He! he! he!" mocked Jotham, sourly. "What made the hanged old thing do that?"

"That's what it's for," asserted Renwood. "What would it be good for if it always hung still and let you tackle? A running man will dodge you if he can, and the dummy is made to do the same thing. That is so you'll tackle quick and sure, and be on the watch for any move the other fellow may try to make."

"Well, it wasn't fair that time, for I warn't ready for it to jump like that," said Bubble, heavily rising to his feet.

"Try it again," urged several.

"Excuse me!" Jotham protested. "I guess I'll look on and see some of the rest of ye try it."

"Hurroo!" cried Dennis Murphy, prancing off and spitting on his hands. "Oi'll be afther havin' a go at it, an' let's see thot bag av sawdust dodge me."

"All right," said Renwood. "Go ahead, Murphy."

Dennis made a dash at the dummy, expecting Dolph would give it another pull in the same direction as before, but Sterndale had slipped up and taken hold of the other end of the rope, and, at the critical moment, the figure seemed to spring the other way. The result was that the Irish youth miscalculated entirely and went down, but he came up from the ground as if he had been thrown erect by springs.

"Howld on!" he ejaculated, whirling about and glaring at the object, while the amused lads shouted again. "Is it backward ye dodge, Oi dunno? Sure, ye're a shlick crayther, av Oi ivver saw wan, but Oi'll down yez av it takes me all noight, so Ol will."

He sprang at the dummy again, caught it waist high, and brought it down immediately.

After this the boys took turns at it, having it drawn swiftly along and running at an angle to head it off, pursuing it, meeting it, and coming at it in various ways. Dolph showed them just how to tackle low and effectively, and they would not stop till it was too dark for them to practice on the machine with any success.

“Let every fellow get up here by seven o’clock to-morrow morning,” said Sterndale, “and we’ll put in an hour on this machine. We ought to get our new ball by to-morrow night, and so we’re not going to be hurt much, as far as practice is concerned, by the destruction of the other one.”

In high spirits, they left the field, laughing, joking and singing, and the sentiment universally expressed was that a fellow who took so much trouble and interest in coaching them was the right person for the position.

CHAPTER XVIII. TROUBLE ON THE TEAM.

"I did not see you practicing after school to-night with the other boys, Don," said Dr. Scott, two evenings later. "I happened to be driving past the ground, and so I stopped at the gate and looked on a few moments. I expected to see you in the midst of it. Where were you, my son?"

"I—I was not feeling very well," declared Don, as smoothly as he could, although he knew his face had flushed, "and so I did not practice to-night."

"There!" exclaimed his aunt; "what did I tell you, Lyman! I knew there was something the matter with him, as he hasn't been acting at all natural for the past few days. I'm afraid, brother, you will have cause to regret permitting him to indulge indiscriminately in that rough and dangerous game."

"I hardly think there is any cause for alarm," smiled the doctor. "Any boy may have a turn at feeling indisposed in the midst of apple-time, when every orchard is inviting him to gorge himself. You have not been hurt in practice, have you, Don?"

"Oh, no, sir! not at all," was the hasty answer.

"And you're feeling all right now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me look at your tongue."

Don shamefacedly showed his tongue.

"Slight coat on it," commented his father. "Stomach a trifle disturbed. I'll give you something for that before you go to bed. You'll be all right in the morning. It wouldn't do for you to fall ill now, with the great game against Highland only four days ahead, would it, my boy?"

"Hardly," said Don, intensely disgusted with himself.

"Let me see, what position are you to play?" asked the doctor, pursuing the conversation, to the boy's increasing discomfiture.

"Half-back," answered Don.

"Then you must have considerable running and kicking to do, for I believe that is one of the most important positions on the team. They must think pretty well of you, Don, to give you such a prominent place on the eleven."

"Oh, yes, they think well of me!" murmured the uneasy youth, with hidden bitterness.

"How is the team coming on in a general way?" persisted the man. "Do you think it is improving with practice?"

"I hope so."

"But you do not speak in a confident manner. You how, those Highlanders make a hard crowd to beat."

Don was silent.

"I presume this young Renwood, who is instructing the team, knows all about the game?" said the doctor, causing his son to writhe inwardly.

"He thinks he does," laughed Don, shortly and harshly.

"Well, he has played it some, and so he must be able to give you many valuable points. Is he an agreeable sort of fellow?"

"Not much."

"Don't you like him?"

"No," answered Don, speaking the truth this time, at least; "I do not like him."

"That's unpleasant," said Dr. Scott, noting with regret the dark look on the boy's face, "but you must not permit that to keep you from doing your level best in practice and in the game. At times it is necessary for us to put aside all personal likes and dislikes and join heartily with friends or foes in working together for a result. The boy who permits his personal feelings to rule his conduct in baseball or football will never make the highest type of player, and there is danger that he will not be very successful when he leaves school and enters on a business or professional career, for he will be ruled by prejudices and likings and not by sound common sense and reason. My boy, I want you to promise me that, for all you may dislike one or more of your associates on the eleven, you will join with the others in doing your level best under every condition to win from your opponents. Promise me this, Don."

The youth choked a little and turned his eyes away. It was too late now, he fancied, to reveal to his father the exact condition of affairs, and so the deception must be continued at any cost of torture to his outraged conscience. Far better would it have been had he nerved himself to speak the truth without further subterfuge and falsehood.

"I'm sure you are the kind of a boy to think first of winning, regardless of your personal feelings," asserted the doctor, not, however, without a shade of anxiety in his voice. "That being the case, it is your express duty to do everything you can honestly and squarely do to assist toward the desired result, even though it is necessary to sacrifice yourself in order to aid an enemy on your own side to make a successful play. I want you to promise that you will do so if the occasion arises."

"That's easy," thought Don, "for I shall not play, and so the occasion will not arise." And he gave the desired promise.

He took the medicine which his father gave him, as he could not easily avoid doing so, and then retired to his own room, relieved and thankful to escape. In the seclusion of his room, he seemed to turn in anger and disgust on himself.

"Oh, you're a pretty cheap creature, Don Scott!" he muttered, fiercely. "You're

getting to be a slick liar! How long will you be able to keep it up? What will he think of you when he finds out the whole truth?"

The following night, he remained away from home during the time the eleven was practicing on the field, being forced to accept Bentley for a companion. But Don found that by association he was learning to tolerate Leon far easier than at first, for all that some traits and actions of the fellow still jarred on his nerves. Misery loves company, it is said, and both boys had once been members of the eleven, so they sought a secluded spot where they could smoke and talk and pass the time away till Don dared venture home.

Scott did not stop at one cigarette now; he smoked three, and would have smoked more but that a certain unpleasant sensation warned him to desist.

"You're taking to 'em as a duck takes to water," declared Leon, encouragingly. "I rather guess you've found they're good for what ails yer."

"Oh, they give a fellow something to do to pass away the time," said Don; "but I don't care about them."

"You will some time," averred the other. "You'll want them with you all the time. But, say, they ain't having such a slick old time since you and I left the eleven."

"What do you mean?" asked Don, quickly.

"Oh, they're not getting along as well as they might. They've put Smith in your place and Linton in mine, with Boland as right tackle. Murphy couldn't get along with Old Lightning near him."

"Why, I thought Carter was going to take your place."

"They found it wouldn't work, for Old Lightning was too slow for end work. Carter is filling Smith's place on the end, but Renwood kicks like a steer about Boland. Thad is getting sick of it, too, and it wouldn't surprise me a bit if he got out. Anyhow, all these changes have made the right wing of the line awfully weak."

"If Boland gets out, they're up a tree!" exclaimed Don, with a feeling of unjust triumph. "They haven't a good substitute now, and it will break them all up to lose Thad."

"That's right!" cried Bentley, gleefully. "They will be in the soup! What will they do?"

"Give it up. What could they do now if a man should be hurt in a game?"

"They've been talking of taking one of the mill fellows along as a substitute, but they don't like to do it. There are a dozen fellows who go to the academy and who might play, but they won't have anything to do with the game. They've got a scrub team from Lobsterville playing with them for practice to-night. Perhaps they'll get somebody out of that."

"Perhaps so, but I doubt it. Sterndale can blame himself for letting Renwood boss things, if they do happen to get into a box."

"One thing is certain," said Leon, wagging his head; "they won't get us to help them out."

"It isn't likely they'll want us," muttered Don, bitterly.

And so they passed the time in talking of these things till the doctor's son dared venture homeward. On his way, he dropped into a tobacco store and, in a very self-conscious, guilty manner, bought a package of cigarettes, which he slipped into an inner pocket.

Bentley had spoken the truth in saying the eleven was not progressing in a satisfactory manner. Renwood had worked hard to teach them, and they had received instructions in punting, drop-kicking, place-kicking, passing, tackling and interference; but when it came to working out the various plays, Thad Boland could not be aroused to the absolute necessity of quick and decisive action, and he bothered and hindered the others in a provoking manner. Thad was large enough and heavy enough to become a good man in the line, but it seemed doubtful if he would get into action and make himself of the least consequence in the game. Renwood scolded him and Sterndale coaxed him, but neither scolding nor soft words brought the desired result.

That night in the game against the scrub team, which was made up of all sorts and conditions of boys, there being sixteen in all, instead of eleven, Thad utterly refused to earnestly exert himself, declaring it was no use to "slash and tear 'round" in a fooling game of that sort, nor could any kind of talk or influence affect him. As the regulars failed to make an entirely satisfactory showing against the scrub, this was most annoying and not a little disheartening.

After the game, Sterndale, Renwood, Smith and Murphy drew aside to talk matters over.

"Of course we gave the scrub the advantage of numbers and the wind," said the coach, somewhat ruefully; "but that is no excuse for our failure to score oftener."

"The right end of the line is terribly weak," confessed Sterndale, who looked troubled. "Carter is a new man on the end, Boland is too lazy at tackle, and Sprout is too fat as guard. We must make a change, Renwood."

"It's pretty late in the day to make a change now, but we may have to do it. The team was far better as it stood originally, with Smith on the end and Linton next to him; but you had to pull Smith back to half to fill Scott's place."

"Perhaps I don't fill it," said the tall boy; "but you bet I'll do my level best."

"You're all right, John," declared the captain of the eleven, laying an arm across Smith's shoulders with something like affectionate familiarity. "You're just as good a man as Scott was at half, but it has weakened the line taking you off the end."

And this was the same John Smith who had once been called the hoodoo of the baseball nine, derisively nicknamed "Jonah," and treated with inconsideration or positive contempt by Richard Sterndale. Having proved his worth, he was now

held in esteem by the very ones who had entertained nothing but scorn for him, and no more was the opprobrious nickname applied to him.

Dennis Murphy beamed with satisfaction and pleasure. In the days of Smith's disgrace the Irish lad had been the only one of the village boys to side with him and stand by him.

"Thot b'y's all roight wheriver ye put him, Misthur Sterndale," he declared, loyally.

"Yes, Smith's all right," agreed Dolph, promptly; "but we weakened the line by taking him off. If the Highlanders ever discovered just how easy our right end is, they could raise hob with us by hammering at it all the time—and they will discover it, sure as fate."

Renwood appeared worried, and his manner impressed the others.

"What can we do?" asked the captain. "What would you advise, Dolph?"

"Bentley is a better man than Boland, if he will do his best. If we could get him back into his old position as left tackle and put Linton into Boland's place, it would strengthen the right end some."

Sterndale nodded. "Bentley is not a first-class man," he said, "but he would be an improvement on Boland. Then, if we could put Smith on the end again, with Carter in Bubble's position, we'd be all right as far as the line is concerned."

"But without a right half," said Renwood. "Now, if Scott——"

"It's no use to talk of him!" exclaimed Dick, quickly. "We don't want that kind of a fellow on the team. Isn't that your opinion, Dolph?"

Renwood did not answer at once. He was aware that the others were watching him closely and waiting with interest for him to express himself on that point. At last, he slowly said:

"It would be better to play with almost anybody than to be badly beaten just because there was one weak point in the team, you know. If Scott didn't have such a beastly temper——"

"That's not the worst thing," the captain grimly asserted. "A fellow who will do what he did is too nasty to be on the team. And you seem to forget that he tried to lay it on to you, Dolph."

"No, I don't forget; but I was thinking of the eleven, not of myself."

"You're altogether too generous, old man. But we won't talk about Scott; he's out of the question. However, I'll see Bentley and tell him he can come back into his old place. That will set Linton over to right tackle, which will strengthen that end of the line some. If it had not been for Dummy and Murphy, who could not get along with Boland, I should not have shifted Linton into Bentley's place."

"Are you sure Leon will come back?" asked John Smith. "You know he's friendly with Scott now, and he's been saying all kinds of hard things about you and the

rest of us. Won't he stick by Scott?"

"Stick by nothing!" exclaimed Dick, with a laugh. "I'll get him back on to the team easy enough. He isn't the kind of a chap to stick by anybody."

"I'd think more of him if he was," declared Renwood; "but I guess it's the best you can do, Captain Sterndale. Better get him back in a hurry, if you're going to get him at all, so he will have the advantage of what little practice we get before Saturday."

"I'll have him up here for practice to-morrow morning," promised Dick, confidently.

And he kept his word.

CHAPTER XIX. THE NET OF DECEPTION.

"Look here, Bentley, I want to see you," called Don Scott, sharply, as Leon was hurrying homeward from school the following noon.

Leon cast a backward glance over the shoulder and saw the doctor's son coming after him with swinging strides. The day was dark and lowering and a storm was threatening, but Bentley saw indications of a swifter and more violent storm in the face of the boy who was hastened to overtake him, which made him feel like taking to his heels and seeking shelter from the outbreak.

"I'm in a hurry," he cried, half pausing and then quickening his steps once more.

"I won't bother you long," was the assertion which failed to reassure him in the slightest degree. "What I have to say to you I can say in short order. Hold on!"

"He won't dare to touch me," thought Leon, seeking to quiet his own fears, but not entirely succeeding. "I might as well let him blaze away and have it over."

He paused at a street corner and waited. A wet wind was slashing viciously at the trees that lined the street, and a yellow leaf, harbinger of the great flocks to follow, came fluttering like a wounded bird to Bentley's feet.

The pursuer came up with a few swift, firm steps and stopped, regarding Leon with scorn and anger apparently unspeakable, so that the vacillating fellow stared at the ground and weakly asked, forcing himself with a painful effort to utter the words:

"Well, what do you want?"

"You're a nice one, you are!" grated Don, with a motion that caused the other to start back a bit and lift one hand, like an oft-beaten child who expects a blow. "Oh, I'm not going to touch you, so don't cringe like a whipped cur!"

"What's the matter with you?" Bentley snapped, trying to stiffen up and put on a bold front. "If you have anything to say to me, why don't you say it?"

"I will. You're a treacherous sneak! You're a two-faced whelp! That ought to be plain enough for you to understand."

"Oh, come, Scott!" exclaimed Leon, changing his manner. "What reason have you got to make such talk to me? What have I done?"

"You know what you've done! You pretended to be my friend, and yet——"

"I am your friend."

"You're nothing of the sort! I wouldn't own you for a friend! You have gone back on me!"

"I suppose I know what you're driving at. You're mad because I've gone back onto the eleven."

"After swearing over and over that you'd stick to me through thick and thin! After vowing you'd never play on the team unless I did! I didn't ask for all those promises, but you made them."

"And I meant to keep them when I made them, Scott——honest I did. But Sterndale came and offered me my old position, and so——"

"You went back on your word and quit me."

"No, I've not quit you; I'm still your friend."

"Bah!" cried Don, scornfully.

"I am!" palpitated Leon, eager to convince his companion. "I'll prove it to you, too. You don't think I went back because I want to help them win, do you?"

The doctor's son did not speak, and Bentley hastened to go on:

"Not on your life! That wasn't my little game. I went back because I can keep track of things better by standing in with the gang. I can watch Dolph Renwood, and I may get a good chance to give him a dig that will do him up. Can't you see I'm liable to get a better chance at him now? I haven't forgotten that he got Sterndale to drop me, and I'll pay him back."

"It's a case of treachery on one side or the other," declared Don. "If you're not lying to me, you've gone back to betray the team, and so you're a sneak, just the same."

"Well, you beat anything!" gasped Leon, quite unable to understand the other youth. "You want to see them get it in the neck because Renwood is coaching them, and yet you turn up your nose at me when you think there is a chance that I may be able to give them the throw-down. What are you made of, anyhow?"

"I hope I'm made of different stuff than you are. I do want them to be beaten, but I'm not on the eleven. If I were on it, no matter how I felt, I'd have to do my best to help win. If you do anything else, you will be a traitor and a sneak."

Some color mounted to Bentley's thin cheeks.

"You're the funniest fellow on legs!" he exclaimed. "Of course I wouldn't do anything to down the team unless I could throw it all on Renwood's shoulders. I'm keeping my eyes open for a chance to show him up dirty."

Don was silent a moment, looking squarely at Leon with those dark, piercing eyes.

"Thad Boland may be lazy," he finally said; "but a lazy man is better than a sneak and a traitor. Sterndale made a mistake when he took you back, and I'd tell him so if I thought he'd pay any attention to me."

"You'll be sorry some time for this kind of talk, Scott!" snapped Leon, in bewildered anger. "There come some girls, and I don't want to talk with you any longer."

Don saw several girls coming down the street, Dora Deland and Zadia Renwood

among them, and he immediately said:

"I'm sure I don't want to be seen talking with you, nor do I want anything further to do with you. You can keep away from me in the future. Understand?"

Without waiting for Leon to answer, he hastened onward toward home, leaving Bentley to wait for the girls and force himself upon them as a companion and escort, whether he was wanted or not.

That afternoon it rained. Don sat at his desk and listened to the dash of the wind-driven cloud-tears against a near-by window. Sometimes he studied, but oftener he was thinking of things far removed from books and recitations. The rain had begun late in the day and was pretty certain to continue, so there could be no practice for the Rockspur Eleven that night.

"They've made another shift about since taking Bentley back," thought Don, "and every change disturbs them some. There's little time now for them to get used to the new line-up."

It was not necessary for him to remain away from home on the pretense of practicing that night, which gave him no small satisfaction. He passed the evening reading.

The following day was bright and clear, and the eleven turned out for morning practice on the field. At school Don fancied the members of the team showed something like satisfaction, as if things had moved better. Even Thad Boland seemed relieved and well pleased.

Saturday came, and as Don came down in the morning, he was greeted by his father, who cheerfully cried:

"This is a fine day for the great game, my son—bright, sunny and cool. Are you feeling in first-class trim for it?"

"I am feeling first rate," was the answer.

"That's good; but it seems to me that you are not looking as well as usual. Perhaps regular practice, together with your studies, has taken hold of you."

"Oh, no, not at all," the boy hastened to declare. "I'm feeling fine as a fiddle."

"Well, I'm glad of that, for you have a hard task before you to beat Highland on its own ground. I suppose you'll want an early dinner to-day, as you always start away by noon when you are going to Highland?"

"Yes; half-past eleven will be about right."

"I did think of driving over to Highland this afternoon and taking a look at the game," said the doctor, causing Don's heart to stop beating for a moment; "but I find I shall be unable to do so."

The boy breathed again, inwardly thanking fortune.

"I want you to do your best to-day, my son," pursued his father; "and remember to guard your temper and keep your head cool. Promise me that you will not,

under any provocation, permit your temper to master you to-day, Don."

The promise was given, and they sat down to breakfast, during which, to the continued uneasiness of the youth, Dr. Scott persisted in talking about football and asking unpleasant questions. Don was glad enough to escape from the house under pretense of going to the field to put in some morning practice.

To him it now seemed necessary to continue the deception as long as he could, and it is even probable that he hoped his father might never find out the truth, although this hardly appeared possible. In the beginning, the deception had seemed a small matter and of little consequence, but, having taken the first false step, he had been led on till now the burden of the deceit seemed more than he could bear. It was wearing on his nerves and blunting all his finer instincts of honor, for Don was naturally an upright and straightforward youth, who, despite his violent disposition, detested anything dishonorable.

