

THE
NEW CAPTAIN
HERBERT HAYENS



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THE
NEW CAPTAIN

HERBERT HAYENS





N.C. "Hallo, want to see me about something?" *Frontispiece*

THE NEW CAPTAIN

BY

HERBERT HAYENS

Author of "Play Up Royals!" "Play Up, Buffs!"
"The Honour of a Royall," etc

With Coloured Frontispiece

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CHAPTER I

DIRTY PLAY

Jack Sefton, the Soccer captain at Waynflete, was in a mood altogether unusual for him. The junior Magpies regarded him with respect and admiration; he was as good in class as a professional swot, a natural leader in the playing-fields, and an all-round popular fellow. He had a bright smile and a cheery word for any one in trouble, and a sense of humour that swept you unresistingly along with him. Though not exactly handsome, he had a pleasant, slightly freckled face and grayish blue eyes; his lips, perhaps, were a thought too thin and compressed, while his chin was a trifle too square. He was of medium height a shade too thick-set for ideal proportion, but promising more than average strength.

His face cleared, though not completely, as the door opened and a boy entered the study. "Hulloa Reg," he exclaimed, "thought you had turned in."

The two boys formed a striking contrast. Reggie Wynford was tall, with olive-tinted skin, dark hair, and dark, flashing eyes. He was built on altogether finer lines, with long, supple, artistic fingers, and a distinctly clever face. Whether it was a good face or not, few ordinary observers would have cared to decide; some people might have seen or imagined a hint of craft in it.

"Saw your light and popped in," he replied easily, and his voice was musical, almost caressing. "I'm afraid you are taking our defeat too seriously, and, may I say? that isn't quite Jack Sefton's style. Besides, we put up a decent fight, and only lost by the odd goal."

"Surely you don't imagine I'm such a Cissy as that! Erdington beat us fair and square; that's all in the day's work; we'll turn the tables on them next time."

"The mystery deepens. What is the trouble? Anything to do with the match?"

"Everything! Look here, Reggie, I've never been so ashamed in my life. You know Mr. Mayne?"

"The Erdington master? Yes; awfully decent fellow, Mayne."

"He was talking to Moggridge when I left the field, and I couldn't help overhearing some of the words. He said it was a pity we had brought two or three dirty players with us; it spoiled the game, and was a bad example to the juniors."

"Rather strong language for Mr. Mayne, but you need not take too much notice of it. After all, he was only giving his personal opinion."

"But what he said was true," declared Sefton doggedly; "if it weren't I shouldn't care, but I saw Pember myself; the biggest hooligan couldn't have played a dirtier game."

"Pember! oh, well, Pember *is* a bit of a hooligan; nothing can alter that."

Sefton's brow clouded again. "I'm thinking of the team and the school," he declared roughly; "I would rather the Magpies played a clean game and lost a thousand times, than that they should win by shady tactics."

"No need to get riled; there's an easy way out. Drop Pember quietly, without any explanation."

Sefton shook his head. "That won't do, we've got to stamp the thing out openly; no hole in the corner business."

Wynford raised his eyebrows. "You are asking for trouble that way, and will do more harm than good."

"It's the only honest way. Dig up the roots, old man; there's no sense in just lopping off the branches. And the Magpies need something drastic; the school is getting into a bad state."

"What is it exactly that you mean to do?" Wynford asked, with his puzzling smile.

"I haven't decided yet; I intend to sleep on it."

"Do," advised his chum, "and think over my suggestion. Drop Pember without remark and little will be said; state your reasons, and you will have a civil war on your hands."

The Soccer captain was sorely tried that night, and his friend's advice rather hurt than helped him; it did not fit in with his own downright, straightforward character. Somehow, Wynford scarcely appeared to realise the situation. What was the sense of dropping Pember without an explanation? That wouldn't do any good.

It amazed him that his particular chum should have passed over so lightly the scathing comment of the Erdington master! His own face flushed anew at the mere memory. The Magpies justly accused of dirty play! It was gall and wormwood to him. The boy had a perfect passion for the old school; he was the fifth Sefton in succession to carry the Magpie colours, and now they had been sullied!