Thus it came about that he remained away from home all the forenoon, shunning and avoiding the other village boys, who shunned and avoided him. When he came rushing home, it was at the last minute, apparently, as if the exciting events of the day had caught and carried him away in their clutches.

"Land of goodness!" cried his aunt, as he flung himself down at the table. "Don't tear the house to pieces!"

"I'm in a hurry," he declared.

"Can't you wait for your pa? The tea ain't quite ready."

"I can't wait for anything, and I don't want any tea."

"But you must eat a good hearty dinner, for you'll need it."

"Strictly against orders," he declared, helping himself to the mashed potatoes and cold corned beef. "No man is permitted to overload his stomach on the day of a game."

He fell to eating without ceremony and was quite finished when his father came in at the ringing of the bell.

"Hello! hello!" exclaimed the doctor. "Have you eaten? Why, you haven't been in the house five minutes. I heard you when you came in."

"You'll have to excuse me, father; I didn't have time to wait for you. I'm off."

"Hold on! Aren't you going to take your overcoat? It will be chilly riding home to-night."

"I came near forgetting it," said Don, whose great anxiety was to get out of the house before his father could ask any more questions. "Good-by, Aunt Ella." He kissed her and then dashed up the stairs, leaving her standing by the table, with uplifted hands, while the doctor sat down, laughing.

"Bless us! bless us!" breathed the good woman. "What are boys in these days coming to? They actually go crazy over baseball, football and such things. Now,

in our day——”

“Boys played barn tag, three-old-cat, prisoner’s base and games of that class; now they have something better, sister. There is more sense in baseball, football, tennis, polo, basket-ball and other modern games.”

“Well, there may be,” sighed Aunt Ella, sitting down and preparing to pour the tea; “but I’m sure there’s more danger, and Don gets so crazy over them that I expect he’ll come home dead some day, or crippled for life.”

Don was heard coming swiftly downstairs, taking three at a time.

“Good-by!” he shouted. “I’m off.”

“Good luck, my boy,” called the doctor. “Remember my advice. Take care of yourself, and do your level best to help Rockspur win.”

The door slammed and Don was gone, but not to play football.

CHAPTER XX.

WHILE THE GAME WAS PLAYED.

On a jutting ledge far up the side of Ragged Mountain, where he could overlook the village, harbor, open sea and hilly country to the westward, a lonely boy sat astride a spur of the blue rock, gazing downward at a dark object crawling steadily along the brown thread of a road which led from the village, crooked about the shores of the amethyst lake and wound into the distance that swallowed it from sight.

The boy was Don Scott, who had made feverish haste to get out of Rockspur ahead of the football team, leaving his overcoat at the little railroad station which he passed on the Lobsterville side. From the station he had followed the railroad to the foot of the mountain, where he found a dimly-defined path that led him, panting and toiling, upward to the ledge on which he was now perched.

At his feet lay Lake Glenwood, seeming near enough for him to hurl a pebble into it with no great effort, although he knew it was quite half-a-mile from the foot of the mountain. His eyes had hastily followed the road along the shore till they found, far beyond the middle section of the lake and pursuing the stream that led off from it, the dark object which he knew was the big buckboard carrying the members of the Rockspur Eleven to Highland.

"There they go!" he panted. "Renwood is with them! Bentley is with them! and I am here!"

He laughed bitterly, and then became silent as the wind seemed to bring faintly to his ears the refrain of a familiar song often sung by the boys on their way to a game or returning from a victorious contest. He could not distinguish the words, but the indistinct sound of the chorus, like a momentary murmur of the wind, was enough to cause those words to flash across his mind.

"Singing!" he cried, fiercely "Don't be so sure you'll 'win to-day.' You can't tell. Anyhow, I hope you won't! I hope you'll be beaten out of your boots!"

He sat there and watched till the buckboard disappeared along with the brown road that had run to a hiding place amid the woods and hills. Even then he did not stir, but long after that he remained on the ledge, yet without deriving any pleasure from the beauty of the scene spread out before him in all the enchanting colors which a river-threaded, lake-dotted, sea-edged landscape reveals beneath the midday sun of early autumn.

At last he left the ledge and came slowly down the mountain. He did not follow the path all the way to the foot of the descent, but turned to the left, skirting the base of Round Stone Cliff, where pleasure-seekers had sent great stones shooting and bounding down the face of the steep declivity, thundering over the lower slope and crashing into the tangled thickets below, tearing crooked paths through the woods to the point where they were piled in confusion into a deep,

dark ravine.

What if some unseen person, knowing nothing of his presence below, were to start a huge boulder rolling from the top of the cliff as he made his way along its base! He thought of that and laughed!

"Let 'em come!" he exclaimed. "I can dodge 'em!"

Nothing of the kind happened, however, which, without doubt, for all of his confidence in his dodging ability, was fortunate for him.

Beyond the cliff, after forcing his way through dense and matted thickets, he came out into the Boxberry Pasture, as it was called by the boys. This was an elevated spot, where he could still look down on the harbor and village. The pasture was a mass of stumps and rocks and knolls, the latter being covered with interwoven vines, which gave to his nostrils the smell of dried checkerberry, plumes of which showed here and there in bright red patches.

Crossing the pasture, he descended to the road that led away to the Powder Mill Woods, where he felt that he might be alone for the afternoon. He hoped that he would not meet on the road any one who knew him, and, to his satisfaction and relief, he did not.

The woods seemed dark and still when he first entered them, and a feeling of loneliness beset him; yet there was a subtle something about the peaceful stillness that soothed his troubled spirit with a gentle suggestion of sadness that, strangely enough, gave him a sensation of enjoyment.

Beneath his feet, where the trees were thick overhead, the ground was damp and yielding, giving his footfall no sound, save when a twig snapped with a muffled noise. The air that he breathed was sweet with the odor of pine and balsam and damp earth. The sunshine did not glare before his eyes, and the dense shadows added to the tranquillity he sought.

So he wandered through the "dim aisles of the woods," and after a time he found they were not so lonely and deserted as they appeared. He paused to watch a tiny black-hooded chickadee that was doing all kinds of gymnastic tricks upon a bush, clinging to the side of a branch one moment, hanging upside down the next, and constantly on the move, now and then gleefully crying: "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee." He sat on a damp and rotting log and observed a red-headed woodpecker rat-tat-tatting away at the trunk of an old dead tree and saw a squirrel skurrying along the ground. And the hours slipped away with few disturbing thoughts of the football game that was taking place in Highland.

When he was tired of wandering in the woods, he sought the favorite spot by the Powder Mill Dam, where he lay on the ground or sat on the rocks and watched a speckled trout in a placid pool below the dam. So the afternoon passed, the sun dropped low, the shadows deepened and night drew on.

In the dusk, he returned along the road that led toward the village, the lights of which were beginning to gleam through the gloom across the harbor. He did not

wish to appear in the village before the members of the eleven returned from Highland, and he knew they could not get back till some time after dark.

Reaching the Highland road, he paused a while, fully satisfied that neither players nor spectators from Rockspur had passed on the return journey. He sat on an old stone wall and waited till two village boys on bicycles, their lanterns making long white streaks of light on the road before them, came along from the direction of Highland. Although it was rather dark for him to make out who they were by the aid of his eyes, he recognized them by their voices, as they were talking about the game while they sped swiftly past toward the crest of Bloody Hill.

"Skinny Jones and Pug Andrews," muttered Don, rising from the wall and making for the road. "They've come in ahead of the others, for Skinny is a scorcher. There's time enough to get over the bridge before the buckboard comes along."

But, as he was hurrying down the hill, there was a rattle of carriage wheels behind him. He looked back and saw a team come over the crest of the hill.

"That isn't the buckboard," he said.

But it proved to be a carriage driven by no less a person than Dolph Renwood, who was accompanied by his sister and Dora Deland. The light from a window of the railroad station at the foot of the hill shone out and fell full on Don, so those in the carriage recognized him.

"Oh, Mr. Scott!" cried a musical voice, "I'm so sorry we didn't have you with us! If you had been there, I truly believe we might have won the game."

Then the carriage clattered on, and Don turned in to the station to get his overcoat. He knew now that Rockspur had lost, but somehow Zadia's words had seemed to rob him of the satisfaction he had expected to feel over such a result.

"She spoke to me!" he murmured; "she spoke to me, for all that she was with him!"

Obtaining the overcoat, he hastened down through Lobsterville to the bridge, crossed the river, turned to the left and hurried past the post-office on the corner, then made his way home by a back street.

Don dreaded to meet his father, for he knew Dr. Scott would question him about the game. It was his intention to make a pretense of being so disgusted over the result of the game that he did not wish to say anything about it; but he wondered what he could do in case his father pinned him down to tell the exact score.

Fortunately, his father was not at home, as he found after slipping quietly into the house, and he learned from his aunt that the doctor had been called to a neighboring town to consult over a critical case.

"He said he might not get home before eight or nine o'clock," said the thoughtful old soul, who had supper ready to put on the table. "I s'pose you're awful hungry? You didn't get no legs nor arms broke to-day, did you?"

"No, I didn't get hurt at all."

"Fortunate—fortunate, indeed! I didn't know but you'd come home dead." Then, after a pause, "I s'pose you beat the Highlanders?"

"No; they beat us."

"I declare!" cried Aunt Ella, sympathetically, stopping half way from the kitchen door to the dining-room table, the teapot in one hand and a plate of warm rolls in the other. "Now, that's too bad! I'm real sorry!"

"And I'm real hungry. Just hustle on the grub, Aunt Ella, and see me wreak havoc and destruction on it."

"You don't seem to feel half as bad about losing as I thought you would," said she, as she complied with his request. "It's not like you, for you used to feel awful cut up when you got beat at baseball."

"Oh, well, we'll even this up with Highland all right next game," asserted Don, sitting down to the table. "It's no use crying over spilled milk."

"You never cry, but you do feel bad, and this is the first time I ever saw you like this. I don't understand it."

Don came near laughing aloud, but repressed the inclination with an effort. When he had satisfied his hunger he went up to his room. He felt like going out to see if he could not find somebody to give him the particulars of the game, but his pride caused him to decide not to pursue such a course, as he did not wish any of his former companions to think he would take that much interest in the affairs of the eleven.

Some boys in Don's position would have sought the defeated players for the purpose of jeering at them and deriding them, and it must be confessed that Scott was strongly tempted to do so; but he decided that it would cut them far more if he made a pretension of absolute and utter indifference, and in this he was right. A person who can deport himself with an air of indifference and unconcern toward those whom he dislikes has not only won a victory over himself and his natural inclinations to show scorn or hatred for his enemies, but he causes those enemies to feel that he considers them of such small consequence that he does not even take the trouble to become annoyed or offended at them. In the long run, indifference is a keener weapon than open scorn and hatred.

So Don remained at home, seeking to pass the evening as best he could. Wishing to do some writing, and finding in his desk no pens to suit him, he went down into his father's office. Having lighted the hanging lamp, he sat down at the doctor's open desk, and there he was writing busily some time later when a gentle tapping sounded on the window near his elbow. Looking round, he saw the outlines of a face close to the glass and recognized Leon Bentley, who was peering in at him with a smirking grin of conciliation and friendliness.

CHAPTER XXI.

BENTLEY TELLS HOW IT HAPPENED.

Don's first feeling was one of annoyance and anger, and he was about to sharply command the fellow to go away when he suddenly changed his mind.

Leon could tell him all about the game, and there was nothing he then desired to know quite as much as the full particulars of the contest that had resulted in a victory for the Highlanders.

"I'll let him in and find out all about it," he decided, as Bentley nodded and beckoned. Then he motioned for the boy outside to come round to the front door, at which he admitted him a few moments later.

"Where's the old gent?" asked Leon, with an assumed air of carelessness. "I was slipping round to throw some pebbles up against your window, in which I saw a light, when I happened to notice you in here."

"Father is out," said Don, somewhat gruffly. "He won't be back before ten. Come into the office."

Leon followed with a swaggering air, and Don closed the door when they were in the room.

"So aunt won't hear us talking," he explained. "What do you want, anyhow?"

"Oh, I just came round to tell you," chuckled Leon, coolly appropriating the office chair in front of the desk, where Don had been sitting. "It would have done you good to see that game to-day. Oh, my! but it was a slaughter!"

"Rockspur was beaten?" said Don, trying to repress a show of eagerness and great interest, but betraying his exultant satisfaction in his gleaming eyes.

"Beaten! I should guess yes. Rockspur wasn't in it for a minute. It was a walk-over for Highland."

"What was the score?"

"Thirty-three to nine. How does that suit you? Isn't that a beautiful record for Sterndale's champs? Oh, but Sterndale is sick!"

"What did you do?" demanded Scott, sharply. "Did you do anything crooked to help lose the game?"

"Didn't have to, my boy," snickered Bentley. "It was a cinch for Highland from the start, and you can bet I did my prettiest to make a good record, for I knew the eyes of several fair maidens from Rockspur were upon me. I made our only touchdown."

"You did?" cried Don, with incredulous emphasis on the pronoun.

"Sure thing," nodded Leon. "Oh, I'm one of the heroes of the day! We didn't get a goal off that touch, either. It was in the first half, and the wind was against

Sterndale when he kicked, so we got only four points for the touch."

"Then the other five must have been a goal kicked from the field?"

"It was. Sterndale found in the last half that he could not get the ball nearer than the fifteen-yard line to save his soul, and so, in order to make the score look somewhat more respectable, he took chances on getting a goal from the field, and made it with as pretty a drop-kick as ever you saw. But it was all chance," Leon hastily added, "for he failed once before that and once afterward. All of Renwood's coaching hasn't shown him how to kick."

"How did Highland make their points?"

"Oh, just piled 'em right up. They had a touchdown and goal in less than three minutes after play began. They made four touchdowns in the first half, but failed to get goals off two of them."

"That was twenty of their thirty-three points. Then Rockspur must have done better in the second half?"

"She did, rather," nodded Leon. "Why, we even had to give Highland two points by making a safety in order to hold the ball one time in the first half. That gave them twenty-two points out of the thirty-three."

"Then, in the second half, they made only eleven points to Rockspur's five."

"But they had the advantage and they just fooled with us. They were playing against the wind, too, same as we were in the first half. But, you see, we couldn't do anything, even though we had the wind with us. Oh, this game has shown up Renwood's coaching in great style!"

"What did Renwood do?"

"Nothing at all that helped us any. Why, he actually blocked Smith once and spoiled a run that might have meant a touchdown. That was early in the game, when we had the ball after Highland's first goal. Of course, it seemed like an accident that Renwood jumped square in front of Smith, but I know it was nothing of the kind. After that, when Highland had made a good lead, it wasn't necessary for him to spoil any of our plays, for he saw we weren't in the game, anyhow."

"Then you think it was his intention to throw the game, in case it was close and he found an opportunity?"

"I don't think anything about it, I know it!" declared Bentley, as he produced a package of cigarettes and prepared to smoke.

"Hold on!" came sharply from Don; "you can't do that in here."

"Eh? Why not?"

"Father would smell the smoke. Put them up."

"But I'm dying for a whiff."

"You'll have to die or go outside. I'm not fooling. I won't have one of those things

lighted in here.”

So Leon was compelled to reluctantly abandon the intended smoke, although he did so grumblingly.

“What makes you so positive that Renwood meant to throw the game?” asked Don, with mingled eagerness and doubt. “He couldn’t do such a thing all by himself.”

“Not unless it happened to be close and he found a good chance. But I know that’s what he’d done, just the same.”

“How do you know it?”

“Oh, I have a way of keeping my eyes and ears open,” wisely asserted Leon, piling his feet upon the doctor’s desk in the midst of the papers.

“Then you saw something?—you heard something?”

“I should say I did.”

It was impossible for Don to repress his eagerness. Leon’s free-and-easy manner annoyed him, but he greatly wished to know just what the fellow had seen and heard that made him so absolutely positive of Renwood’s treachery.

Don forgot for the time, at least, that only a few days before he had told Leon that he wished to have nothing further to do with a fellow of his sort. Having again admitted the foxy young rascal to his home, having apparently accepted him once more as a friend, his greatest desire seemed to be to learn the full extent of the accusation Bentley could make against Renwood.

Leon saw this. At first he had been somewhat surprised by Don’s readiness to take him back on the old footing without a show of continued resentment and anger, and he had anticipated that he would have to whet Scott’s appetite by hinting at the queer things he could tell him about the game at Highland. Already devoured by curiosity and a longing to know the full particulars of the affair, Don had welcomed Leon almost with open arms, and Bentley believed friendly relations between them had been re-established.

“What did you see and hear?” breathed the doctor’s son. “Tell me all about it.”

“Well, just as soon as we arrived in Highland, I left the others and hustled right up to the field where we were to play. Renwood, with his sister and Dora Deland, had passed us on the road, and he was in Highland when we got there. I got to the field ahead of the others, and there was Renwood talking with Winston, the Harvard man, who has been coaching the Highlanders.”

“What of that?”

“They had their heads close together,” Bentley went on, “and they were talking low. They didn’t see me, and I just walked past them, stepping soft. I heard something.”

“Yes!” panted Don. “What did you hear?”

"I heard Winston say: 'It means a heap to me if Highland wins, and you don't care a rap if Rockspur loses.' Renwood answered: 'Not a rap,' and he laughed."

"The sneak! the traitor!" cried Don, springing to his feet. "Did you hear anything more?"

"Yes. Winston said: 'These country yokels of mine can't kick much, and the centre of the line is weak. Just get your captain to let the centre alone. Keep him trying to go round the ends. Where is your weak point?'"

"Did Renwood tell him?" demanded Scott, clutching his companion fiercely by the shoulder.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Leon, with a squirm. "I hurt that to-day! Don't! Yes, he told him all about it."

"What did he tell?"

"He said: 'Our right end is weak, and the backs can't catch punts for a cent. As you say your men can't kick, you'll have to keep hammering at our right end.'"

"Is that all?" panted Don.

"Oh, Winston said: 'Much obliged, old man; I won't forget it.' And Renwood returned: 'That's all right; I haven't forgotten what you did for me once.' That was all."

"It was enough!" Don snarled, driving his clenched right fist into the open palm of his left hand with a cracking smack. "I'm beginning to see through that dirty dog Renwood! At first I didn't understand why he should do anything to damage the team with which he was playing, but now it's plain enough that Winston has done him some favor that he is trying to return in this treacherous manner. And Sterndale thinks more of him than of me! Did you tell Sterndale about this?"

"I tried to, but he wouldn't hear a word against Renwood, and told me I'd better keep still. I saw it was no use, and so I closed up."

"He's a fool!" raved Scott. "I'd like to tell him so!"

"That wouldn't do any good. The only way to convince him is to show Renwood up so he can't get around it."

"How can that be done?"

"I don't know now," admitted Leon; "but I may find a way."

He had picked up Dr. Scott's check-book and was coolly looking it over, which, being in an excited condition, Don did not observe for some time. When he did become aware what Leon was doing, after storming about a while, he exclaimed:

"Put that down! What are you handling that for?"

"Oh, I just happened to pick it up by accident," said the visitor, tossing it back on the desk.

"Don't be so free with your hands!" advised the doctor's son.

“Don’t get so excited,” calmly retorted Leon, fishing into the waste-paper basket and pulling out a sheet of paper on which there was some writing. “Say, your old man’s scrawl is rather queer, ain’t it? But I guess I hit his style all right in that note I faked up for you to carry to old Alden, didn’t I?”

“That was all right,” admitted Don, shortly, not fancying the reference to that matter; “but you won’t have to write any more for me.”

“You never can tell, my boy,” chirped Bentley. “Say, these are odd pens your dad uses. I rather like them, and I think I’ll just take one to try it.” Whereupon he calmly slipped one of the pens into his vest pocket.

For some time the boys talked over the football game and Renwood’s treachery, as charged by Bentley. Finally, Don said:

“You’d better be getting out, Bent; father’s liable to come pretty soon.”

“Well, I don’t care about being seen by him,” grinned Leon. “I know he doesn’t love me a great deal for some reason or other.”

He arose to go. Neither of the boys had heard the sound of wheels outside, being absorbed in their talk about Renwood and the game, and now both were startled by a footfall beyond the door.

“It’s aunt!” breathed Don.

But it was not. The door opened, and Dr. Scott stood before them.

CHAPTER XXII. THE DOCTOR'S STORY.

The doctor was surprised, and a cloud came to his face as his eyes fell on Leon Bentley.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing in here, Don?"

"Why—why," stammered the boy questioned, "Leon happened over, and we were just talking about the game, you know."

"Yes," hastily put in the uneasy visitor, "I was just telling him about it."

"Telling him about it?" repeated the doctor, while Don's heart seemed to jump into his throat and throb there. "Why, wasn't he—I don't understand."

"Leon means we were talking over the plays and trying to figure out just why we lost the game to-day, father," put in Don, with a warning glance at Bentley.

"Oh, then you lost the game, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's too bad; but you might have discussed it elsewhere than in my private office. Was it necessary to bring your caller in here, my son?"

"No, but he—he just dropped in for a minute. I was writing a letter here, and——"

"Very well," said the doctor; "but you know I do not wish you to take visitors into my private office. I have told you so before."

The manner in which his father spoke these words brought a hot flush to Don's cheeks, but he bit his lip and kept silent. Bentley sidled toward the door, saying:

"I guess I'll be going."

Don followed him to the front door and let him out. Outside, Leon paused and snickered, observing:

"You'll catch it! The old duffer's hot under the collar, and he'll give you a raking down."

"I'll thank you not to call my father an old duffer!" flashed Don, in a fierce whisper. "I had no business to take you in there, anyway."

"I don't see that it did any harm, but I wouldn't be in your shoes for a quarter." Then Bentley scudded away and Don closed the door.

The boy was about to go upstairs when his father called for him to come into the office, and he did so with reluctance; for, although he knew the doctor would speak with calmness and deliberation, he dreaded none the less what might be said to him.

"Sit down, my son," said the doctor, who had taken off his overcoat and was seated before his desk. "Are you on very friendly terms with that Bentley boy?"

"Well—not very," hesitated Don, feeling his face burning, while he failed to meet the calm, steady eyes that were regarding him intently.

"Not very friendly, still you invited him into the house. My son, I do not like that boy. I believe he is a bad boy. He dresses extravagantly, though in poor taste, for all that his parents are poor. Yet he never does any work to earn money with which to get his clothes, rings, pins and trinkets. He wears his hat tipped far over one ear, loafers around the corners, smokes cigarettes and talks slang. Not only that, but he uses low and profane language. He has a treacherous face and shifty eyes. Now, Don, I think such a boy is a very good person for you to avoid, don't you?"

Don did not know what to say, and so he remained silent, whereupon his father spoke again:

"I want to speak to you of this matter at this time, my son, because I believe it may in a great measure concern your future welfare. I wish to impress upon you the importance of shunning evil companions, and, at the same time, I will warn you again to guard your temper. I am not going to preach a sermon, but I have decided to tell you a story. I shall make it brief as possible, for it is a painful matter, of which I do not like to think or talk."

For a single moment the doctor lifted his hand to his bosom, where, within an inner pocket, close to his heart, rested the gold-bound miniature of Don's mother. The boy knew his father had chosen this time to unbosom himself in regard to an affair that doubtless had cast a shadow over his life.

Despite his curiosity to know the truth of that affair, Don was ill at ease and would have given much to escape for the time the revelation. However, it was necessary for him to sit still and listen, and, with as good grace as possible, he composed himself to do so.

"You, Don," pursued Dr. Scott, lightly stroking his well-trimmed iron-gray whiskers, "have the same thoughtless, impetuous, passionate disposition that was mine in my youthful days. It did not seem possible for me to control my temper, which led me into doing many things that I afterward regretted; but little did I dream that, in a sudden outburst of anger, I was destined to commit an act that would cause me long years of unspeakable regret and sorrow.

"Your mother was a gentle woman, with a mild and loving disposition, and I have often wondered if she would have married me had she understood how thoroughly unreasonable I could be when I gave way to my uncontrollable temper. But I loved her, Don, and I tried to make her happy. I believe I did during the first years of our married life. It was only by one rash act of mine that I brought sorrow to us both.

"She had a brother who was much younger than herself; in fact, a mere boy when we were married. His name was Charlie, and he was a bright, happy, jovial youngster, full of life and good nature. Shortly after I married your mother, her father died, leaving Charlie an orphan and almost homeless, his mother, your

grandmother, having been dead some years. He might have found a home with relatives in California, but I offered him a home with me, for I had taken a strong fancy to the lad. Of course this greatly pleased your mother, who set about the task of bringing Charlie up in the proper manner.

“At that time I was a young physician, practicing my profession in a small town in another State. I sent Charlie to school, and, as he seemed unusually bright in his studies, I resolved to give him the very best education possible. This matter I talked over with your mother, and we decided that he should be advanced as rapidly as possible without injury to himself and should finally be sent to one of the leading colleges of the country.

“Your mother became deeply absorbed in this project, for she loved her brother with all the depth of her tender nature, and she was ambitious for his success in the world as a man of brains and education. Unfortunately, there was in that town, small though it was, a fast set of boys a little older than Charlie. They smoked and drank and gambled, and they were proud to be known as the ‘sporty set.’ Charlie began to associate with them, and I found it out. I was angry, and I talked to him harshly. I know now that I did not in the right manner go about showing him the error of his ways. I angered him, and, as a result, instead of trusting me, he began to deceive me, associating without my knowledge with the same set of bad boys. It did not seem to him that it was very bad to smoke a little, to swear occasionally, to take a drink now and then, or to play a game of penny poker, with a ten-cent limit. He was only sixteen years old when he began to do these things.

“I said nothing to your mother about it, for I knew it would worry and distress her, and, for some time, I fancied my talk to him had been productive of good results. But I was wrong, for I finally learned that he still associated with his bad companions, which made me more angry than before. I did not tell his sister, but I threatened to turn him out of doors. To my astonishment, he was defiant and told me to go ahead and turn him out. It was with difficulty that I kept my hands off him then, but I did so.

“After that he did not take so much pains to hide from me the fact that he still preferred for companions the fast set of the little village. He neglected his studies and would not attend school regularly. One day I missed some money, and, in a towering rage, I accused Charlie of taking it. Then, becoming angry, he called me a bad name, whereupon I drove him from the house.

“This scene was witnessed by your mother, Don, who could not believe me when I told her the truth regarding her brother. She was certain that I must be mistaken, and she set about searching for the lost money. She found it where I had dropped it at the bath-room door, and then, of course, she was doubly certain that I was mistaken in regard to the other charges I had made against Charlie.

“By that time I was ashamed and sorry, and I was willing to try to rectify my mistake. I was also willing for her to continue to think her brother too good to

choose evil associates who smoked, swore, drank and gambled. So I went to Charlie, told him I had found the money, and asked him to forget. It was a difficult thing for me to do, but I did it for love of your mother, my son.

"From that time on, however, Charlie disliked me more than ever. He did not reform, and his gambling assumed a more serious nature. The time came when he was in desperate straits for money. At this time he was seventeen, being large for his years. Coming home unexpectedly one day, I found him in my private office, with the safe door open. He was stooping before the safe when I entered, but he sprang up and wheeled about, and in his hand was some money he had taken from the safe."

As the doctor paused, the listening boy noticed a quiver of the hand he again lifted to stroke his beard. The expression on his fine face was one of mingled pain and sorrow.

"I scarcely know what followed," he resumed. "Of course I had caught him in the act, and I called him a thief. He said I had called him that before, and he was bound not to have the name without the game. Then I sprang upon him in a perfect tempest of fury. As I said, he was large and strong for his years, and he gave me a severe tussle for a few moments, but I succeeded in getting him by the throat and throwing him. As he fell his head struck against a sharp corner of the safe. When he struck the floor, he lay there still and limp, the color going out of his face. There was a shriek behind me, and I turned to see your mother in the door, brought to the spot by the sounds of our struggle. She sprang over and lifted the head of her brother, staining her hands and her dress with his blood, for the corner of the safe had cut a gash in the back of his head. I can never forget the terrible look she gave me. 'You have murdered Charlie!' she hoarsely cried, and then she swooned."

Again the man stopped, deeply affected by the tragic picture painted for him by memory as he told of this fateful encounter which had brought upon him the sorrow of his life. For some moments he turned about in his office chair and stared at the window, as if trying to gaze out into the darkness, lifting to his face one hidden hand, while the other shook as it reached out to rest upon his desk.

Don's sympathies were stirred most profoundly, for he saw how much pain it was costing his father to relate to him this story of which he had never spoken. Unable to keep still, the boy impulsively cried:

"Don't tell me any more, father! That is enough."

Dr. Scott turned back from the window.

"There is not much more to tell," he said, "so I will complete the story now. I called assistance and sent for medical aid. Your mother was taken to her room, where she lay unconscious so long that I feared she might never recover. When at last she again came to herself, she lay like one dazed until I entered the room, when she shrieked, covered her face and would not look at me. In her condition, it was necessary for me to leave her before she would become quiet. That night, my

son, you came into the world.”

“But Charlie,” palpitated Don, “was he—dead?”

“No; but he was seriously injured—how seriously could not be told at the time. He slowly recovered his physical strength, but the blow from the sharp point of the safe had clouded his mind and he was insane—violently so at times. It was necessary that he should be confined, for he was dangerous when violent, so he was placed in a private asylum.

“Oh, my son! you can never know how much I regretted my outbreak of anger that had caused me to attack him and bring this about! That is, you can never know unless some rash act of your own shall bring an equal sorrow upon you. I had everything possible done to make poor Charlie comfortable.”

“But he was to blame—he was to blame for it all!” panted the listening lad.

“I have tried to think so,” confessed the doctor, “but in my sober moments of reason I found it impossible. Bad company led him into bad ways, it is true; but I was not patient with him, and I did not talk to him in the right spirit when I discovered that he was associating with bad boys. I permitted my anger to govern me, and thus, instead of influencing him to do better, I aroused in him anger and resentment against me. When I did that, my power over him was gone, and I never recovered it. It is thus, I believe, that in many cases parents lose influence and power over their children. They give themselves over to anger in attempting to reprimand their sons or daughters for wrong-doing, and their unrestrained temper produces resentment and anger, instead of regret and resolution to do better, in the ones whom they reprimand. My son, guard your temper and keep it in subjection, for to one of your fiery and unreasoning disposition it is your worst enemy.”

“Mother,” murmured Don, “did—did she——”

“She recovered for the time, but the shock had shattered her health, and she was never herself again. Even the sight of her aroused Charlie, so that the manager of the asylum ceased, after a time, to permit her to visit him. At sight of me he had convulsions. My practice was ruined, and it became necessary for me to seek another field. Then, my son, we came here, where we have remained ever since. Your mother grew weaker and weaker day by day. I doctored her as best I could, seeking the advice and assistance of the most skilled physicians obtainable; but it was useless, for her ailment was not of the body, but of the mind. She forgave me everything, but I lost her, Don, and I can never forgive myself.”

Again the doctor turned his sad, handsome face away, and father and son sat in silence, the only sound being the steady, solemn ticking of the old-fashioned clock that stood outside in the hall. After some minutes, the boy ventured to ask:

“Is Charlie still crazy?”

“No,” answered the doctor; “it was less than a year after the death of your mother that a certain great surgeon operated upon him and restored him to reason. Oh,

how much would I have given had Mary lived till that day!"

"Where is he now?"

"In California, whither he went immediately on regaining his reason and liberty. I offered him a home as long as he wished to remain with me, but he chose to go to California.

"This is all the story, my son, and, having completed it, I am not going to moralize. Think it over. I hope it may serve to open your eyes to the perils of keeping bad company, and I pray that it may teach you to guard your temper."

The doctor arose and held out his hand, as one man offers his hand to another, upon which Don sprang forward impulsively, clasping it with both of his own. The boy longed to express his sympathy in words, but something choked him, and he gazed through a misty cloud at the sadly handsome face of his father, while the pressure of their hands alone spoke more directly to their hearts than aught words could have expressed.

"Good-night, Don, my boy!"

"Good-night, father—good-night!"

Don turned from the room and ascended the stairs, while his father, left alone, drew from that pocket near his heart the gold-bound miniature, which, with a smothered sob, he lifted to his lips.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE DEFEATED ELEVEN.

Twelve boys of various ages and sizes, their faces expressing untold disgust, sat around in the so-called "reading-room" of the Rockspur Athletic Club. They were seated on the table, benches and chairs, and a woe-be-gone, disheartened-appearing set of fellows they were. The big Rochester kerosene lamp with a smoky chimney shed over them a melancholy light that seemed quite befitting to their mood. Finally, Sterndale looking around at his companions, and finding something decidedly comical in their aspect, laughed aloud.

"Kill him!" cried Jotham Sprout.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," groaned Walter Mayfair.

"I'm too sus-sus-sore to laugh, anyway," sighed Danny Chatterton.

"An' Oi feel loike foightin'!" burst from Dennis Murphy.

"I'm so lame I can hardly draw my breath," confessed Rob Linton. "I'm lame from my head to my heels."

"I have bruises and contusions and gashes all over me," declared John Smith.

"I raked my right arm from the wrist to the elbow when I made that touchdown," put in Leon Bentley, in a manner that called attention to the accomplishment.

"That was the greatest fluke of the game," said Sterndale. "It was a streak of luck for the ball to roll right out of a scrimmage, in which you were carefully taking no part, just so you could pick it up with a clear field ahead of you and get over Highland's line with it."

"No fluke about it!" flared Leon. "No luck about it, either! I wasn't going into the thing pell-mell, like the rest of you fellows, and I had my eyes open. That's how it happened."

"I noticed that you didn't go into much of anything pell-mell," yawned Thad Boland, sleepily. "You kept out of danger."

"Bah! What have you got to say about it? You wouldn't know a good play if you saw it, you big, lazy duffer!"

Thad pulled himself together somewhat and gave Leon a look.

"You better not get too gay with your mouth," he drawled, "or I may take a notion to shake you. It would be lots of trouble, but I can't swallow too much of your sass."

Bentley did not care to arouse the lazy lad, for Boland had the strength of a young giant, though it was on very rare occasions that he saw fit to display it; so Leon lighted a fresh cigarette, contenting himself by saying:

"You're all jealous of me, but I don't care."

"Jealous of you!" came derisively from Rob Linton. "That would make a cat laugh!"

"Well, what did you do in the game?" demanded Bent.

"Oh, I did something! Didn't I tackle Dow and keep him from making a touchdown?"

"But Hartford got one two minutes later."

"The trouble with you, Bent," said Rob, "is that you think you are the only thing that ever happened."

"The trouble with you," retorted Leon, quickly, "is that you think you are the whole menagerie."

"Don't sus-sus-see ha-how he can think so wh-when you're round," chuckled Danny Chatterton. "He-he-his eyes must sus-sus-show him there is another mum-mum-monkey in the show."

Bentley did not relish the laughter that followed this, and he growled and grumbled to himself, after which he smoked and sulked in silence.

"Ford hasn't expressed his opinion of the game," grinned Sprout, who was chewing gum and eating peppermint candy at the same time, his fat cheeks shaking as he wagged his jaws.

They looked at the mute, who seemed to understand on the instant what had been said, and he made a gesture expressive of dejection and disgust, slowly shaking his head.

"Misther Rinwood isn't afther sayin' a great dale," observed Dennis Murphy, a sly twinkle in his eyes.

Renwood was sitting astride a chair, his elbows on the back of it, his chin resting on his hands. He grinned in a sickly manner, showing his lips were battered and bruised, the under one being swelled till it projected almost as far as his nose.

"My lips are too sore to make much talk," he declared, rather thickly. "And some of my teeth are so loose I'm afraid they'll fall out when I open my mouth."

"Well, fellows," said Sterndale, "we're a sorry-looking crowd, but it's no use to mope over being defeated. That's only one out of three with Highland, and they took the first ball game last summer."

"But they didn't snow us under," came quickly from Mayfair. "They barely won by a fluke."

"And I made the fluke," acknowledged John Smith, smiling grimly at the remembrance.

"But you saved us on the last game of the series by your great work in the box," Mayfair hastened to assert. "You made up for that first game, old man."

"And he did some splendid work in our game to-day," said the captain of the eleven. "If we'd all done as well as Smith, we might have won the game."

John flushed with pleasure, for such praise from Sterndale was most agreeable. Leon Bentley looked through a cloud of blue smoke, his lips curling scornfully, but he remained silent.

"That's right, Sterndale," agreed Dolph Renwood. "Smith was a perfect whirlwind. Several times he did great work at interference, even though he was playing back of the line. If he'd been in his old position——"

Renwood stopped, and Harry Carter spoke up at once:

"I did the best I could, fellows. I know I made some bad blunders, but I didn't shirk, and——"

"You're all right," Dolph interrupted; "but you haven't had the practice, and you were given a hard position in the line. Now, if you had been placed next to the end, with Smith on the end——"

"Are you digging at me?" asked Bentley, snappily. "I was playing next to the end."

"I am not digging at anybody," calmly answered the quarter-back of the team; "but I know we should have had Smith on that end."

"There's been too much shifting about," said Leon. "You fellows took in Boland and Carter, and then you tried Linton at right tackle till you found Ford wouldn't work beside Old Lightning. That made you shift back, and finally you decided you couldn't get along without me, after all, which caused another change."

"We've not had enough time for practice," Sterndale asserted.

"You've had as much as Highland," grinned Leon, lighting another cigarette.

"No, not by a whole week."

"That's a lot!"

"It counts when all the practice a team gets is secured in two or three weeks. College teams begin to practice months ahead."

"And sometimes there are changes in the make-up of a college team one day before a great game," put in Renwood.

"I presume you know all about it," purred Leon, with a sneer.

"Well, I know something about it. I've had a chance to see considerable of Harvard's training work, and some of the Harvard men are my friends."

"For instance, Phil Winston, who is the Highland coach. I suppose he is one of your friends."

"I happen to know Winston," confessed Dolph, "but that is all. We are not friends."

"Oh," said Bentley, queerly, "I didn't know but you were." And the tone and manner in which the words were spoken attracted attention.

Renwood gave Leon no further notice, but turned to the others, saying:

"I tell you what it is, fellows, we met with a big loss when Scott got his back up

and left the eleven. With that fellow in his old position and Smith back on the end, I believe we might give Highland a hot game a week from to-day."

"It's no use to talk about that," said Sterndale, gloomily. "Scott won't come back."

"That's right," nodded Leon. "I just saw him by accident a little while ago, and he's in high spirits because we got beaten. He says he'll never play again on any kind of a team with Renwood or Sterndale."

"I've heard fuf-fellows make that kuk-kind of tut-talk before," said Chatterton, sprawling out on the top of the reading table.

"But he means it," cried Bent. "When Scott gets his back up, he sticks to a thing."

"It's too bad," declared Renwood, tenderly touching his damaged lips. "I don't know of a man who can fill his place."

"He's changed his tune about Scott lately," whispered Leon, giving Jotham Sprout a nudge in the ribs with his elbow, upon which the fat boy fell off the end of the bench and landed on the floor with a crash that shook the building.

"Don't you do that again!" gasped Bubble, sitting up and choking, having swallowed his gum in the midst of the catastrophe. "I'd like to know who you think you're pushin'! I won't set side of you no more!" Then he proceeded to make himself comfortable on the floor.

"If you don't want to 'set' beside me, you may 'lay' on the floor," grinned Bentley, looking around to see if anybody present took notice of the pun.

"Egg-egg-eggs-actly," cackled Chatterton. Then he quickly put up his hands, crying: "Don't sus-sus-shoot!"

"Somebody oughter hit you with a good, hard piece of iron," slowly declared Thad Boland. "You committed a crime."