Besides, as he had remarked, Waynflete was not in a good way. Recently a flagrant case of bullying had cropped up, there was a good deal of underhand lawlessness, and a sneering contempt of the rules was spreading like an epidemic, even amongst the juniors. For this state of things Hudson, the School Captain, was no doubt partly responsible. An amiable, well-intentioned fellow, who never broke a rule in his life, he was weak and unstable as water. He hated disputes and longed for peace—peace at any price. He was too timid to back up his own monitors, even when they were right.

"No help to be got in that quarter," Sefton reflected; "the old boy wouldn't go as far as Wynford, he'd simply beg me to hush the matter up. And that," grimly, "I won't do."

The notice, calling a meeting of the First Soccer Eleven for six o'clock, attracted no more than ordinary attention; only Wynford smiled a trifle dubiously and hurried off in search of the captain.

"I've just seen the notice," he began carelessly; "any special meaning in it?"

"Nothing, except that I intend to tell the fellows what I think."

Wynford whistled softly. "Going to wreck the team and split the school into factions! Is it worth it?"

"Is it worth keeping the Magpies' colours clean? That's a funny question, Reg."

Wynford bit his lip in vexation. "You are making a foolish move," he said, "and it's scarcely worth while being your chum if I'm not to tell you so."

"I know," exclaimed Sefton impulsively, "and I'm grateful; but whatever comes of this I must enter my protest openly. And," with a whimsical smile, "I shan't wreck the team, because, if the fellows don't approve, I shall resign and fight it out as an ordinary Magpie."

"All right, old man, I've finished. Of course I shall support you, but," chuckling, "in my own way."

The members of the team, strolling into the room at the appointed time, found Sefton already there. They were rather surprised by the absence of his cheery smile, and their astonishment increased at his opening words:—

"This isn't an ordinary meeting," he began; "I have called it for the purpose of saying some very disagreeable things."

"Nothing like showing your hand first off!"

"That's right, and I'm laying all my cards on the table face upward. You can slang me as much as you like afterwards, but I hope you will give me a fair hearing."

"Don't forget that we happen to be gentlemen, Sefton." This from Foster, the right back.

"That's the point; are we? I am speaking of yesterday's match, and what I heard described as the Magpies' dirty play."

"Erdington didn't play exactly like a young ladies' school," sneered Dick Fenwick, the inside right; "I was grassed more than once."

"They used their weight naturally, and a fair charge is legitimate; but I'm talking of ankle-tapping, deliberate tripping, elbow nudging, and the other tricks in the hooligans' bag."

"Oh, draw it mild, old man," from Bassett, "no need to go in for fireworks because some one has a notion that we didn't play altogether like arch-angels."

"Well, I'm feeling pretty sore about it. Maybe it's out of fashion nowadays to talk of the honour of the school, and that sort of thing, but I am old-fashioned. I believe in the school; the Magpies have always been a sporting crowd."

"Oh, cut the cackle and come to the 'osses," cried Fenwick; "we didn't come here to be lectured, even by you. If you've any charge to make, make it; if not, I'm going," and the speaker's words raised a murmur of approval.

Sefton stood facing the men obstinately. It was plain that his words had obtained scant sympathy, but his mind was set, and he came of a stock not remarkable for yielding easily. "I'm coming to that," he observed quietly. "As far as one of our men is concerned the charge was true; he did play a dirty game, for I saw him."

"Name, name," arose the instant and angry demand.

"I'm here to give you that. Pember."

The right half was a sound, if not brilliant player, but he had a hasty temper, which he rarely endeavoured to control. Now he jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing with passion. "You are a liar," he exclaimed coarsely.

The insult produced a curious effect on Sefton; the tenseness under which he had laboured vanished, he spoke easily and naturally. "I will pass that, and come straight to the point. What I wish to say is this. As long as I captain the team Pember will never play in it, nor will any one else who adopts shady tactics. I am out for clean play, and, old-fashioned as it may sound, the honour of the school. There's a sort of dry rot creeping into Waynflete, and every loyal Magpie should do his best to stop it."