Sterndale stood up.

"We must do something, fellows," he said. "There is no question about that. Unless the team is strengthened greatly, Highland will have another easy time when we meet them next Saturday. If they win that game, it settles the series, and there'll be no need to play the third game."

"If necessary," said Redwood, "and if you fellows think it best, I'll go to Scott and see if I can't get him to come back onto the team. I should hate to do anything of the sort, but I'm willing to do 'most anything that is honest so that we may win the next game."

Leon Bentley groaned, softly and derisively.

"That sounds first rate," he muttered, "but you can't fool some people."

The words were spoken loudly enough for some of the boys to understand them, but Dolph, who was at the farther side of the room, did not catch them distinctly.

"What's that you say, Bentley?" he demanded, sharply.

"I say that sounds first rate, but you can't get Scott if you go down on your knees to him."

"Perhaps that was what you said," admitted Renwood; "but it didn't sound like it. I'm not going down on my knees to Scott, but I am going to speak to him, no matter what he may do."

"I wouldn't do that, Renwood," said Sterndale, scowling a little. "If anybody says anything to that fellow, it is my place to do so. I have not yet decided that I'd take him back onto the eleven if he came and asked to play."

"Of course you wouldn't!" exclaimed Leon, promptly, showing satisfaction. "The team is all right just as it is, if it gets the right kind of practice work."

"Perhaps you mean that I have not been giving it the right kind of practice?" Dolph cried. "Perhaps you know more about coaching a team than I do!"

"I didn't say that, either," grinned Bentley.

"You seldom say anything point-blank to a man's face, but you insinuate and insinuate, and you talk behind his back."

"Look here, Mr. Renwood," Leon angrily snapped, "I don't fancy that! I've always used you all right, and you have no reason for making that kind of talk. I won't stand any more of it, either."

Renwood shrugged his shoulders and turned to Sterndale, with whom he began to talk earnestly.

"Ginger!" cried Carter, starting up as the town clock in the Baptist church tower began to strike. "It's nine o'clock! I told mother I'd be back before this. I've got some groceries to take home, and the stores will be closed. Good-night, fellows."

He was hurrying out when Bentley also arose and remarked that he was going home, following Harry down the stairs. As Carter came out upon the street, Leon overtook him and grasped his arm.

"Look here, Cart," he said, "can't you see through this little game?"

"What game?" asked the boy addressed, turning sharply and shaking off the hand of his follower, whom he did not like. "What do you mean?"

"Why Renwood's game, of course. It's plain enough. He doesn't want Rockspur to win, for all that he makes the bluff that he does. He has Sterndale on a string, and he's the real manager and captain of the eleven. It was through him that all the shifting about on the team has come, and now he wants to make another shift. He's sore because I made that touchdown, so he's going to try to push me off. He'll try to get Scott back into your place; then where will you be? He is going to keep this thing up just so that the team will be unsettled all the time, and that will fix us so that we'll never win a game. Now, Carter, are you going to stand it? That's the question."

Leon had tried to appear very earnest and sincere, but he made very little impression on the listening youth.

"I don't take any stock in that stuff, Bentley," declared Harry, promptly. "I know I'm not as good a man as Scott on the team, which makes me willing to get off any time Sterndale wants to fill my place."

"Yah!" snarled Leon, showing his yellow teeth. "You're just like all the rest; you'll let Dick Sterndale wipe his feet all over you. I'm sick of the whole crowd; but I'm just as good a man as anybody on that team, and I'll show Dolph Renwood up if he comes any sneaky business to throw me down!"

Then, lighting a fresh cigarette, and hearing other boys descending the stairs from the club-room, he hurried away, muttering to himself.

"Those nasty things he is smoking are turning his head," said Carter, to himself. "If he doesn't stop using so many of them, he'll go daffy, for I can see that he's getting worse and worse every day."

CHAPTER XXIV. FANNING THE FLAMES.

Leon was waiting for Don at the first corner when the latter started for school the following Monday morning. As usual, he was puffing a cigarette. The sight of him angered Don, who would have hurried straight on without speaking, but Bentley joined him, saying:

"I was watching for you, old man. Got something to tell you. I went down to the club-room after your dad came in on us so jerky Saturday night, and I found all the gang there, weeping over their defeat. It would have done you good to see them. A big lot of cry-babies! They had something to say about you, too."

He had hurried on with his words, being shrewd enough to observe that the doctor's son was in no very agreeable mood, and, as he anticipated, the final statement aroused Don's curiosity, although an attempt was made to conceal it.

"What do you suppose I care what they say about me!" growled the dark-eyed lad, with a toss of his head. "They can say any old thing they like."

But he slackened his pace somewhat and did not try to shake off his unwelcome companion.

"They were saying every old thing," asserted Leon. "I tell you, they gave you a raking down behind your back."

"That didn't hurt me any. I wasn't on their old team, so they couldn't blame me for their defeat."

"But they did, just the same."

Don stopped short and looked at Bentley, his face growing hard.

"How the dickens could they do that?" he snapped.

"Why, they said you acted like a fool in getting your back up and leaving the team. They said they were glad enough to get rid of you, but they'd ought to have fired you in the first place. As it was, you left at a bad time, making it necessary to shift the men around, so there was no time to get the team back in shape, and, for that reason, you were responsible for the loss of the game."

Leon told this lie glibly and with a show of truthfulness that aroused no suspicion in the mind of the hearer; but the falsehood did the work Bentley wished it to do, and the black look deepened on the rather handsome face of Don Scott, marring his good looks and making his aspect repellent.

"Who said this, Bentley?" he demanded, harshly. "Was it that treacherous snake, Renwood?"

"Sure thing," nodded Leon. "He blames it all onto you, but he ain't the only one. The others agreed with him, and I told them what I thought of it. I don't often get right up and speak out in meeting," the fellow went on, "but I couldn't keep still

this time, so I said enough to get them all mad at me. Now, I hear that they're going to kick me out again. What do you think of that, Don?"

"I think it serves you right for going back onto the team," was the unsympathetic answer.

"What? You say that after I stood up for you? Well, I never thought such a thing of you, Scott!" Leon assumed an injured air, giving Don a look of deep reproach.

"The trouble with you is that you're altogether too shifty," said the doctor's son. "When you do a thing, stick to it. But I'm not kicking at you. I'd like to hit Renwood for wagging his mouth about me so much!"

"It's what you ought to do. Of course he would deny it, but you know what he is. Why, he even denied to you that he meant you when he said there were some men on the team who were no earthly good, but he's laughed about it since, saying he didn't think you'd tumble to yourself so quickly."

A sound of grating teeth came from Don's mouth, delighting Leon with the knowledge that he had reawakened to the full extent the hatred of the dark-eyed youth for Dolph Renwood.

"There'll come a day of settlement!" Scott panted.

"Now that he is sore on me, you can't imagine what he proposes to do," snickered Bentley. "Why I have it straight that he's going to come to you and try to get you back onto the eleven, just so he can kick me out."

"Let him come!" cried Don. "That is what I want. I'll tell him a few things!"

They had proceeded up the hill till they were in sight of the white academy, which showed through the trees of the grounds. Now, fully satisfied with himself and what he had done, Bentley stopped, saying:

"Perhaps we'd better not go up together. The fellows have charged me with carrying things to you, and they may suspect that I've put you onto Renwood's game. You go ahead."

So Don walked on and Leon came up later. Knowing Bentley as he did, it was rather surprising that the doctor's son permitted himself to be deceived by the fellow; but he was ready to believe almost anything bad of Renwood, which, with his hatred and prejudice, blinded his sense of perception.

Renwood had not arrived at the academy and did not appear till a few moments before the beginning of the morning session, giving him no opportunity to speak with Scott, in case he desired to do so. That noon, however, the coach of the eleven was talking with Chatterton beneath one of the large oaks near the entrance to the grounds, when Don came through the gate. Perceiving Scott, Dolph immediately advanced toward him, calling:

"I'd like to speak with you, Scott, if you'll wait a minute. We can talk here without being overheard by the fellows up by the steps."

"I have nothing to say to you that I'm not willing anybody should hear," declared

Don, holding himself in check, for Leon's warning had informed him what was coming, and he was glad of the opportunity to again express himself to this fellow whom he hated with all the intensity of his nature.

"Still, it's better to talk the matter over out here away from the others," said Dolph, rather nervously, his manner seeming to betray to the boy with the searching eyes a self-consciousness of guilt. "I am in hopes we can come to an understanding."

Don said nothing, but continued to watch Renwood's face.

"There is something about me," Dolph continued, seeming troubled to find words to express himself, "that caused you to take a strong dislike to me almost the first time you saw me. I knew it, for you are not a chap to conceal your feelings. I have some pride and spirit of my own, and I'm not the kind of a fellow to try to curry favor with those who dislike me, for which reason I had very little to do with you till the football team was organized, and I was selected as coach. Then it became necessary for me to have some dealings with you. One thing I want to claim right here is, that I never tried to injure you in any way."

There was curling scorn in the movement of Don's lips, but he continued silent, apparently waiting with some impatience for Renwood to finish. Dolph saw and understood the expression on the face of his enemy, but he pretended to take no note of it, hurrying on with scarcely a break:

"When Sterndale was making up the team, I suggested that you be tried in the position you were given, one of the most prominent and difficult places on an eleven. I had observed that you could run like a deer, could dodge and handle yourself gracefully, and I fancied you possessed, or could develop, other requirements that would make you a first-class man at half. I made one mistake," the coach confessed, "for, in instructing the team, I did not take into consideration the fact that you might be easily angered, so that you would quit the eleven and refuse to come back. I don't think I quite understood you in that respect. Anyhow, you got mad with me, which has raised hob with everything. I used you just exactly the same as I did others on the team, but you seemed to think I had some spite against you. You were wrong, Scott; I had nothing in the world against you."

"By that," said Don, with a sneer, "I presume you infer that I was wholly to blame for everything that occurred? When you jumped on me and made your insulting remarks to me before the eleven and the whole crowd of spectators, I had no right to resent it! I should have curled up and taken it, like a meaching cur! But I'm not that kind of a huckleberry! I don't belong to the whipped-cur breed, Mr. Dolph Renwood!"

"I made a mistake," Dolph again acknowledged, still speaking calmly. "You must remember that I belonged to a city team, and that team was coached by a professional. You should have heard him talk to us! Why, there wasn't a man in the whole bunch that he didn't give a tongue-lashing. If I had begun to talk that

way to the boys here——”

“You started in,” declared Don. “Just because a professional coach could talk that way, you tried to show off by doing so; but you found out it wouldn’t go in this town, and so you had to come down some. That’s about the size of it.”

Renwood’s face had been pale, but now a sudden flush burned in his cheeks, making it plain that Scott’s words and bearing were arousing his pride and anger.

“Let’s not talk of that,” he cried, perceiving it would do no good. “We were beaten at Highland, Saturday, and the eleven must be strengthened somehow if we are to stand a show with them when they come here next Saturday. If we had you back in your old position, I think there would be a chance of making the team strong enough to meet those fellows. I confess that I’m sorry I offended you. I’ll even apologize if you demand it! I’ll do anything to make the team strong enough to beat Highland.”

Don laughed harshly. “You don’t know me, Renwood,” he declared. “I have said I was done with you, and I mean it. I’ve said I’d show you up as a sneak and a traitor, and I meant that, too! I know you for just what you are. You pretend that you are anxious to beat Highland. Bah! You’re hand-and-glove with Phil Winston, the Highland coach. You owe him favors, which you are trying to pay by throwing down Rockspur. I know it! That strikes home, doesn’t it! Wait—keep still! I’m going to say all I have to say to you right here and now. You must think me a soft fool to come back onto the team with you after what I know about you! You know that I know it, too! You know I know you slashed the suits and cut up the football in the dressing-room under the grand-stand! Yet you had the crust to face me and try to paste that onto me! As far as you have been able you have hurt me, for the most of the boys are idiots enough to believe I did that job. Now, you are sore on Bentley because he happened to get a touchdown in the Highland game, and you want to dump him off the team. You see that you must do something to hold your grip with the boys and make them believe you are trying hard to put a winning eleven on the field, and so you’ve planned to dump Bent and make a bluff at doing something all at one lick. Renwood, you’re so thin I can see through you like window-glass. Some day all the fellows will see through you. I’ve told you just what I think of you, and you can chew on it.”

Don was about to turn away, but, panting and pale, Dolph caught him by the arm, huskily exclaiming:

“Stop! I’ve got something more to say to you! I see I’ve made a fool of myself for nothing. I might have known you were unreasonable and obstinate enough to keep the thing up. Talk about bluffing! You are the champion! After stealing my knife right from under my nose in the club-room, you saw a way to hurt me, as you fancied, and you went up to the field and slashed the suits and cut up the football with that knife, which you left there so that it would seem I did it. Then you told a preposterous story about encountering me in the room and tried to make the boys believe I attempted to stab you. I was willing to overlook all that,

not because I forgave you, but because I was anxious for the good of the eleven; but now I want to tell you just what I think, as you have pretended to tell me. You're a miserable——"

"Dolph! Dolph!" cried a voice, and Zadia, having entered by the gate, accompanied by other girls, rushed between the two panting lads, who were about to fly at each other's throats. Putting a hand against the breast of each, she held them apart with all her strength, gasping: "You shall not! You shall not! Stop this minute. Remember your promise to me, Don Scott!"

Don did not draw back immediately, but at last he took his eyes, full of intense rancor, from the face of Renwood and turned them upon Dolph's pretty, trembling, imploring sister. Swiftly he melted before her entreating gaze, but he could not resist the impulse to hurl a last savage shot at the fellow he hated.

"Some time, Renwood," he said, "your sister will not be at hand to come between us. Then look out for yourself!"

With which, he turned toward the academy.

CHAPTER XXV. DON DECIDES TO PLAY.

Sterndale came down from the football field in a discouraged condition, although he tried not to betray his feelings. He could see the boys had lost confidence in themselves, with the exception of Bentley, who was full of conceit and arrogance, seeming to regard himself as the only player of consequence on the team.

On his way home, Dick almost ran against Don Scott. It was growing dark, and something was the matter with the street lamp on that corner.

"Say, Scott, wait a minute!" exclaimed the captain of the nine, catching hold of the other.

"I'm in a hurry," muttered Don.

"Never mind; you can give me five minutes for old times' sake. You and I got along pretty well on the baseball team. We never had any particular trouble, did we?"

"No."

"Well, this trouble on the eleven is all nonsense."

"Needn't been any trouble only for that sneak Renwood, Sterndale."

"I know how it was. See here, Scott, do you want to see Highland get the best of us and crow over us just because you had a row with Renwood?"

"No, but——"

"I know you don't!" declared Dick, with a show of satisfaction. "I've felt it all along! I was sure that, deep down in your heart, you wanted us to win."

"It's only Renwood," muttered Don, hesitatingly. "If you hadn't had him——"

"We had to, old man. We didn't know beans about football, and he did. We couldn't afford to hire a coach, and he's coached us for nothing. There we were."

"But he hasn't tried to coach you to win. I know it! He's standing in with Winston, who is working for a rep. I have it straight, Sterndale. The sooner you get rid of Renwood the better off the eleven will be."

"I can't think that. I want proof. Prove what you say and I'll kick him out on the jump."

"If I bring a man who heard him talking with Winston—who heard enough to learn there is an understanding between them?"

"If I'm satisfied the man isn't lying, I'll kick Renwood off the team," declared Dick.

Don realized on the instant that the captain would not believe Leon Bentley, so it was useless to bring Bentley forward.

"But I don't believe it, Scott," the big leader of the village boys went on. "You have

misjudged Dolph Renwood. He feels as bad as anybody over our defeat, and he'll work hard to help us win, Saturday. But there's a weakness in our team. We want you back at half, and then we can put Smith on the end of the line, where he was in the first place. Can't you let bygones be bygones, old man, and come back and help pull us out of the hole? You can bet your life I'll appreciate it if you do! Now, don't say you won't, Don! I've favored you before now, and I'm ready to do it again. Of course you'll do this for me! I know you will!"

There was something almost irresistible in Sterndale's manner, so that Don found it nearly impossible to refuse his entreaty; but the doctor's son was not to be turned thus easily from his determination to keep off the eleven as long as Renwood had anything to do with it, and he grimly shook his head.

"I can't do it," he muttered, sullenly. "It's no use to ask me."

"Not even for me? Not even to save Rockspur from being defeated by Highland?"

"Not even for anything!"

Dick was disappointed and nettled, but he held his anger in check, though he betrayed his disappointment plainly enough. Almost always the village boys were ready to obey his beck and call, and he found it decidedly provoking to have Scott refuse in this case to come back onto the eleven at his request.

"You'll think better of it," the captain said, not willing to give up defeated. "I'm your friend; I've proved it, too."

Dick did not say outright that he had proved it by not going to Don's father about the ruined suits and destroyed football, but his meaning was plain enough, and Scott cried:

"You're no friend of mine if you think I did that dirty piece of business! That was one of Renwood's tricks, as you'll find out some day."

"I'm not saying you did it," the captain instantly cut in. "I don't know who did it. I don't want to think that either you or Renwood would do a thing like that."

"One of us did it, and it wasn't me," assented Don.

"Well, never mind that now. I want you back on the team, and you are coming back. We can't get along without you, Scott, old man! You can save us from defeat. We can't shift all over again, but we can put the men back in their original positions, and we'll beat the stuffing out of Highland. I'm going to see you again about this, so think it over. Remember, that I am asking this of you."

Then he got hold of Don's hand, shook it warmly, said something pleasant, and they parted.

"I hated to refuse him," muttered Don, who still felt the effect of Dick's influence and magnetism, "but I had to do it."

He remained obstinate when Sterndale approached him again on the following day, and there seemed little prospect that he would give in and resume his old position on the eleven.

The boys practiced faithfully every day, regardless of weather; but Scott kept away from the field and Bentley was well satisfied.

It was Thursday morning at breakfast that Dr. Scott, who was looking over the little country newspaper published at Highland, suddenly lowered the paper and, glancing keenly at Don, observed:

"How is this, my son? Didn't you do anything worthy of note in the game at Highland last Saturday?"

The boy nearly dropped the glass of milk he had been lifting to his lips, for he instantly realized that his father had been reading an account of the game.

"Why, no—I—that is—not much of anything," he stammered.

"I see the *Register* does not even mention your name," smiled the doctor. "It speaks of the plays of a number of men on both sides, but nothing is said of a chap by the name of Scott."

"Does it give the line-up of the two teams?" breathlessly questioned Don, his heart standing still.

"No," was the answer. "It seems to me a very careless piece of reporting, and it's plain the fellow who did it doesn't know much about football."

The boy breathed again, but he still shook a little, feeling a clammy perspiration on his face. He had kept up the deception so long that the horror of the seemingly inevitable discovery was wearing on his nerves.

"Let me see," said the doctor, still regarding Don closely; "what position did you fill, my son?"

"I was right half-back," came, rather faintly, from Don's lips. Then he took a swallow of milk and choked over it.

"But it says here that Smith, the right half-back of the Rockspurs, took the ball round Highland's end for a gain of twelve yards before being tackled and brought to earth by Garrison, Highland's left half. What does that mean?"

"It's another blunder of the reporter's," asserted Don, boldly. "He got twisted somehow. Smith is on the right end of the line."

"It's too bad there could not have been a good report of the game," said the doctor. "I hope you fellows will do better next Saturday, for I'm going to see that game if I can possibly get to it. You want to remember that I'll be watching you, and brace up, my boy. I suppose you want to see the account of the game. There it is."

He passed the paper over, but it was some moments before Don could read a word, although he sat staring at the print, which ran together in a confused mass. At last the boy's brain cleared, and he slowly perused the report of the game.

"That's sloppy," he commented, handing the paper back. "That reporter ought to write up one more game of football and then go off somewhere and die. He didn't get half of it correct."

As soon as possible, he left the table and the house.