"Do I understand," asked Fenwick, "that you are clearing Pember out of the team without even

consulting us?"

"That is the captain's right," coolly; "but, having done that, I am entirely in your hands. If my action doesn't meet with approval, I resign office without any feeling of ill-will."

"Sefton is right there," put in Wynford quietly, "and with his strict views he couldn't have acted in any other way. And I take it that we have now either to side with him or to go against him. Most of us agree with his principles—as gentlemen we are bound to—but before coming to a definite decision I suggest that we should hear Pember."

Cries of "Hear, hear," "Very sensible," greeted Wynford's remarks, and every one turned in expectation towards Pember, who, however, refused to do more than repeat his assertion that Sefton was a liar.

Then Foster got up. "All this seems to me a storm in a tea-cup," he began, "and I think the captain unwise in stirring it up; you can't expect a football crowd to behave like plaster saints. Still, what he said about Pember is correct. The ref. cautioned him twice, and I couldn't help seeing him deliberately foul his man time after time. But a word in private——"

"No," said Sefton, "cut the sore out or let it fester, but don't pretend it isn't there."

Wynford's prediction as to wrecking the team seemed likely to be realised; opinion was sharply divided, and an irregular discussion was carried on amidst much excitement.

Sefton was a prig. It was a tuppenny 'apenny affair not worth talking about. Any chap was liable to lose his temper in a football tussle. The captain had a "down" on Pember. No, Sefton was fair enough, but he had queer notions. After all, the Magpies ought to play the game. Well, they could do that without having a sermon flung at their heads!

It was Wynford who at last restored some sort of order to the meeting. "As far as I can judge," he observed quietly, "the case is this. The captain, for reasons stated, has cut Pember out of the team, and he now asks us to approve or condemn. If we are in favour of the team being run on the lines set out, well and good; if not, we get another skipper. That right, Sefton?"

"Yes, that's so."

"We are all pretty ruffled just now, and I suggest we have another meeting to-morrow, and get the thing settled one way or another."

"Sensible notion," said Foster, "but no more speechifying; we'll just come and give our votes," on which the meeting broke up.

CHAPTER II

A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

Sefton had expected a storm, but scarcely such a hurricane as swept through Waynflete, when rumour of what had occurred at the Soccer meeting began to circulate; even Wynford's forecast had erred on the side of moderation.

The school, from top to bottom, was split into two camps, and the members of each were equally bitter. As is usual in such cases, it was utterly impossible to obtain a simple, straightforward version of the affair. Garbled reports were industriously spread, and, especially by the juniors, implicitly believed.

The Sixth, as befitted their august station, maintained almost complete silence; the Fifth, to which both Fenwick and Pember belonged, were more demonstrative, and the majority talked openly of Sefton's "consummate cheek."

Tilney, who always wanted to stand well with Pember, made a great display. "Never heard such rot in my life," he declared hotly. "Who is Sefton, I should like to know? Talks of standing up for the school and is throwing mud on it all the time. The Magpies can get along without his interference. One would fancy we were a set of corner-boys. The truth is he's had a 'down' on old Pember; wanted an excuse to get him out of the team."

"Sefton has perhaps acted foolishly," said a boy named Hallon, "but you are talking rubbish. Sefton may be a dozen different things, but no one can say he isn't straight."

"He's a confounded prig, anyway."

"Not even that; maybe a bit fussy, but he's playing the game as he sees it. And, putting the Erdington match out of it, the Magpies are getting a bit off-side. There's a sort of new feeling at Waynflete; Jack as good as his master and that sort of tosh. And, if Sefton can stop that rot from spreading, I'm with him."

"Birds of a feather," returned Tilney, with a sneer; "for my part, I hope the team will knock him off his perch. *I* would," and he finished with what was intended to be a derisive laugh.

But if the Fifth was a little unduly excited, the wigs were fairly on the green in the Fourth. It was here that Sefton had aroused his bitterest, or at least his most truculent, opponents. Ignorant of the real issue, they were all the more ready to decide on the merits of the case. And ignorance brought many sound Magpies into the hostile camp.

Pember minor, naturally enough, sided with his brother. His mental abilities were not particularly brilliant, but, though not precisely popular, one could hardly call him unpopular. A sturdy fellow, with quite capable hands in the boxing ring, he rarely used his strength against boys weaker than himself, and had never been known to bully. One could not describe his temper as amiable, but on most occasions he managed to keep it under control. Even now his remarks, which proved very damaging, were put forth without undue heat.

"You fellows will say I'm standing up for my major," he began, "but he can take his own part; no need for me to butt in there. There's a heap of ginger in him somewhere, and for all I know he may have let some of it out at Erdington. Footer ain't the proper game for Cissies, anyhow," a remark greeted with emphatic signs of approval.

"What gets me is Sefton's cool cheek. Being a monitor and captain of the Soccer team ain't everything!"

"That's right," encouragingly.

"And then, because in his opinion my major didn't play the game——"

"One chap's word is as good as another's!" exclaimed a sympathiser.

"Well, cut my major out; he can stand on his own feet anyhow. My point is that Sefton's slanging the whole school, calls the Magpies a set of rotters, says we're a low-down lot and a set of bally Bolshies."

"It's a dirty bird that fouls its own nest," said Bathurst.

"I vote we go to his study and boo him."

"Send a round robin telling him to resign."

"Demand his head on a charger," suggested Cathcart ironically, and a few boys ventured to titter.

Jim Cathcart had a distinct place in the Fourth, and was important enough to be talked of even in the Fifth. He was a flaxen-haired chap, with pleasant face, blue eyes that nearly always smiled, a faint dimple in the left cheek, and a laughing mouth. On his first appearance at Waynflete he had been dubbed a Cissy, and treated accordingly, with somewhat disastrous results to his tormentors. Two or three black eyes, a bruised face or two, and a loosening of various teeth had promptly dispelled that illusion, and created a marked respect for the supposed Cissy.

"You *are* a set of mugs, and no mistake," he remarked, with an air of light banter that annoyed them exceedingly; "Pember minor has fooled you down to the ground—I never suspected he was half as clever. A very good stunt, old man."

"I don't know what you mean," sulkily.

"It's a simple dodge, but it generally works when you're dealing with mugs. The trouble is over your major, not the Magpies. Who told you Sefton called us a lot of rotters?"

"That's what he meant, anyhow."

"Setting up for a thought-reader, eh! Take my advice, old chap, and stick to what you can understand. None of us knows what Sefton actually said, and it strikes me we're blowing a lot of hot air about for nothing. And," with a jolly laugh, "I'm not so sure that the Magpies are altogether perfect; we're losing tone."

"Tone be blowed," growled Pember minor.

"Oh, I didn't include you," said Cathcart quietly, and the boys who were smart enough to see the point laughed.

"At all events," exclaimed Bathurst, "I hope he'll be made to leave the team. A pretty sort of captain to turn round on his own men! I don't call that playing the game."

"Not if they are in the wrong?"

"We've only his own word as to that."

"Right-o," replied Cathcart; "Sefton's word is good enough for me."

Cathcart's remarks had moderated, in the Fourth at least, the feeling against the Soccer captain,

and the more level-headed decided to "wait and see," but the majority agreed with Pember minor and Bathurst.

Amongst the members of the team, the incident had created a general feeling of uneasiness. The whole thing was not only unusual, but, as far as they knew, without precedent. An ordinary captain would have found some excuse for dropping Pember without making a scene. But Sefton's action had forced them to come out into the open, and to take sides, which they heartily disliked.

There could be no jockeying with the thing; they had either to approve or condemn what the captain had done, and somehow he seemed to have them in a cleft stick. Pember's part in the affair steadily lessened, until it faded into insignificance. The real issue was far more serious—whether they would back their captain in his quixotic fight, or let things run along as they were.