“Ginger! I thought the jig was up!” he muttered, hastening away. “It will be up next Saturday.” Then he halted, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his eyes fastened on the ground. “It’ll be all up, unless——” There was another pause, and, all at once, as if relieved, he cried: “I’ve got to do it, that’s all! If I do, he may never know I’ve fooled him.”

Then he lost no time in finding Sterndale and informing him that he had decided to play on the team in the game against Highland the following Saturday.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE PROOF AGAINST RENWOOD.

"What's this I hear, Scott?" cried Leon Bentley, rushing up to him as he appeared at the academy that noon. "They say you practiced with the team this morning. I was away—went to see my aunt over at Freeport last night, and didn't get back in time for school this forenoon. They lie about you, don't they? You didn't practice with the team, did you?"

"What if I did?" demanded Don.

"Why, hang it! you said you wouldn't—you said nothing could induce you to! You gave me fits for going back."

"Well, you're not the only fellow who has a privilege to change his mind."

"Then you have?" gasped Leon. "I never thought it of you! After all Renwood's said, too! You'll be chumming with him next."

Scott's face grew dark. "Let up on that!" he grated. "I won't take it from you! I hate him just as much as I ever did!"

"Well, they'll kick me off the team now," said Bentley. "You've helped him carry out his plan to do that, anyhow. I never thought it of you," he again declared, with unspeakable reproach. "Anyhow, I'll bet my money on Highland, and I've got some to bet, too."

As he made this statement, Leon produced a roll of bills, which he flourished before Don, grinning triumphantly. The doctor's son was surprised to see so much money in the possession of Bentley, but he made no comment, not a little to Leon's disappointment.

"Why don't you ask me where I got it?" he demanded. "My aunt's been keeping it for me, to make me a present on my birthday that comes next Tuesday. She was going to get me a suit of clothes, shoes, hat and full rig with it, but I got the old lady to cough it up to me and let me buy my own stuff. If I can catch any suckers, I'm going to bet the whole pile on Highland."

"And I hope you'll lose it!" exclaimed Don.

"That's nice!" sneered Leon. "But I won't. Highland will have a snap, same as she did before, and it won't make any difference if you are on the team."

"It's not Rockspur I'm sore on," declared Don. "It's only that cad, Renwood."

"And still you're going to play with him."

"I have a reason for that. You know my father doesn't suspect I left the team, and I don't propose to let him know it. He's going to see the game, Saturday."

Leon whistled. "Oh, that's your little game! Well, I didn't think you'd go back, even for that. What do you care if he does find out?"

"I wouldn't have my father know I lied to him for anything."

"What if somebody told him?" grinned Bentley.

Don had the fellow by the collar in a moment. "Don't you dare peach on me!" he hissed. "If you do, I'll give you the worst thrashing you ever had."

"Oh, I won't say a word!" promised the frightened fellow. "Don't choke! Ain't I your friend? What's the matter with you?"

"That's all right," said Don, releasing his hold. "But you want to remember what I said. If it gets to my father in any way, and I find out who caused it, I'll do just what I said." Then he entered the academy.

"Oh, yes, I'm your friend!" whispered Leon, glaring after Scott with a sidelong look and showing his yellow teeth. "I'm your friend just as long as it's any advantage to be. I don't like you. You're too ready with your threats to thrash somebody."

That night Don practiced with the team again, and, as Leon had expected, Carter was given the position of left tackle, Smith played in his original position on the right end, and Bentley was left off the eleven. Leon left the field in a huff, and the boys did better work after he departed.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," said Dennis Murphy, as Leon departed. "Talk about yer hoodoos, begorra, he's it."

Don practiced with all the vim and vigor he could command, and during the final brush with the scrub he particularly distinguished himself in various ways.

When the boys left the field that night confidence had returned to them in a great measure, and Sterndale praised them freely. There had been nothing like a clash between Renwood and Scott, which had been dreaded, and every one felt relieved.

Scott was invited to come round to the club-room that evening, but he declined, saying it was necessary for him to study. However, he did not do much studying, for, as he was alone in his room shortly after reaching home, there came a signal he could not misunderstand. Some small pebbles rattled against his window and a peculiar whistle sounded below.

"Now, what the dickens does that fellow want?" muttered Don, half resolved to pay no attention to the signal. Then, fearing his father might discover Leon, he thrust up the window and called down, in a guarded tone: "What are you prowling round here for?"

"I've got something to show you—something that you'll like to see," replied the dusky form below. "Your old man's gone out; I saw him go five minutes ago. I have the absolute proof against Renwood."

Don hesitated no longer, but hurried down to let Bentley in; and, a few minutes later, the boys were together in Scott's room, with the window-shades tightly drawn.

"Now, where is your absolute proof?" demanded the doctor's son, eagerly. "I want to see it. How did you get hold of it?"

"It's the tail end of a letter," said Leon, "which I picked up under Renwood's desk, where he dropped it. I saw him drop it, too, and I wondered if it amounted to anything. I hung round till he left after school, and then I gobbled it. Here it is."

He brought out a sheet of crumpled note-paper, on which there were a few lines of writing in a clear, bold hand, and passed it to Don. The page was numbered "3," and the writing began in the middle of a sentence. This was what Scott read:

"take no chances, so Highland must win again Saturday, and you must tip me off to any particular weakness of the Rockspur team, as you did before. I shall expect a letter from you Friday. Your friend,

P. W."

"That's it!" cried Don, exultantly—"that's the proof! This is the last of a letter to Renwood from Phil Winston, the Highland coach! Now, I can show the fellow up to Dick Sterndale, for I'm going to take this straight to him."

"Hold on," said Bentley, with a knowing grin. "You hadn't better do that."

"Why not?"

"How are you going to satisfy Sterndale that the letter this came from was sent to Renwood? Renwood's name is not mentioned. He may simply refuse to believe that fellow knows anything about it, and you'll simply balk yourself."

"Well, what am I to do?" exclaimed the doctor's son, after a moment of silence. "Sterndale will have to believe it, that's all. If he doesn't, he's a bigger fool than I take him to be."

"But we might just as well fix it so he can't help believing, even if he wanted to."

"How can that be done?"

"Why, it's dead easy. I've got some samples of Renwood's handwriting here, and I rather think I can get up a reply to that letter that will fool anybody."

"That would be forgery."

"No more than the note you took to old Alden. Besides that, it would be for a good purpose, so there wouldn't be anything wrong in it. I tell you, it's the only way to do Renwood up good and solid."

"What'll you do with the letter after it's written?"

"That's where you come in. The fellows invited you down to the club to-night. I want you to go down and drop the letter on the floor, where it'll be picked up by somebody besides Renwood. Whoever gets it will have to read it to see what it is, which will give the whole thing away. Will you do it?"

Don's nature rebelled against such an act, and Leon saw he was wavering.

"Think what he's done to you!" urged the tempter. "He's covered you all over with

dirt. He's made the fellows believe you slashed the suits and destroyed the football. It's your only chance to get even. Have you got the nerve?"

"Yes!" grated Don. "Go ahead and fake up that letter. I'll drop it where it will fall into the hands of Sterndale himself."

"Good!" laughed Bentley. "Mr. Dolph Renwood is as good as done for! Bring on the paper, pen and ink, and watch your old side-partner do the trick. The world is ours, and Renwood isn't in it!"

CHAPTER XXVII. THE FORGERY DISCOVERED.

The second bell was ringing when Don entered the academy the following morning. As he stepped through the doorway he felt a pull at his sleeves and a well-known voice whispered in his ear:

"Well, did you do it, Scott?"

Bentley had been waiting for him, and Don saw the fellow's face over his shoulder.

"Yes," he answered quickly, in a low tone. "I got a good chance last night, for I waited with Sterndale till after the others were all gone home, pretending I wanted to have a talk with him. Then, when he didn't see me, I dropped the letter just where Renwood had been sitting, and I saw him pick it up."

"Good!" chuckled Leon. "Something will drop on Mr. Renwood to-day! You did a good job, old man."

But Don had already begun to regret his action, having found time to think it over soberly when his blood had cooled somewhat, and he was not at all proud of what Bentley called "a good job." His hatred for Renwood had not abated in the least, but his conscience told him he had made a false step. Had he by any honest means obtained possession of a letter from Dolph to Phil Winston in which the Rockspur coach betrayed to Winston the weak points of the Rockspur team, he would have denounced the traitor openly before the members of the eleven, backing up his charges with the letter. But, in a way that now seemed sneaking and underhand, he had succeeded in causing the letter forged by Bentley to fall into the hands of the captain of the team, and, even though he had no doubt of Renwood's guilt, he now saw that he would not stand in a very favorable light were the whole matter made public. More than that, he felt that he had, to a certain extent, placed himself in Bentley's power.

Leon, however, troubled by no such prickings of his conscience, chuckled inwardly as he entered the school-room.

"If it's found out that the letter ain't genuine, nobody can lay it onto me," he thought. "I wasn't around the old club-room to drop it there."

To the surprise of both Scott and Bentley, the forenoon passed without any reference being made to the letter by Sterndale. The expected exposure did not come, and Leon was greatly disappointed. He hurried after and overtook Don as the doctor's son was walking swiftly homeward.

"Are you sure Sterndale got hold of that letter?" asked the youthful rascal.

"I saw him pick it up," asserted Don.

"Did he read it?"

"He looked at it, started, and then quickly put it into his pocket."

"Well, it's mighty queer, that's all," said Leon. "Why didn't he jump on Renwood? He didn't say a word—not a blessed word!"

"It is queer," admitted Don; "but I think it'll come out before night. He may be waiting to jump on Renwood to-night when we go up to practice."

"Oh, I'll be there!" sang Leon, as he skipped off at a corner on his way home.

Arriving home, Don ran lightly up the stairs to his room, the door of which he found standing slightly ajar. When he entered, he was surprised and startled to see his father standing by a window with a crumpled sheet of writing-paper in his hand. Instantly the boy felt that some unusual thing had brought the doctor to that room just then, and he halted, his face turning somewhat pale.

The doctor, likewise pale, regarded his son with searching eyes, making Don feel that his very thoughts were being scrutinized.

"My son," said the physician, calmly, "how does it happen that I find this half-written letter of mine in your waste-basket? I am sure I did not place it there."

It was some seconds before the abashed youth found his voice, which did not sound quite natural when he finally spoke.

"I—I don't know, father," he said. "Let me see. Oh, yes! Why, I went down to your desk for some writing-paper one evening, and that was with the sheets when I brought them up here. I thought it didn't amount to anything, so I threw it into the waste-basket."

The doctor still regarded his son steadfastly, causing the blood to mantle Don's cheeks, driving away the pallor and making his face very red. He felt for the first time in his life that he was not believed by his father, and the shame and humiliation of that feeling burned like coals of fire within his swelling bosom. No greater punishment for his wrong-doing, deception and falsehoods could have been inflicted upon him than befell at that moment, when he realized that his father doubted his statement and had lost confidence in him. In those few moments he suffered more keenly than ever before in all his life.

The doctor stepped toward Don slowly, placed a hand gently on his shoulder, and, in a low voice, said:

"My son, I am very sorry."

Then he went out of the room and descended the stairs, leaving the stricken lad standing there, his hands clenched, his teeth set, his whole body trembling.

"He knows!" panted the miserable boy—"he has found out about the forged excuse! The jig is up, and my father knows just what kind of a wretched liar and two-faced hypocrite I am! Oh, I wish I were dead! I wish I'd never been born."

He walked the floor, his soul torn by the poignant anguish that he had brought upon himself by his own false steps. Fancying he could never again look his father in the face, he thought of running away, of drowning himself, of doing anything to escape the mortification of the ordeal.

Then came a sudden, fierce surge of anger. "Renwood is to blame for it all!" he panted. "But for him I'd never done any of these things, for I'd stayed on the eleven, and it would not have been necessary! Oh, how I hate him! How I hate him!"

He made no attempt to reason calmly, therefore it was not possible for him to see the unjustness of his position. His eyes were not yet fully opened to his own moral weakness, nor had this exposure unveiled to him all the pitfalls of the crooked road into which he had been led by his ungoverned anger and by the craft of a bad companion.

As he was fuming about Renwood, he heard somebody leave the house. Hurrying through the hall to the front of the house, he looked out from a window in time to see his father pass through the front gate and join a bearded man who had paused on the sidewalk to wait for him. The bearded man was Simeon Drew, the deputy sheriff of the village of Rockspur. The two men walked away toward the village, Dr. Scott talking earnestly and Drew listening.

"Now, what does that mean?" wondered Don, beset by a sudden, vague sense of peril. "I don't understand why Sim Drew waited for father at the gate, and I'd give a dollar to know what father is telling him."

Having watched them till they disappeared from view, he hurried downstairs, where dinner was waiting, and Aunt Ella was in a state of flustered worry.

"I can't understand it," declared the flushed woman. "Something has happened that worries Lyman, and he hasn't told me what it is. He didn't even wait to eat dinner, yet I'm sure he ain't going to see a patient."

Don did not eat much himself, but, after swallowing a few mouthfuls, he got away from the house, fearing his father might return and find him there.

The boys were practicing in the academy yard when he arrived, nearly all of the eleven having eaten with great haste and returned. He joined them, but somehow his work lacked the dash and vim he had put into it the previous night, his heart being gnawed by hatred for the quarter-back of the eleven.

It was plain Sterndale had remained silent about the letter, for Renwood continued to coach, apparently greatly in earnest, although Don was satisfied that all his earnestness was false pretense.

Scott found an opportunity to say a word to Bentley before the afternoon session began.

"A nice scrape you've got me into!" he guardedly snapped.

"Hey?" said Leon, showing his teeth. "What are you talking about?"

"About the forgery."

"Forgery!" gasped the young rascal, his face turning yellowish-white. "Why—what—what forgery? You don't mean——"

"I mean that excuse to the professor. My father has found out about that."

"Oh!" said Leon, with a long breath of relief. "I thought you meant—something else. I thought you meant—er—that letter."

"No; but I wouldn't be surprised if that came out, too. I wish I'd never had anything to do with you!"

"But you did, and you're just as deep in the mud as I am in the mire. You can't peach now without giving yourself away." He grinned as he said this, and, with an angry growl, Don hastened into the academy, fully expecting to be called up before the professor and questioned about the forged excuse.

To his surprise, nothing of the kind happened that afternoon. After school he went directly to the football field with the others of the team, where the usual amount of practice was obtained; but Don continued to worry, which made it impossible for him to appear at his best. Bentley kept away from the field, and still Dick Sterndale remained silent about the letter that had been prepared for the undoing of Renwood.

Puzzled, apprehensive, distressed, Don came down from the field and encountered Simeon Drew, who seemed to be waiting for him. The boy's heart gave a heavy thump as the officer spoke to him.

"I won't detain ye but jest a minute," said Drew; "but I want to talk with ye private. Jest come over here to Robinson's barn."

Don followed, feeling both dread and wonder. He could not understand how the deputy sheriff might be concerned with the affair of the forged excuse, yet he feared that somehow he had done something that brought him beneath the ban of the law.

"Set down," invited Drew, when they were in the barn, the door of which stood wide open. "I want to ax ye a few questions." He pointed to a feed-box, while he picked up a stick, took out his knife and leisurely planted himself in the most comfortable position possible for him to assume upon a saw-horse, which he tipped down on its side.

Don remained standing. "What do you want of me?" he asked, nervously.

"I want to find out what you know about this here forgin' business," explained Sim, beginning to whittle. "I've kinder figgered it out that you know somethin', an' you might jest as well tell all ye know. It'll be the best thing to do."

It had come at last, and the boy braced himself to meet the emergency.

"I'd like to know what you have to do with it, anyway," he said.

"Me?" cried Sim, looking up from his whittling. "Well, I guess, b' Jim, I've gut somethin' to do with it! I'm an officer of the law, an' I'm goin' to 'rest the forger."

"Why you can't arrest him for that little thing!"

"Can't? Well, you don't know much about law! It's a State's prison offense."

Don gasped, but he quickly decided that the man was trying to frighten him, and

he forced a laugh, which, however, sounded faint and unnatural.

"Get out!" he said. "I know better! It's something for my father to settle with Professor Alden, and you don't have anything to do with it."

"Hey? Well, by Jing! I'd like to know what Professor Alden has ter do with it! It don't consarn him nohow."

"Why, the excuse was given to him."

"The what? What be you talkin' about? I don't know northin' about no excuse."

"You don't?" cried the astonished boy. "Then what are you talking about?"

"About that check for twenty-five dollars with your father's name forged onto it," answered the deputy sheriff.

CHAPTER XXVIII. BREAKING THE FETTERS.

Don actually staggered, and for some moments he was unable to speak a word. To the deputy sheriff the boy's agitation seemed a confession that he knew all about the matter in question, and so Drew said:

"The hull business has come out, ye see, so you might jest as well tell the truth about it. Of course your father'll pectect you, but the other feller that passed the check over to Freeport will hev to smart."

"Why, I don't know anything about a forged check!" exclaimed Don, in a flutter. "That's the honest truth, Mr. Drew."

"Oh, come!" drawled the man. "It ain't no use to try to squiggle round it. The check come back to the bank to-day, an' your father was straightenin' out his accounts this forenoon, so he gut holt of it right off. Reuben Gray, over to Freeport, tuck it, and he sent it over here by Jeff Lander to git it cashed at the bank, as Jeff was comin' over on business. It was jest a happenstance that your father diskivered it so soon."

Now Don understood why his father had looked on him with such sad reproach after discovering the crumpled letter in his waste-basket, and the boy was horrified by the knowledge that the doctor suspected him of participating in such a crime. He realized, also, that all this had come about through his association with an evil companion, against whom his father had warned him.

Being entirely innocent in regard to the forged check, Don became both vehement and indignant in his protestations. It was useless for Simeon Drew to try to coax or frighten a confession from him, and the deputy sheriff finally gave over the attempt in disgust.

"It would hev bin better for ye if you'd jest told everything ye knowed about it," the man declared; "but, anyhow, I'll hev the other feller nabbed before night."

As Don continued on his way home, his brain in a whirl over the affair, the whole truth came to him like a flash of light. He recalled the fact that on the evening after the football game at Highland, while he was talking with Bentley in his father's office, he had caught Leon examining Dr. Scott's check-book and had angrily ordered the fellow to let it alone.

"He tore a blank check from it then!" palpitated Don. "He is the forger! He could imitate father's writing, for he faked up that excuse for me. He went to Freeport, Thursday, and when he came home he had lots of money, which he said his aunt had given him for a birthday present."

Everything seemed plain enough in a moment, and he understood why it was suspected that he had known something about the affair. Immediately he resolved to face Bentley in the matter and force the fellow to exonerate him. He hurried straight to Leon's home, but Mrs. Bentley, a pale-faced, worried-

appearing woman, announced that her son had not appeared since school that afternoon.

As Don was departing he found himself again confronted by Simeon Drew, who had followed him without his knowledge. The officer looked at him in a stern, accusing manner that was also full of triumph.

"I kinder jedged you'd hurry to tell t'other feller all about it," he said. "Now, you kin see you might as well own up."

"I'll never own up to a thing I did not do!" cried Don. "You can't make me, either! If Leon Bentley says I had anything to do with that business, he lies!"

"All right," grinned the man. "He'll hev a chanct to tell his story purty soon. You better go hum and keep still."

Don went home, fully resolved to find his father and make a full confession of everything. Unfortunately, Dr. Scott was not there, having been called on a very serious case, and it was possible that he might not return until late at night.

Restless and excited, his face flushing and paling by turns, Don found himself unable to eat much supper, which convinced his aunt that a serious illness threatened him.

"It's that dreadful football," she asserted, positively. "You're all worked up over it. I knew it would make you sick, and I told Lyman so. There's no sense in you're staving yourself to pieces morning, noon and night the way you've been doing for the last three weeks."

Don might have told her everything then, but it was hard enough to have to tell it to his father, and he thought it useless to distress his aunt over a matter she could not remedy. After supper he went out into the village and tried to find Bentley, but it was a long time before he met any one who could give him any information concerning the young rascal.