"It's perfectly ridiculous," Foster grumbled whimsically; "Sefton makes me feel like a modern crusader. Yet it's serious enough, too, because if we don't back him it means that we don't care a blow whether we play fair or not."

"Not at all," replied Fenwick, to whom he was speaking; "it's simply that we consider Sefton was mistaken."

"That cock won't fight here," said Foster, "because Pember did play a dirty game; I saw that."

"Well, anyway, I stand by the old motto, 'My country, right or wrong,'" Fenwick laughed disagreeably as he went away.

As the time for the meeting approached, the Magpies flocked to the entrance of the corridor along which the members would pass. The juniors had mustered in force, and those who knew the least about the matter were very noisy and truculent. It really appeared that in the junior school the Soccer captain counted few friends, and the mob was out to make this plain.

Unfortunately, they were forced to defer the hostile demonstration, since Sefton had resolved not to attend the meeting.

"No," said he, in reply to his chum's remonstrance, "you can discuss the case more freely if I'm not there. Besides, I've made my position clear, and certainly don't intend to argue the matter. It's up to the team now."

"Some of them will hint that it's a case of cold feet," Wynford suggested, a remark at which Sefton merely shrugged his shoulders.

Meanwhile Fenwick, the first to push his way through the line of struggling boys, received a regular ovation. He had never been popular before, and the cries of "Good old Fenwick," "Stick to your guns, Fenwick," mounted to his head. He smiled broadly on his juvenile admirers, and felt a tremendous hero.

Arthur Langton received an even more cordial welcome. He was a Sixth Form boy and a monitor, and the juniors thought him a very fine fellow. He shone at sports and in class, was always pleasant and affable, and frequently put himself out of the way to do things for the "kids." Many Magpies confidently expected that next year, when Hudson went down, Langton would become School Captain. He accepted the complimentary cheering with a smile of pleasure, and passed on.

The juniors knew that these two were "safe," but the others were mostly dark horses, so they

reserved their energies for Sefton, and when Wynford appeared alone they considered they had been unfairly treated. However, they hissed the captain's chum, which pleased them and had no effect on him; he did not even laugh, as Foster had done.

Inside the room Langton opened the ball. "Sefton not coming?" he asked, looking around.

"No," replied Wynford; "he thinks it fairer to stay away."

"Cold feet," sneered Fenwick.

"Well," observed Langton, "there's no need for any more pow-wow-ing. Sefton has insulted the team and the school, and I move that he be asked to resign."

"Seconded," exclaimed Fenwick promptly.

Wynford remained silent. He meant to back his chum, but thought his best policy was to let some one else take the lead. He had no idea what the result of the division would be.

Foster got up. "Sefton has managed the affair badly," he remarked, "but as to insulting the team and the school, that's nonsense. He's a capable captain and a good Magpie, and I move that he be asked to retain office."

"On his own terms?" inquired Fenwick.

"Why not? Surely we all believe in playing a straight game! Any one second my proposition?"

Wynford still remained passive. His chum could not have a more weighty advocate than Foster, and if another boy could be induced to second him so much the better. Presently, to his intense satisfaction, Bassett got up.

Bassett was a plain, blunt chap, who did not cultivate flowers of speech. "This is all tommy-rot, you chaps," he said; "Sefton's making a mountain of a mole-hill, but since we have to choose between him and Pember—that's what it amounts to—I'll second Foster."

"I reckon we've all made up our minds and don't want any more speeches," Wynford suggested smilingly; "may as well take a vote now and get the business over," which was agreed to willingly.

Langton and Fenwick were joined by Curtis Ward, the remainder of the team supported the absent captain.

Fenwick, flushed and angry, jumped to his feet. "That's all right," he snarled, "and you can tell your precious captain I've played my last Soccer game for Waynflete."

"I'm afraid my name must go in with Fenwick's," announced Langton; "I certainly can't play under a man who insults his own school."

"You, too, Ward?" asked Foster.

"Yes," but with perceptible reluctance.

"That's settled, then," said Wynford briskly; "now we know where we are. Sefton will have to draw four men from the second team, but I dare say he will be able to manage. Nothing more to be done? Well, so long, you fellows; I must report to the captain."

CHAPTER III

HUDSON GOES DOWN

The result of the voting, which speedily became public, fell like a bombshell on the waiting crowd. It was a surprise even to Sefton's friends, who, fortunately, were too prudent to display their exultation.

On the waverers it had a steadying effect. Foster and Bassett had asked the captain to stay on—there was a tremendous amount in that. Both were sturdy, independent fellows, not likely to stand nonsense from any one. If they were willing to uphold Sefton, there couldn't be much wrong with him. This was the attitude taken up by the moderates, who formed a goodly number.

The opposition expressed their anger by booing the six men who had supported the captain, and by cheering wildly for their own particular heroes. Langton especially was raised to the very height of popularity. Fenwick was bound to champion his chum's cause, and Ward—well, Ward didn't count much anyhow—but Langton was different. There could be no questioning his motives. In defiance of the traitors, he had stood up boldly in defence of the school's good name; he was a true champion. So the juniors clubbed around him, cheering enthusiastically, and shouting till their voices cracked, "Good old Langton!"

And the hero smiled and bowed and thanked them, patted two or three screaming youngsters on the head, and altogether bore himself as a hero should. But, when he reached his study and shut himself in—for, though popular, he had few intimates—he laughed outright.

"Little idiots," he chuckled. "Still, it was a smart stroke. Makes me the most popular chap in Waynflete, and safe for the captaincy next year. It's really funny how gudgeon will swallow the bait, and they are mostly gudgeon. No wonder the pater laughs after he has made a speech in the House," for Langton père was a not altogether undistinguished member of the government.

Meanwhile, the blissfully ignorant juniors continued to sound his praises, and to make savage attacks on the unpopular Sefton.

"A perfect scandal," bawled Bathurst—one was forced to raise one's voice in order to carry above the din—"here's a chap that blackguards his own school, and the blighters won't kick him out. Well, the best men at any rate have made it pretty plain what they think of him."

"That's true," chuckled Ashley mischievously; "there's Foster and Bassett and——"

"We aren't talking of that tosh," cried Bathurst scornfully; "they haven't a bit of decent pluck among 'em; Sefton can kick that crew anywhere; have 'em feeding out of his hand if he wants," a remark which caused Ashley to rock with laughter.

"Langton's chucked him for keeps," observed another boy, "and Fenwick"—Ward received no credit for his sacrifice, while Pember's name wasn't mentioned—"the two tip-top players; carry the team on their backs."

"If Sefton had any right feeling he wouldn't wait to be kicked out."

"But he isn't going to be kicked out," Ashley remarked sweetly.

"He will be, though; the school will see to that."

"With Bathurst giving the first kick; you're getting a regular Jack the Giant-killer, old man. Watch Bathy, you fellows: he'll show you something. Langton isn't in it."

While these squabbles continued in the Fourth, Sefton was listening to his chum's account of

the meeting.

"You have gained your point," observed Wynford coolly; "lost four good men, and split the school into two factions. The youngsters have made Langton into an idol, and he will be able to do as he likes with them. Rather a Pyrrhic victory!"

"It's the first blow for a clean school."

Wynford—he was sitting on the table—swung his legs indolently. "I'm not so sure that I would harp too much on that string," he advised; "you'll make more enemies over that than anything. Blackguarding your own school the youngsters call it, and they don't like it. Besides, there's not much wrong with Waynflete. As Kipling's man says, we may not be precisely plaster saints, but we're a good average."

Sefton looked up quickly. "I hope I'm not a prig or a Cissy," he said; "I can stand a good many things, but I like 'em to be straight. Take the smoking that goes on, for example. Only the other day I caught a Fourth Form fellow chewing a fag."

Wynford was interested. "What did you do?" he asked curiously.

"Nothing. What could I do, when every one knows that heaps of Fifth and Sixth Form fellows smoke?"