The doctor's son was not dull, even though he had been deceived by the crafty Leon, and, in thinking the whole matter over, he was assailed by a doubt concerning the genuineness of the portion of a letter that Bentley claimed to have found beneath Renwood's desk.

"That may have been a forgery, too," thought Don. "How do I know? I wish I'd never agreed to do that other business of dropping the letter to Winston where Sterndale could find it. Oh, I've got myself into a pretty mess, and all because I had anything to do with Bentley. But Renwood is back of it all! He started it! He is to blame!"

Always he came round to this mental assertion, but now, for the first time, he found it was not at all satisfying to himself. He was struck by the thought that in this manner he was trying to shift the blame for his own weakness on to the shoulders of another, which made him feel mean and small and more wretched than ever.

Then he thought of his father's story and of Charlie, who had been ruined by associating with evil companions, suddenly feeling that the similarity of his position to that of Charlie when first accused of stealing was something startling. Charlie had associated with bad boys, but he had not actually stolen when first charged with theft. Don's father had been taught a lesson by that terrible experience, and his lips had not harshly charged his son with participating in the crime of forgery, but his eyes had spoken quite as distinctly as words.

"But I'll not be like Charlie!" the tortured boy mentally cried. "I see my mistake now, and I'll have no more to do with Leon Bentley."

He felt in a pocket of his coat and found a half-consumed package of cigarettes, which he took out and flung away. Leon's father and mother were respectable, hard-working, honest people, and it now began to seem to Don that somehow all the degraded qualities of the son had developed under the brain-weakening, conscience-deadening, manhood-destroying thrall of that opium-tainted creation of evil, the paper-covered cigarette. Don wondered now that he had ever been tempted to smoke one of the vile-smelling things, and wondered still more that, having found neither satisfaction nor pleasure in the first one, he had persisted in their use; but he was thankful in his heart that the dreadful habit had not fixed itself firmly upon him, though he tried to assure himself that he would have broken it at any cost of self-denial and distress. His heart, however, declared to him that one of his passionate, impulsive disposition, one who could not control his fiery temper, would surely have found it hard to break clear from a habit with such power to fasten itself on its victims and bind them with chains soft as silk and strong as iron.

With the casting away of those cigarettes a feeling of partial relief came to him, for it seemed that he had broken the unsuspected bond that somehow connected him with the unscrupulous fellow he now despised.

As he was wandering about the streets, thinking of this thing and hoping to run across Bentley, he met Danny Chatterton, who seemed flushed, excited and in a great hurry.

"Hello, Scott!" called Chatterton, seeing him. "Have you heard the nun-nun-nun-news?"

"What news?" asked Don.

"Abub-bub-about Bentley."

Don started. "No. What is it?"

"He's sus-skipped out."

"Skipped out? You mean——"

"He's run away. I don't nun-nun-know what he's done, but it's sus-something cuc-cuc-crooked, and he's run for it. He sus-stole Sus-Skinny Jones' bicycle and run away on that. Sim Drew has tut-took a tut-team and put after him. I'm going to the cuc-cuc-cuc-club to tell the bub-boys. Come on."

But Don declined to accompany the little fellow, and Danny skipped away to carry the news to the boys at the club.

Scott turned toward home, for there was no longer any chance that he would meet Leon on the street that night. His father was still away. Till nearly ten o'clock he sat up and waited, still determined to confess everything; but the doctor did not return, and at last Don crept to bed to spend a wretched night—the night before the football game.

CHAPTER XXIX. ON THE GRIDIRON.

The day, the afternoon, the hour of the game had arrived. Not even at the deciding game for the baseball championship between Highland and Rockspur had a larger crowd gathered to witness the struggle on the field. The sun was shining, but there was a strong, cool wind from the west, and the air was as invigorating as a delightful tonic. The exhilaration of the atmosphere and the occasion had entered into the hearts of the assembled throng, which buzzed with expectancy, ready to laugh, to shout, to cheer, to go wild with enthusiasm over some brilliant play or plucky stand of the favorites in the game.

Ropes had been stretched to hold the crowd back, but they were surged against till they threatened to give way. It was amazing to see in that small country village such a great concourse of people gathered to witness a game of football between two bands of smooth-faced, clear-eyed, clean-limbed lads. Fathers and brothers and sisters were there, to say nothing of many mothers, who had been unable to remain away and who had come to see their favorite sons struggle like youthful gladiators with the sons of other mothers, equally affectionate, but lacking the courage to witness the rush, the clash, the shock and tumult of battle in which these lads would hurl themselves at one another like human catapults.

Highland apparently had sent over nearly all its boys and girls between twelve and twenty to cheer its eleven. They had gathered in a compact body on the bleachers to the left of the grand-stand, and already they were singing a song of victory, which some rhymester had composed to the tune of "Marching Through Georgia." They were prepared for the occasion with megaphones and crimson pennants and unlimited confidence in the ability of their boys to win from Rockspur on the home ground of the latter team.

On the opposite side had collected the adherents and supporters of the Rockspur Eleven, but, although they were in the majority, they could not drown the noise made by the visitors. Everybody seemed good-natured, and there was bantering and bandying of words.

The grand-stand and much of the standing room to the ropes was filled with older persons, who, however, seemed scarcely less excited and eager than the boys and girls, and who joked with each other and anxiously discussed the possibilities of the game.

The field lay stretched before them like a white-ribbed skeleton, the goal-posts rising at either end. It was in splendid condition, and all were certain that a battle royal must take place there that day.

Suddenly a new sound arose, and then, as onto the field trotted eleven shaggy-headed lads, togged in their football suits, dirt-stained, mud-bespattered garments of victory, there was a great upheaval to the left of the grand-stand, and the mass of fresh-faced, youthful humanity broke into a wildly swaying

surge of crimson, while the Highland cheer sounded short and sharp and clear, like the barking of hundreds of wolves on a still winter's night.

"Rah! 'rah! 'rah! Here we are! High-land, my land! 'Rah! 'rah! 'rah!"

Instantly this was drowned by another sound, deeper, intenser, more like thunder, as the Rockspur Eleven quickly followed their antagonists onto the chalk-marked gridiron. There was another upheaval, mightier than the first, and the blue-and-white was waving here in a dense mass, there in streaks, yonder in spots, but all round the field. The Rockspur cheer of greeting was like rolling thunder, the rattle of musketry, the starward hiss of red rockets and the boom of cannon.

"Boo, bum, burr! Rick, rock, spur! Rockspur—s-s-s-s! Rockspur—boom! Rockspur!"

How the blood tingled! How one thrilled to the very finger tips! Carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, staid, middle-aged men forgot themselves and their dignity, and when they realized what they were doing, found they were swinging their hats and yelling at the top of their voices, the sound being swallowed up and drowned in the general uproar. Youth, incarnate, never-dying, all-powerful, imbued by conscious vigor and power, invested with confidence and courage unshattered by the buffets of Time; youth, the little-prized, the fleeting, the sadly-regretted, the vainly-sought; youth, the beautiful and glorious—it was there, and the great crowd offered homage to it.

In the lull that followed after some moments of tumult, a white-haired citizen of Rockspur, who had passed the three-score mark, flourished his cane in the air and shrilly cried:

"Them's our boys, an' they kin beat at football jest the same as they beat at baseball, an' don't you fergit it!"

This caused a burst of laughter, and somebody shouted:

"Hooray for Uncle Ike! He always stands by the boys! Give him a rouser, fellows! Ready—let 'er go!"

They did "let 'er go," and the cheer for the old man must have warmed his heart—that rare old heart that had never forgotten its youth, and thus, with advancing years, had found its owner a place in the affections of the generations that followed him. In acknowledgment of the tribute he bowed, with uncovered head, and some dust, or the sun, or something got into his eyes, causing him to brush his hand across them while he laughed.

Youth once lost may never be regained; but youth firmly planted in the heart may remain there, though the body wither beneath the blighting touch of age.

In their heavily-padded suits the boys looked stout and stocky. A ball being tossed in among them, they began to chase it about and fall on it as a sort of warming-up.

Don Scott was there, looking rather pale, his dark hair and eyes accentuating the whiteness of his face. His worry and a restless night had told on him, and his manner seemed full of lassitude!

Don had not made a confession to his father. With the passing of the weary night also passed his strength and determination to reveal everything and seek forgiveness. He told himself that he was blameless in the thing of which he was suspected, and time would prove him so; therefore, it might simply add to his father's belief in his guilt if he told him then of his deceptions and falsehoods. He resolved to wait until it was plainly proven that he was in no way concerned with the forgery of the check, promising himself that he would then make a clean breast of everything.

So, as much as possible, he avoided his father, which was not difficult, the doctor being very busy that Saturday forenoon. Don had expected that Bentley would be reported in custody that morning, but, to his surprise and dissatisfaction, nothing had been heard of either Leon or the deputy sheriff since one left the village hotly pursued by the other the night before.

As Don paused on the field, adjusting his belt, his eyes roved over the great throng of people who were roaring a greeting to the young gladiators of the gridiron. While flags, hats and hands were waving it was almost impossible to recognize anybody in the crowd, but when the commotion subsided somewhat, he saw two girls in the midst of the Rockspur Academy delegation on the blue-and-white bleachers, and one of them seemed looking straight at him. Their eyes met; she smiled; she waved her flag in his direction.

"That can't be for me!" thought Don, with a little color coming to his cheeks. "Zadia Renwood would not do that for me."

But then he saw the other girl glance toward him, toss her head and say something in a spiteful manner to her companion, which caused Zadia to shake her head and blush. Then he knew that Dora Deland also fancied Zadia had waved to him.

The cheering broke out again after Uncle Ike's little speech, and Don looked about for his father. In time he found the doctor, who was watching his son steadily. The doctor smiled a bit and waved his hand, but Don seemed to feel reproach in the smile and it hurt him.

"But I'll do my best," he muttered. "Perhaps I may be able to make him proud of me some way."

The excitement was still great when the two captains drew aside with the referee, who sent a coin fluttering into the air.

"Heads," said Walker, the Highland captain, and the Goddess of Liberty looked up at him from the ground.

"Your choice," smiled Sterndale, as the referee picked up the piece of silver.

The wind was now blowing quite strongly from the west, and the Highland

captain immediately selected the west goal to defend, giving the ball to Rockspur. The pigskin was placed on the spot in the exact centre of the field, and the two teams lined up amid another uproar of cheering and all kinds of noises.

There was a sudden lull. Those two lines of youthful tigers were gathering themselves for the clash, crouching a bit, leaning forward, teeth set, muscles taut. Sterndale eyed the ball critically, settled himself carefully, went at it and smashed it down the field against the wind with a beautiful kick.

With the plunk of Sterndale's foot against the leather, which sailed into the air in a long graceful curve, the uproar broke forth again.

The game was on.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FIRST HALF.

Stubby Fisher, the Highland quarter-back, was under that ball, and he caught it cleanly, passed it instantly to Walker, who, like Sterndale, was playing full back, and Walker smashed the oval with such furious force that Sterndale was compelled to try to take it on the run, the result being a muff. The Highlanders came surging down like a flood from a broken dam, but Don Scott was on hand, and he fell on the ball, while Jack Powell, Highland's left tackle, leaped upon him like a panther. The ball was down on Rockspur's thirty-yard line, but the home team had it, and there was great cheering from the bleachers on both sides.

"Clever, Scott—clever!" said Sterndale, approvingly, as the men untangled. "The right man in the right place."

The players lined up quickly, Chatterton preparing to snap the ball back. They crouched close together, facing each other, each Highlander watching his man, each Rockspurite ready to do his part in handling the ball or in the work of interference. It was a thrilling spectacle, and again the uproar lulled somewhat, so that Sterndale was heard distinctly giving the signals.

There was a sudden, quick movement. Chatterton snapped to Renwood, who fumbled and lost the ball; Highland's left guard, Hartford, came through on the jump, got it, but—also fumbled. Renwood redeemed himself by recovering the oval almost before the spectators could realize he had lost it, and it went to Scott, who tried Powell and made two yards.

This was football! It was electrifying in its swift changes. The groan caused by Renwood's fumble had barely reached the lips of the Rockspur spectators when it changed to a shout of joy on seeing him immediately recover the pigskin and carry out the captain's signaled directions.

But two yards was not a gain worth mentioning, and Scott had found Powell there to stay. He felt like immediately making another try at the fellow, but Sterndale decided otherwise.

"Good boy, Renwood!" breathed the captain. "Saved yourself prettily. It's all right."

But Dolph shook his head, evidently little pleased with himself. Again the crouching men were waiting, and Dick fell back. As the signal came, the ball went flying back to the big captain, who punted; but it was an inferior kick, and Garrison, left half for Highland, caught the leather in the middle of the field, where he was downed in a flash by John Smith.

Highland began the attack, but it was quickly over, for Garrison lost the ball on his first plunge into Rockspur's line, having been sent across against Ford, the deaf-mute, who seemed rooted in the ground like an iron post, and Murphy came down on the yellow oval like a load of rocks, with six men on top of him.

In this savage business Rockspur made no delays. This time Mayfair was given a trial, and, aided by his interferers, smashed hard into Highland's centre, but was beaten off. Immediately he went at the visitors' right tackle, but two yards was the best he could do, and the second down left Rockspur with three yards to gain.

Sterndale was given a meaning look by Renwood, who received a nod, and then Dick called the signal for a double-pass. A moment later the ball was snapped back, sent to Scott, and Don started across for Highland's right end. As he shot by Dolph he returned the ball to the quarter-back, and Renwood darted toward the visitors' left wing.

The trick was not successful, however; in fact, it was disastrous, for Jack Powell came through the interference like a leaping greyhound, tackled Dolph and actually carried him back for a loss of ten yards, which gave the ball to Highland.

How they shouted from the crimson bleachers! They roared forth their cheer, ending with Powell's name; and the Rockspur crowd was silenced for the moment.

Don had successfully performed his part of the work in the double-pass, but he was assailed by a suspicion that Renwood, knowing what was coming, had managed to signal the play to Highland and had deliberately permitted himself to be carried backward for a loss.

"Some of his treachery!" thought Scott, giving the quarter-back a black look. "I can't understand why Sterndale didn't do anything about that letter. The fellow will throw this game—if he can."

There was little time for such thoughts as these in the rush and whirl of the game, and every Rockspur man was eager to know what the enemy would try to do. They soon found out, for Garrison was sent through clean to the home team's forty-yard line before being held and forced to take a down.

"Hold 'em here!" panted Sterndale. "Don't let them cut any deeper into our pasture!"

The defenders of the blue-and-white responded nobly. The line was like a stone wall when Morse, Highland's right half, was driven against it. Only two yards were gained on a try at the home team's centre by Walker, and the oval was down again. The same trick being repeated, a yard was lost, upon which the ball went to Rockspur on downs.

Now the blue-and-white bleachers took a turn at cheering, hoping to give the home boys encouragement and vim. The flags waved and the megaphones blared.

The rival gladiators were facing each other near the centre of the field, though on Rockspur's territory. It had been sharp work, but nothing of a sensational nature had taken place thus far. Sensations were to follow, however.

Rockspur had discovered that Highland's centre was strong enough to stop the plays that had been aimed against it, and so the ball was flashed back to

Sterndale, who punted beautifully, sending the pigskin into the grasp of Garrison; but the Highland left half was downed almost in his tracks by John Smith, and the referee's whistle sounded.

Then the referee declared Highland had been off side when this play began, whereupon the visitors suffered a loss of ten yards, and the ball was carried back.

"Smith, you're a corker!" Sterndale found time to say, and the tall boy who had once been called a hoodoo blushed in confusion.

Thus far the Rockspur boys had played with a savage determination that astonished the Highlanders, who, remembering the last game, counted on an easy victory; and now the home team began an attack that proved positively irresistible.

The ball was given to Scott, and, with it hugged tight, he lowered his head and bowled the terrible Powell over, making four yards. Right on top of this, he made one yard through Hartford and Davis, who were playing strong as left guard and centre.

Sterndale showed his fine white teeth in an approving way, and the signal that followed told his men he would make a try on the right end of the enemy's line. The ball came flying back to him, and he smashed his magnificent body into Sawyer and Dickens, right guard and right tackle, gaining six yards and setting the entire gathering of spectators to yelling like wild Indians at a war dance.

There was hardly a lull, and now came the first hair-raising play of the game, and Don Scott was in it. Everything indicated that Sterndale rather foolishly contemplated a kick, so Highland braced for that kind of a play. It was a clever piece of strategy to fool the visitors that way, for Scott was given a third opportunity to show what he could do, and, with his head encased in some sort of helmet, which he had adjusted unseen, he took the ball and dashed off toward Highland's right end. Ahead of him ran a wall of interferers, blocking off the Highland tacklers with the skill of veterans. With the line broken through, Scott still sped on. The backs were hurled aside, and yet he did not stop. Then it was seen that he would have an almost clear run to the enemy's goal line, and every man and woman and child rose up and shrieked; but the cries from the crimson bleachers were those of alarm and horror.

Walker got past Renwood in some way and made a headlong flying tackle at the runner, but he missed, though his hands touched Don. Then it seemed that Highland's last hope of preventing a touchdown had been lost.

The ten-yard line was reached, when from somewhere Davis bobbed up at the very heels of the runner. He got one hand on Don's arm, and the desperate lad with the ball could not fling him off, though he tried. That hand went down as the other came forward, and both fastened like hooks upon Rockspur's right half-back, dragging him to earth exactly one yard from Highland's goal line.

For some moments it was impossible to hear anything. A mighty cheer greeted

this splendid tackle, but the Rockspur spectators were mad with excitement, even though the run had not resulted in a touchdown. Nothing could quiet them, even though Sterndale made the request that they keep still.

"I told ye our boys could do it!" Uncle Ike screamed; but his words were not heard by three persons, so great was the uproar.

Highland prepared to make the most desperate sort of resistance, while Rockspur was equally determined to succeed, being overflowing with courage at this moment. The lines formed, panting, crouching, ready. With a quick movement, Scott was hurled like a battering ram against the enemy's centre. When the ball was forced down on the hold, it was just one foot from Highland's goal line.

"Nun-next time we gug-go over, boys!" panted Chatterton, who found it impossible to keep still.

But he was mistaken, for not a fraction of an inch could they gain when Don once more was flung against the visitors' barrier. It was like trying to butt a hole through a wall of granite.

There was a brief pause. Sterndale seemed to hesitate, and then——

They were at it again. A surprise play had been attempted, for the ball had been snapped to Morse and then passed to Renwood, who got it firmly under his arm and went slamming into the Highlanders. This was their last chance. They must put the ball over or lose it. And so, with the aid of a revolving formation, Dolph was jammed across the line, Don Scott being ahead of him and pulling him by the collar.

Rockspur had made a touchdown, and the members of the eleven were leaping and hugging each other, while down across the field rolled the reverberant, roaring, booming yell of victory from the side where fluttered and flaunted one great mass of blue-and-white.

But, despite all he had done, Don Scott's heart was sore. His was the gallant run that placed success within the grasp of his team, but the lad he hated with all his heart had, on the third try, been given the ball and literally rammed over the line. The touchdown was Renwood's, but Don was certain he could have made it just as well with the aid of that revolving formation, and he felt that he had been robbed of a right that belonged to him.

However, despite the fact that he had been assailed by this feeling, the moment he heard the signal for Renwood to advance the ball he did his level best to put Dolph over the line, and Dolph afterward confessed that, more than anything else, it was Scott's terrific surge at his collar that dragged him across.

The ball had been carried over at the southwest corner of the field, and Sterndale punted it out with a beautiful kick, Renwood catching it directly in front of the goal-posts.

Then came the try for a goal. Having made the touchdown, Renwood was permitted to hold the ball. He stretched himself on the ground, with his right side

toward the goal-posts, while the boys lined out even with his body, but slightly behind the dirt-stained pigskin. Dolph held the ball with his left hand undermost, his elbow resting on the ground and his hand lifted a trifle. The fingers of his right hand steadied the ball on its upper side, and then, with the utmost care, as if handling something intensely delicate and breakable, he lowered his hand to the ground, flattening it out, guarding against letting the ball touch the ground, which would have given Highland liberty to charge.

Sterndale sighted along the seam of the ball, which was uppermost. He drew back his right arm and advanced his left, his fists clenched. A second later, he went leaping at it, his heavy toe caught it fair and handsomely, and the anxious hush that had fallen on the field was broken by a roar when the oval sailed, twisting and whirling over the cross-bar and between the goal-posts, which made the score six to nothing in favor of the home team.

The crowd felt like rushing onto the field and hugging the boys, and it was difficult for two men wearing badges to hold it back. As both sides returned to the centre of the field, Don looked round for his father and found the doctor watching him with an expression of great satisfaction and pride, while Zadia Renwood waved her flag and laughed in his direction.

But the game was not over; not even the first half was over, and there was to be a most surprising turn about in a very few moments. The Highland boys were not "quitters," and every man wore a ferocious look when they lined up with the ball at the centre of the field. The captain had been saying something to some of the men, and the visitors were ready to give the over-confident home team a hustle during the remainder of the first period.

When everything was ready, Walker kicked off, and again those twenty-two men were leaping at each other's throats like famished wolves. The fortunes of war varied till, by a splendid round-the-end run, Garrison took the oval well into Rockspur's territory, being brought to the earth by Sterndale himself. Then Walker booted the pigskin straight into Renwood's clutch; but Dolph fumbled, and Dow, Highland's left end, fell on the ball like a carload of steel rails. Again it seemed to Scott that Renwood was playing into the hands of the enemy.

However, though this advantage had been gained, though the crimson bleachers were shrieking like mad, though they tried their best men against Rockspur's line, the boys from the hills could not get another foot. Three times they were held and beaten off, and the ball went to the home team on downs, which brought a roar of satisfaction from the blue-and-white and caused the crimson to groan.

"Get into 'em! get into 'em!" grated Sterndale, just loud enough for his men to hear. "We must do it!"

Five seconds later, the ball was sent to Scott, who, with teeth set, neck-cords strained, eyes bulging, went across and round Highland's right end for a gain of seventeen yards. There he was forced out of bounds, and the ball was brought in

and put down for a scrimmage, out of which another advance was made, which gave the Rockspur spectators still greater opportunity to breathe freely.

"It's no use!" squealed Uncle Ike, waving his crooked cane. "They jest can't do it! Our boys won't hev it!"

It was too soon to crow, however, as the blue-and-white admirers quickly found out. Highland took a "brace," and the fiercest hammering failed to give the necessary gain, so the visitors again obtained the ball.

Then a kicking duel took place, in which Walker got the best of Sterndale at the end, though it was nip and tuck at first. The visitors having the advantage of the wind, Walker made the most of it. At the conclusion of this volleying, Renwood was downed with the ball in his grasp on Rockspur's ten-yard line, and once more the fighting was uncomfortably near the goal-posts of the home team.

The Highland rushers were desperate, and they tore through Rockspur's interference with a fierceness that could not be resisted. It was impossible to make a gain by a hard drive at Highland's centre, and, fearing to lose the ball there, Sterndale punted.

It was an unfortunate kick, for the ball flew low and Powell jumped in front of it. It struck him on the chest and bounded back over Rockspur's goal line. There was a mad scramble, from the midst of which Stubby Fisher wiggled out like a slippery eel, and a moment later was sprawling spider-fashion on the ball.

Then a wild yell of triumph went up to the blue sky from the crimson bleachers, for the ball was down behind the home team's line and Fisher had it. The players themselves seemed dazed for a moment, and the faces of the Rockspur lads were full of dismay.

There was no delay. The ball was not punted out, but Fisher brought it straight on to the field from the spot where the touchdown had been secured, although that made it necessary to try from a difficult angle. The men lined up, and the stocky little Highland quarter-back squared himself for a try at the goal.

A sudden hush, a quick twinkling of Fisher's short legs, a desperate kick, and away flew the yellow egg. Seconds before it reached the posts, as it seemed, the crowd saw it was a miss, and a mingled yell of satisfaction and shout of dismay arose.

The ball fell to the ground, leaving the score 6 to 4 in favor of the home team.

"It's all right, fellows," breathed Sterndale. "They'll never overtake us now."

It was his manner of trying to give confidence to his men.

When all was ready, he kicked off, driving straight to Fisher, who passed the leather quickly to Garrison. Highland's left half-back was somewhat flustered, and he kicked the ball out of bounds at Rockspur's thirty-yard line. Scott had it, and he announced an intention of bringing it in ten yards for a scrimmage.

Rockspur now endeavored to smash a road up the field by a series of furious

plunges, making ten yards in this manner; but there the Highland line became rooted, and Sterndale was forced to punt. Murphy came to the fore again by nailing Morse on Highland's forty-yard line.

But Highland had the ball. Apparently Walker was getting ready to punt, and that was what Rockspur expected. Then it was that the visitors gave the home team a dose of its own medicine by surprising them with a sudden rush through centre that carried the leather down the field to Rockspur's thirty-five-yard line. Right there the rush stopped and two mad lunges failed to gain a single foot.

Then Walker gave the signal for Garrison to try for a goal from the field, knowing that the first half must terminate in a very short time. The Rockspur men saw what their opponents contemplated, and some of them laughed outright over the folly of an attempt to drop-kick a goal from such a distance. Every man of the rushers prepared to try to go through and down Garrison the moment the ball was snapped, while the Highlanders braced themselves to hold the enemy in check long enough for Phil to make a fair try of it.

Again a hush, and then a quick movement and a clash. The ball flew to Highland's left half-back, who took it with the utmost coolness, poised it carefully, dropped it, and the moment it rose from the ground kicked it with all the force and accuracy he could command. Then some of those panting tigers came through and slammed him to the earth, but they were too late.

Away sailed the pigskin, turning over and over, rising higher and higher, a beautiful kick. There was a craning of necks and an upturning of white, anxious faces.

"It's over!"

Over it was, fairly and beautifully. Barely had it touched the ground when the referee's whistle told the first half was ended, and Highland had a lead of three points, the score being 6 to 9.

CHAPTER XXXI. THE SECOND HALF.

Under the grand-stand the perspiring, blood-stained, dirt-bedaubed young heroes were being rubbed down by their admiring friends, while outside the Highland crowd sang pæans of victory.

"We'll win this game, fellows, just as true as we play the next half to win," said Sterndale, undaunted.

He never seemed to lose courage, but some of those tired fellows hung their heads.

"They can out-kick us," muttered Rob Linton.

"Well, if we've found our weakness there, we must avoid kicking," said the captain, guarding his words so none of the Highlanders would hear. "Perhaps they don't know how weak we are."

"Don't fool yourself," grated Scott, flashing a look in the direction of Renwood. "They were informed of all our weak points before they came to Rockspur to-day."

"How do you know that?" demanded Dick, putting peculiar emphasis on the "you."

Don realized that this was something he could not explain, and so he muttered:

"Never mind. I know a thing or two, and I've caught on to some things in this game that ought to be plain enough to you, Sterndale, if you are not stone-blind."

"You're all wrong, Scott, and you'll find it out," said Dick, positively. "The sooner you get over that feeling the better it will be for you and the team."

Scott flushed. "Do you mean to hint that I haven't done my level best?" he harshly demanded.

"Not a bit of it," Dick instantly answered. "I don't know where we would have been without you. And I've given you chances enough, too."

"But you gave the ball to Renwood on the third try when the touchdown was made—and that after my run."

"It was a trick to bother Highland some. Besides that, you were tired, and I had sent you against them twice."

"Tired! Bah! I was over the line ahead of Renwood, and——"

"I don't believe I'd got over at all if you hadn't yanked me across," broke in the voice of Renwood himself, who had overheard Don's words by accident. "I was stuck fast when you gave that surge and seemed to pull me right through Hartford. The entire credit of that touchdown belongs to you, Scott."

This was so frank and honest that Don was silenced for a moment, but he finally

muttered:

"Well, I didn't get it."

There the matter dropped for a time, the men receiving notice to get onto the field again, the ten minutes of rest being over; but Don had not changed his mind in the least.

The two teams were given tumultuous greetings by their respective admirers, and, as they lined up for the concluding half, it was observed that Rockspur had not substituted a man, while three new players appeared for Highland, being Pell at right guard, Hardoak at right tackle and McCord at right half-back. It was plainly an attempt to strengthen the right wing of the visiting eleven.

"Now, git in, boys—git in an' win!" cried old Uncle Ike. "Jest show 'em the kind of stuff you're made of!"

It was Highland's kick-off, and Walker drove the ball to Mayfair, who attempted to run with it, but was downed by Pell and Johnson on the home team's thirty-five-yard line. The referee, however, announcing that Hardoak was off side, the ball was called back, Highland losing five yards as a penalty. Therefore, it was from the visitors' fifty-yard line that Walker made his second kick, which Carter caught. Once more the game was on in all its fury, and the tide of battle ebbed and flowed with heart-breaking irregularity.

Garrison was full of confidence, having been petted and congratulated and complimented, and seven minutes after the second half began he made another try to drop-kick a goal from the field. This time, however, not being favored by the wind, he missed the goal-posts by two yards, though he came near enough to give Rockspur something of a scare.

Sterndale had been nettled by the ineffective kicking of his team, and, now, with the wind favoring him, he punted out in a manner calculated to show what he could do. It was the longest kick of the day, for the ball actually came down on Highland's thirty-yard line. One of the visitors would have gathered it in, but he was checked by cooler heads, and the leather was permitted to roll on over the goal line for a touchback, which counted for nothing.

Highland suddenly seemed to realize that facing the wind meant different kind of playing, whereupon a time-killing game was inaugurated right away. It was not long before Sterndale saw through this, and he resolved to give the enemy such hot work that they would find time-killing would not do.

As soon as the ball again came into the possession of the home team, Dick sent Mayfair against the new men in the right wing of the Highland line to try the mettle of those substitutes. The interference was poor, and Rockspur's left half-back was blocked without a gain. Again this play was tried, but the result was the same, and Sterndale was forced to kick.

For a second time the big captain of the Rockspur Eleven booted out a distance annihilator, and for a second time Highland permitted the ball to roll across the

goal line, which was foxy and scientific defense, showing that the coaching of Winston had borne excellent fruit. Only a small number of the spectators appreciated the quality of the playing they were witnessing, but the Harvard coach saw it with satisfaction that he was unable to express.

With the resumption of play, Walker kicked from his kick-out line, but the oval went out of bounds and Powell crashed into Ford, who was trying to pick the ball up. The mute was stretched out for a few seconds, but he quickly recovered and resumed his place, a grim look of mingled pain and courage on his face.

"They're trying to knock us out," thought Don. "If they can cripple us, they'll have the advantage, and they know it."

This made him intensely angry, and his dark eyes glowed with a dangerous fire. He had hoped that Rockspur would be able to give Highland a severe drubbing, for all of the supposed treachery of Renwood, but that hope was growing fainter as the minutes passed and the home team gained no decided advantage in the second half. All through the game Powell had shown himself to be the most dangerous man to encounter in the line of the visiting team, and now Don fancied the fellow was using his brute strength in an endeavor to put some of the Rockspur players out of the game.

With this idea firmly planted in his head, Scott aimed for Powell in the very next scrimmage. When the energetic Highlander attempted to shoulder him aside, Scott lost his temper completely and struck Powell a heavy blow on the neck.

Instantly the whistle of the keen-eyed referee sounded, and, as a penalty for this foul, Rockspur was put back a distance of ten yards, with an equal advance for the visitors.

"Don't do a thing like that again, old man!" exclaimed Sterndale. "We can't afford it. Hold steady."

"But don't you see what that fellow is trying?" palpitated Don, who already was ashamed of his angry action. "He's doing his best to cripple some of our men."

"Then let him do the fouling," returned the captain. "We can't afford such business."

There was no time for further words. Scott was deeply humiliated, for he knew he had, in a burst of ungoverned anger, done something that seemed to brand him as a ruffian. And this had happened after he was beginning to congratulate himself on his ability to control his passions when he resolutely set about doing so, for was he not playing football on the same eleven with the one fellow he hated more than all others in the world—had he not done his level best to drag that fellow into the glory of a touchdown?

Now, all in a moment, he realized that very little credit was due him for holding in check his hatred toward Renwood. The scales dropped from his eyes, and he saw it was to avoid humiliation and shame before his father that he was on the team, not because he had resolved to restrain the animosity for Renwood that

had leaped to life within him. Of course his father had seen that wretched blow at Powell, and Don dared not look in his direction. He hung his head and was most crestfallen in appearance.

Before he knew it the Highlanders were smashing through Rockspur's right wing, Powell was upon him, and then he was trampled down as the whirling mass of humanity swept on like a twisting tornado. When this storm had passed, a human figure was seen prostrate and motionless on the torn and trampled turf.

"Scott's down! He's hurt! Stop the game!"

Cries of alarm went up, the whistle sounded, and several men bent over Don.

"Give him air! Where is a doctor?"

Then Dr. Scott hurried onto the field and knelt by his son, lifting Don's head to his knee. The boy's eyes opened and he gasped painfully, seeming dazed for a moment.

"Where are you hurt, Don?" asked the doctor, in a steady voice.

"Hurt? I'm not hur—— It's my side—and head!"

The injured lad had tried to start up, but a sharp pain caught him in his side and his head went round and round, while a black shadow dropped like a curtain before his eyes. Blood trickled from his nostrils, his father wiping it away.

"It's a shame!" grated Sterndale, through his clenched teeth. "Scott's strengthened the weak spot on the team and made the best record of anybody to-day. With him out, we're beaten!"

These words were spoken low into the ears of Mayfair and intended for no other, but they pierced that black curtain and reached the dazed brain of the boy on the ground, arousing all his wonderful will-power and bringing him back from the brink of unconsciousness.

"I'm not knocked out!" he whispered. "Give me some water! I'll play this game out if I die for it!"

Water was placed to his lips, his face was wet with it, and then he got up, with his father's arm about him. The breathless spectators saw him push that arm off and step away, staggering a bit, but gathering himself and growing steadier. Then, after a last moment of hesitation, the doctor turned away and the players prepared to resume the game.

The Rockspur yell came over the field, with Scott's name exploding at the end like a huge firecracker. It was a sound to stir the blood, and it seemed to restore the right half-back of the home team to complete strength.

Then the game was resumed. Don caught a look of satisfaction from Powell, and he knew the Highland left tackle felt that he had evened the score.

The pluck of Scott gave Rockspur new life, the onslaught of the visitors being checked. But time was flying, and, as yet, no opportunity had arrived for the

home team to make the coveted score. Highland was fighting beautifully to hold her own till the time was up.

There were many swift changes, but most of the struggle took place near the middle of the field, and the hopes of the Rockspur spectators fell lower and lower as the second half waned and drew near a close. With every sharp play by the visitors the bleachers to the left of the grand-stand heaved with crimson and shrieked with joy. The bleachers on the other side tried to keep it up, but a note of doubt and failing confidence had crept into the cheering. Old Uncle Ike, however, remained undaunted, declaring over and over that, "Our boys will git there yit."

"It's a shame!" fluttered Dora Deland; "but I felt sure we'd lose when I heard they'd taken Don Scott back. Just see how he lost ten yards for us by striking that Highland fellow!"

"As it happened, that made no difference," said Zadia Renwood, immediately. "I think you are unjust to Don Scott. He has played splendidly."

"What has he done? He hasn't made a touchdown. Dolph did that."

"After Don Scott's run had made it possible. Rockspur owes to Scott the points it has made."

"You're just the queerest girl, Zade!" exclaimed Dora. "You know Don Scott hates your brother."

"Is that a good reason why I should be unjust to him? Look! look! He downed that Highland fellow that time!"

Don had been waiting for the opportunity, and, with the ball tucked under his arm, he shot out from the midst of the interference, lowered his head and bowled Powell over handsomely. He made a gain of ten yards before being stopped by Walker.

After that, Scott felt a little better, for he had shown that Highland's left tackle was vulnerable.

In the next scrimmage Jotham Sprout was put out of the game with an injured back, and it was necessary to fill his place with Thad Boland. Boland had the brawn to stop the gap in the line, but his slowness was well known to Highland, and they tried to take advantage of it, which brought the brunt of the battle on the right wing of the home team and gave Scott all he could do.

With only five minuses of play remaining, neither side had scored in the second half, and there seemed no prospect that a further score would be made.

"It's no use," said some of the Rockspur spectators. "We can beat those chaps at baseball, but they are too much for us in this kind of a game."

Highland had the ball, and was playing to hold it as long as possible. Don saw this, and he fairly ached in his desire to get hold of the leather. The ball was down for a scrimmage, and he pressed up into the line between Linton and Boland. He heard the signal and fancied he understood it. Then Davis snapped back to Fisher,

and Highland's quarter-back attempted a long pass to Powell, who had dropped slightly behind the line for the ball.

The play was balked, for right through between Hartford and Dow shot a pantherish figure, and the oval did not reach Powell's clutch. Don Scott had intercepted the pass, and he went by Garrison like an express train overdue and trying to make up time. But the hopes of the Rockspur spectators were dashed when he was brought down by Walker on Highland's forty-yard line. It seemed that the last chance ended right there.

"Oh, you can't do it, you know!" sang the visitors on the bleachers.

Sterndale lost not a second. He tried to get Scott round Highland's end, but no gain was made. Next he gave the ball to Mayfair and smashed into the enemy's centre, getting five yards.

Once more the Highlanders became rooted. It was impossible to jar them. Already some of the visiting spectators were pressing toward the gate, regarding the game as won by their team, for but one minute of play remained. Having given up hope, not a few of the Rockspurites were leaving the grounds, unwilling to remain and witness the rejoicing of the victorious Highlanders.

"The boys did well," they were saying, "but they were outclassed."

Then there was a hush. Something was going to happen. What could it be?

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FINISH AND THE BLOW.

What was up? The Highland spectators watched the men on the field with languid interest, regarding the game as safely won. Somebody declared it was "all over but the shouting." The one who said this already was so hoarse from shouting that his voice sounded like the croaking of a huge frog. The blue-and-white was down; the crimson was aloft.

Don Scott, his breast heaving from recent exertions, was seen to poise himself securely on his pins, while Renwood crouched just behind Chatterton, who dallied with the ball between his feet.

"They're going to try a drop-kick from the field," laughed somebody on the Highland bleachers. "It's the last gasp of the dying calf."

Flip went the ball, but Renwood handled it awkwardly in his excitement and made a poor pass to Scott. Don, however, for all of his fiery nature, now seemed calm as an old-fashioned clock, and he gathered in the quarterback's pass, deliberately turning and poising the leather while the Highland rushers were fighting madly to tear their way to him.

The great egg dropped, struck, and then was lifted with a clean, swinging kick. It flew over the hands outstretched to stop it, carrying with it the fortunes of this remarkable game. The hush suddenly became intense as all eyes followed the oval, which went straight and true as a cannon ball between the goal-posts and over the cross-bar. When it struck the ground pandemonium broke loose, for this beautiful kick in the last minute of the game had given Rockspur five more points and placed them ahead, the score being 11 to 9.

The game was won, and Dick Sterndale gathered Don Scott in his arms and hugged him with a bear-hug, while the mad crowd bellowed and thundered and the bleachers to the right of the grand-stand became a heaving sea of blue-and-white billows.

But there could be no delay, for thirty seconds of play remained, and the ball was brought back to centre for Highland to kick-off. With tears in his eyes, Lee Walker kicked the ball in a half-hearted manner. It was captured by Mayfair, and then the whistle sounded and the end had come.

Onto the field poured the roaring crowd, while the players caught Scott up to their shoulders and bore him aloft, cheering and singing. Such handshaking, such hugs, such dances of joy! Everybody tried to reach the hero of the day. It was remarkable how two girls made their way through that swaying, seething mass of humanity, but they did so, and when Don was lowered for a moment he discovered Zadia Renwood clasping both his hands and congratulating him. His face burned like fire, and he found himself unable to utter a word in response.

Although they felt bad over losing the game at the last moment, the Highland

players congratulated the victors, ending with a promise to beat them in the third and concluding game of the series.

Then there was more cheering, more handshaking and demonstrations of joy, and the boys finally found their way to the dressing-room beneath the grandstand, where scores of admirers were ready to rub them down.

Among the Rockspur players was but one man who did not seem bubbling with satisfaction and happiness. Scott observed that Renwood did not seem elated, and his heart swelled with mingled anger and satisfaction, as he fancied the fellow had been completely balked in his treacherous designs.

In the midst of the chatter of voices somebody announced that Leon Bentley had been captured by Sim Drew, brought back under arrest and confined in the village lock-up.

This information re-awoke Don to his own troubles and reminded him that his father had not appeared to congratulate him after the game was over. Immediately he decided that the doctor, receiving information of the arrest of Bentley, had at once left the field to interview the captured rascal. This being true, it seemed certain that he still suspected his son and had hastened to learn from Leon's lips if his suspicions were well founded.

"He might have waited a little!" the boy mentally cried. "But I suppose he thought we had lost the game anyway, so he failed to see the finish. I'm sorry. He'll get the whole thing out of Bentley; but, unless, the fellow lies, no matter what else he learns, he'll find out I had no part in the forgery of that check."

The possibility that, to partly shield himself, thinking the doctor could not be so severe if Don should be implicated, Leon might assert that Don was associated with him in the check business startled and appalled Scott.

"He won't dare!" he panted, half aloud. "If he does——"

"What ails you, old man?" asked Sterndale. "One'd never dream by the look on your face that you won the game for us to-day. You took that pass splendidly, and ——"

"Saved me the disgrace of making a fizzle at the critical moment," said Renwood, coming up with half his clothes on. "I owe you thanks, Scott."

"You owe me nothing!" Don blazed, instantly. "I rather fancy you would have felt more like thanking me if I had fumbled your pass."

Dolph turned pale and stared hard at the lad who had won the game.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Do you insinuate that I——"

"I insinuate nothing," interrupted Don, hotly; "but I think what I like. We didn't lose the game to-day, Renwood, for all of the traitor on the team."

There could be no misunderstanding his meaning. Dolph's voice shook as he said: "You are insinuating, and I want to tell you now that if you mean to cast that

slander on me, you lie!"

Don was on his feet, and he had fallen back against the board wall of the dressing-room. His right hand gripped something that was standing there, and then the demon of uncontrollable anger possessed and mastered him.

The next moment, with a stick of wood, he struck Renwood to the floor!

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE CONFESSION.

All alone, his face drawn and white, moving like one in a trance, the hero of the football game went down the hill. It seemed strange that he was not in the midst of a throng of admirers, all eager to be near him and bask in the sunlight of his glory. It seemed strange that not one of his late companions on the field accompanied him. But it seemed stranger still that his eyes were full of despair and his appearance was that of one who had met crushing and overwhelming defeat.

He had met defeat in his soul, and he knew it; but out of that defeat was to come the great victory of his life.

He had seen the victim of his cowardly blow carried away in the arms of horrified friends, his eyes closed, his face ghastly, one arm dangling limply. The dreadful picture was before him now, and it sickened his soul.

He knew Sterndale had stopped him outside the dressing-room, but had stood off without touching him, as if afraid of contamination—the same Sterndale who had hugged him a short time before in the presence of all the players and the great crowd of spectators. In a dull way, he had heard the captain tell him what a contemptible person he was, and he had felt that every word was true. He had not denied it when Dick accused him of dropping the forged letter that was meant to destroy Renwood's reputation with the members of the eleven. He made no sign when Sterndale declared he had seen through the wretched trick from the first, and would have kicked him off the team but for the disruption another change must have brought about. When the captain had finished, Don turned away, without a word in his own defense.

A groan came from Don's blue lips as he thought of his father's story and warning, which he had utterly disregarded, to his complete downfall and disgrace. His heart was wrung with anguish at the thought that he had brought another great sorrow upon that father who had suffered so much, and with that he began to think of others more than himself. Renwood—ah! that was the worst! Just then he would have given his life to undo that passionate act.

"You're the feller I'm lookin' fer."

Simeon Drew's hand dropped on the boy's shoulder. Don looked at the man, who had overtaken him as he reached the front gate of his home.

"You have come to arrest me?" said the miserable lad, huskily. "All right; I'm ready to go."

"I ain't come to 'rest ye," denied the officer. "I thought you said you was innercent?"

"I did it."

"Well, by Halifax!" gasped Drew. "An' Bentley said he was the one."

"Bentley?" muttered Don, staring at the man, uncomprehendingly. "Why, he wasn't there! I struck the blow."

"I dunno what you're drivin' at," admitted the puzzled deputy; "but I do know that Bentley wants to see ye an' hev a talk with ye. He begged me to hunt ye up. I'll take ye in to see him."

The boy's head cleared a bit, but he accompanied Drew without further words, and soon he was standing before Leon Bentley, who, wild-eyed and fear-shaken, paced the narrow confines of his prison, smoking a cigarette.

"I'm glad you came, Don!" cried Leon, trying to catch his hand. "I was afraid you wouldn't!"

The doctor's son refused to permit his hand to be taken.

"What do you want?" he coldly asked.

"Don't look like that!" Leon whimpered. "We've been friends, and I've tried to do you some good turns."

"You have done me the greatest possible harm, but I am willing to forget and try to forgive if you tell nothing but the truth now."

"Oh, I'll tell the truth!" cried the nerveless prisoner; "but you must help me. Promise that you will help me!"

"How?"

"With your father. I think I can fix it about the bicycle, if I can get your father to go easy with me. I'm sorry, and I'll try to do better. Please help me with your old man, Don!"

"If I promise to try, you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"Yes! yes!"

"I'll do all I can, then. I have been accused of knowing something about that forged check."

"You didn't, Don—you didn't know a thing about it!" declared Leon, instantly. "I hooked it from your governor's check-book the night I came over to tell you about the game at Highland. I had the doctor's writing down fine from practicing on that excuse business, and I forged the check. Then I didn't dare to get it cashed here, so I took it over to Freeport, where I bought some stuff and got a man to take the check and give me the difference in money. He must have got nervous about it afterward, or he'd never hurried it back here the way he did."

Don did not even look at Simeon Drew, who was leaning against the door, wagging his jaws over a chew of tobacco and listening to every word that passed between the boys. He was certain now that the suspicion of this crime would be lifted from him, but there was yet another thing about which he wished to know the truth.

"How about that remnant of a letter you claimed you picked up from beneath Renwood's desk?" he asked.

"Why, what does that have to do with this business?"

"You have promised to tell me the truth in everything," said Don, grimly. "If you do not—if you hold back or lie about a single thing, I'll not speak one word to help you! Was that remnant of a letter genuine?"

"No," admitted the young scamp, trying to force a grin; "I faked that up."

Don steadied himself on his feet, feeling that the ground on which he had fancied he stood securely was dropping from beneath him bit by bit.

"And you led me into the dirty trick of dropping that letter for Sterndale!" he finally said, harshly. "You wished somehow to get me concerned in your low business!"

"But you hated Renwood just as much as I did!" cried Leon. "It was to down him."

"And failed. Sterndale tumbled to the trick. Is that all you can tell? Is there nothing more?"

"That's all."

The manner in which Leon uttered those two words convinced Don that it was not all, and he instantly said:

"If you hold back anything, you want to remember that I will not help you. The truth is bound to come out, and so you may as well confess the whole business. Is that all?"

"Yes, it is—all except one thing."

"What is that?"

"It's about the cutting up of those suits and that football."

Don steadied himself again, feeling his last foothold crumbling, and his voice almost failed him as he asked:

"What about that? Speak out, fellow!"

"It—it was a mistake, Don," faltered Bentley, keeping his eyes downturned. "You see, it was this way: Just before you dropped into the club that night, Renwood had his knife out. It was on the table when you had that little jaw with him, and I took it, thinking he wouldn't notice it was gone. He did notice it after you went out, and we all hunted for it, but, of course, we didn't find it. Later, when they proposed to give Carter a try on the team, I got mad, for I saw I'd be dropped if Carter got on. I told them what I thought and got out. Then I wanted to do something to get even with somebody, and I knew Renwood was the one who was trying to bounce me. I remembered how you thought he was a traitor, and an idea struck me. I went up to the dressing-room under the grand-stand and slashed up the suits and the football with Renwood's knife, which I meant to leave right there, hoping he'd be suspected; but, just as I finished the job,

somebody came right in by the door and bumped against me. I couldn't see who it was in the dark, and I tried to jump and scoot. The other fellow grabbed me, and we had it. You bet I didn't want to be caught in that job, so I fought for all I was worth; but the other fellow was too much for me, and he had me down and was choking me to death when I struck at him with the knife. I didn't know it was you, Don—truly I didn't! I thought I was being killed. You know the rest; you know how you got the knife and I managed to slip away. That's the whole truth, Don, and now you must help me, just as you promised you would."

The listening lad sat down weakly on a box, feeling that he had been robbed of everything. He beheld himself in the true light at last, and the spectacle was so repulsive that he shuddered and grew cold. When he lifted his eyes, Bentley cowered beneath the terrible look he received.

"Don't!" he whimpered once more—"don't look at me that way! I've told you the truth, and now you must help me! Think of the terrible scrape I'm in!"

"You!" cried Don, rising and flinging the other off, so that he reeled up against the wall, his cigarette flying from his fingers. "The terrible scrape you are in! Why, I have killed Renwood!"

Then he went out, Bentley's prayers and pleadings falling on ears that were deaf.

CHAPTER XXXIV. REPENTANCE AND VICTORY.

It was some time after dark that, having till then wandered aimlessly about by himself, Don Scott turned in at the gate of his home, passed up the gravel walk and entered the front door. His heart felt like a stone within him, without life even to give a fluttering start when he found himself face to face with his father, who seemed to be waiting in the hall.

"My son!" cried the doctor, catching him by the arm, "where have you been? When I came home, I expected to find you here to tell me all about it."

"Oh, I can't tell you!" groaned Don. "I can't think about it! How you must loathe me!"

The doctor was astounded. "My boy, my boy!" he exclaimed; "what do you mean? It is you who must shrink from me, for I have heard how Leon Bentley has confessed, clearing you of everything. I can never forgive myself for permitting a suspicion of your possible guilt to creep into my mind. And they say you won the game to-day by a wonderful kick after I was suddenly called to attend a patient. I'm sorry I could not have been there, but I'm proud of you, my son—proud of you!"

Don choked, beginning to tremble in every limb. He suffered then such anguish and remorse as seldom comes to a person more than once in a lifetime.

"You don't know, father," he said, hoarsely; "you haven't heard——"

"They told me all about it," insisted the doctor. "And you had genuine grit to get up and continue playing after you were stunned. Do you feel your injury much now?"

It was not an injury to his body that was giving the boy such exquisite pain; it was a far deeper wound.

"Oh, I don't care for that!" he cried, despair in his voice and manner.

"Then you should be happy," declared his father, wondering and perplexed over the boy's appearance. "You were not hurt as badly as young Renwood. Why, they had to take him home in a carriage. I met them on the road, and they had me attend him. It was a bad knock on the head, and might have caused concussion of the brain, but he came round all right, and he'll be well as ever in a day or two."

The strength went out of Don's legs, and he dropped heavily on the hall seat. Up to that moment, he had thought Dolph Renwood's blood was on his hands.

"Father!" he panted, "is it—is it—true? Are you sure I didn't kill him?"

"Of course it is true; he is not seriously injured. But what are you saying? Do you mean——"

"I struck him after the game was over. That was what ailed him."

"And they never told me a word! Struck him, Don—with what?"

"A baseball bat," whispered the unfortunate lad. "Oh, I'm a bad, wicked boy! I'm not fit to be your son! I wish I'd never been born!"

Then he burst into tears, which, more than anything else, were compelled by the relief in learning that he had not the crime of homicide on his soul, and he was shaken by a perfect tempest of emotion.

The doctor lifted his remorseful son and led the boy into his private office, closing the door behind them. And there in the seclusion of that room Don unbosomed himself fully, holding nothing back, and found relief and consolation and forgiveness.

"I know I was all wrong; I see it now," said Don, when he had ended. "Father, what can I do?"

"You must go to Renwood, confess everything as you have confessed to me, humble yourself and ask his forgiveness. That is the least you can do. In this there is one good feature, at least; Bentley's story will prove to the other boys that they were wrong in believing you destroyed the football and the suits. Will you go to see Renwood, my son?"

"I'll go, father—I'll do anything! And as long as I live I'll never forget the lesson. I was to blame for everything!"

"You were to blame in letting your temper get the best of you, but you were led into wrong-doing by your bad companion. Now you can see the danger in associating with such a fellow."

"I'm going to see Renwood to-night—now!" cried Don, springing up. "I can't sleep unless I see him!"

"Go, my boy; I think he will be in condition to see you. Go!"

Father and son walked to the front door together, the arm of the former across the shoulders of the latter. Then the boy went out into the darkness and hurried away.

Don feared he would not be admitted to see Dolph, but his fears were groundless. There was some delay, and he waited anxiously in the hall; then the maid came and conducted him to Renwood's room.

Dolph was there, reclining on a Morris chair, wrapped in a dressing-gown. He was pale, and there was a bandage about his head. He looked at his visitor in speechless inquiry, while Don stood with his head bowed and his face flushed with shame.

Renwood was the first to speak. "I'm glad you've come," he said, "for I'm aching to tell you just what I think of you; but I declare I didn't think you'd have the crust to show yourself here!"

His voice was full of the scorn and contempt which the persistent injustice of his enemy had aroused to its fullest extent. The other lad shrank a bit, lifting one

hand.

"That's right!" he hoarsely exclaimed; "you can't say anything too mean about me, call me what you like! I deserve it all—and more!"

Renwood was astonished by this altered attitude of his enemy, but fancied it was fear of reprisal that had brought the boy who dealt the blow hurrying to see him. However, before he could say anything further, Don went on:

"I thought I was right in hating you, for I had been led to believe you a sneak and a traitor. I have a nasty temper that it has been impossible for me to govern in the past, but I'll master it in the future—or die! You have every reason to hate and despise me; but you cannot hate and despise me more than I hate and despise myself. I thought I had killed you, and I suffered just what I merited. But even then I did not know what a miserable wretch I was till I went to see Bentley in the lock-up and heard his confession."

Renwood's wonder was growing, for this humility and repentance were so genuine that his doubts were dying.

"Bentley," he muttered. "They said he had been arrested."

"Yes, and I want you to hear just what he told me. Will you listen?"

"Go ahead."

Then, as well as he could in his excited condition, Don told of the confession Leon had made; and a change came over the face of the injured lad who listened, for Dolph began to see how this repentant boy who stood before him had been misled by his own passions and by the deceptions of an unscrupulous and rascally companion. Don did not spare himself in the least, and he did not try to shoulder all the blame onto Bentley. When he told of the forged letter, he was astounded to find that Dolph knew absolutely nothing about it. Fearing to bring further discord into the team, Sterndale had told Renwood nothing of that letter.

Some moments after this, on her way downstairs, Zadia Renwood passed the door of her brother's room. That door was ajar, so that, glancing in, she saw two boys standing face to face, the one with his head bandaged having both hands on the shoulders of the other, and she heard her brother saying:

"It was a misunderstanding and a mistake, Scott, that's all. It's all right now, and I think we'll know each other better in the future. Let's forget it."

When Don Scott came down from Dolph's room, his face wore a look of relief that was almost happiness. He found Renwood's sister in the hall, and she let him out.

"I'm so glad!" she said, giving him a happy smile; "I'm so glad you and Dolph are to be friends now. I'm sure you'll like each other."

Alone in the night, Don halted, took off his hat and lifted his throbbing forehead to the cool wind that came off the open sea roaring along the Eastern Shore. The sky was heavily overcast with clouds, but, as he looked upward, they broke and parted in one place, and through the rift he saw a calm, pure white star.

The following is quoted from the *Highland Register*, published eleven days later:

“The third and final football game of the series between Highland and Rockspur was played last Saturday before a great crowd of spectators in Highland, and the boys from the coast won by a score of 17 to 12. It was a fast and furious battle from start to finish, the youngsters on both sides fighting as if for their very lives and displaying at times such vim, dash and courage that the witnesses were aroused to the greatest enthusiasm and cheered themselves hoarse. Of course, it is greatly regretted that our boys lost after being trained by such a thoroughly experienced and capable coach as Mr. Winston; but Rockspur also had a first-class coach in young Renwood, who played quarter-back on the team, and the improvement of the visitors since their first appearance here this season was something remarkable. Still, it may be justly claimed that luck had much to do with the result of the game, for it was Garrison’s fumble within four minutes of the close of the game that gave Rockspur the ball and enabled the visitors to obtain the final touchdown and goal that cooked Highland’s goose. At the time this accident happened Highland was in the lead, the score standing 12 to 11.

“The first half was a battle of giants. Several times it seemed that one side or the other must make a touchdown, but something happened to prevent anything of the kind taking place, and it was a case of taking a desperate chance after the second down, when Scott tried a drop-kick for a goal from the twenty-five-yard line. He made it beautifully, and the half ended with the points 5 to 0 in favor of the enemy.

“In the second half Highland put some new men on the field, and one of the substitutes, Hardoak, soon found an opportunity to show his mettle by going round Rockspur’s left end for a touchdown that resulted in a goal, giving the home team a lead of one point, 6 to 5. But this simply seemed to awaken eleven tigers from Rockspur, and the way they tore great holes in the right wing of the Highland line was heartrending to witness. Whenever he was given the ball to advance, Scott seemed a perfect demon of fury, and once he actually made fourteen yards with half the home team apparently riding on his back and shoulders. He was finally crushed to the earth by sheer weight of numbers, but even then he managed to squirm along for a foot or two before they could pin him fast. And he finally slammed himself over the line for a touchdown that netted a goal and gave his team the lead once more, 11 to 6.

“At this stage the game was most exciting, for Walker was begging his men to take a brace and win out, and every fellow responded nobly. In a kicking battle Highland got the advantage, and the ball was held in Rockspur’s territory. Then, after several minutes of varying fortune, Morse found a hole between Ford and Carter and got over the goal line of the visitors for another touchdown, from which Walker kicked the handsomest and most difficult goal of the day. That gave Highland 12 points and Rockspur had 11. Not a great margin, but the game was drawing toward the end, and it seemed enough.

“Our boys fought for time, but Sterndale’s men pushed the battle with a sort of

mad fury that it was hard to withstand. When the ball came into Highland's possession she endeavored to retain it till the finish of the game, and there was but four more minutes of play when Garrison fumbled in a scrimmage and Renwood captured the ball and wiggled out of the squirming knot of players. He got a fair start, but even then he could not have made a goal without the assistance of Scott, who was the only interferer that ran with him. Powell had been doing masterly work in the way of tackling, but Scott bowled Jack over and saved Rockspur's quarter-back from being brought to the turf. Walker came next, and somehow Scott had recovered from the collision with Powell enough to be on hand and block Lee quite as effectively. Then the two men went down a clear field, with all the others stringing after them like a pack of hounds and the Rockspur spectators roaring like mad. Pell had great speed, and it seemed that he was going to overtake the runner for a tackle, but somehow Scott looked over his shoulder and got the range of the pursuer. When Pell leaped Scott sprang sidelong before him, and it was Scott that the tackler brought down, while Renwood ran on and crossed Highland's goal line with the ball. From that a goal was kicked, with the final result as stated above; but it is to the amazing interference of Scott more than to the run of Renwood that Rockspur must give the glory for winning the game."

THE END.