"A dozen, perhaps, not heaps."

"The principle is the same."

"And I fancy I can remember seeing Jack Sefton with a fag."

"But not here! That's my point," eagerly. "There's no crime in smoking, though it may be a silly practice, and it certainly doesn't do a fellow in training any good."

"Agreed," said Wynford judicially.

"But that isn't the point at all; it's the trickery, the mean dodges, and the underhandedness I'm up against. The fellows know it's breaking the rules."

"Well?" questioningly.

"My notion is they should stick to the rules or break them openly."

"You are a rum stick, Jack," exclaimed his chum, laughing. "Do you expect Pember, for instance, to smoke his fag where the masters can see him?"

"Why not? Isn't it just plain cowardice to slink off into dark corners, so that he shan't be found out?"

"Never looked at it like that," Wynford admitted.

"And the card-playing?"

"Yes," thoughtfully, "that's more serious."

"On exactly the same level. I don't object to cards. The pater taught me cribbage when I was a nipper, and I've played many a game with him. But these chaps have to play on the sly."

"Obviously."

"Yet they swagger about and think no end of themselves, as if they were doing something big."

"Well," Wynford exclaimed good-humouredly, "if that's how you feel, it's a mercy you aren't Captain of the School; there would be ructions."

"There would," admitted Sefton, "and if I were put to the test I'm not sure that I could go through with it. However, as long as you and Langton are here, I'm pretty safe."

"The experiment would be worth watching, though," said Wynford. "However, your present troubles will carry you on for a little while."

He was going out when Sefton said, "I haven't thanked you for standing by me, old man. It was good of you, especially as you reckon I've played the goat a bit."

"Not at all," Wynford replied; "I simply thought my methods superior to yours, and," he concluded with a laugh, "I suppose that's only natural."

Sefton felt lonely that evening; he seemed out of touch with every one, even with Wynford, his closest chum. He might have been a criminal and have found more real friends. And he realised perfectly what had aroused such bitter opposition. As Wynford had advised, Pember might have been dropped with little or no comment, but, in focusing the lime-light on to him, Sefton had in a sense thrown down a challenge to the school. He had implied, if not stated outright, that all was not well with the Magpies, and naturally the Magpies resented the accusation.

It did not occur to him to back down; he had given the team their chance; they had declined his proffered resignation, and he would carry on. Sefton was a die-hard, and a last ditch man, and in anything that interested him a bonny fighter. In one sense, perhaps, it was fortunate that the School Captain was little more than a nonentity, and, sooner or later, he reflected, the best fellows would come round to his views.

It was not until the next day that he realised how seriously he had offended the school. The Sixth were civil, though not particularly friendly; the Fifth appeared passively hostile; the juniors were so worked up that they even lost their natural awe of a Sixth Form boy and a monitor. A few of the bolder spirits boomed, and talked loudly about prigs and black sheep. Fortunately, Sefton had the ability to appreciate the humorous side of the performance.

Affairs were in this unsatisfactory condition, when a fresh matter invited the Magpies' attention. For some reason connected with his father's business, Hudson had to leave Waynflete almost immediately. Although excessively amiable and kind-hearted, he had certainly not proved a strong and wise ruler. He was very much of a drifter, and his usual mode of coping with difficulties was to shut his eyes and pretend they did not exist. As Foster had on one occasion remarked, he had too keen a sense of what might happen.

Few healthy boys like a peace at any price man. Their code is a simple one. When they do wrong they expect, if caught, to be punished; that is one of the rules of the game, like paying their sixpence for goods duly delivered at the tuck-shop. The snivellers are few; the majority wait to grow up before they begin whining. So the Magpies had no real respect for Hudson; they grinned at his leniency and called him soft.

Thus it was not his unexpected withdrawal that interested them, but the question of his successor. Who would be the new Captain? was what every one asked, and answered mostly according to his personal inclinations.

The most popular candidate was undoubtedly Langton. It was a distinct advantage to him that

all his best goods were displayed in the shop window; all the soiled and tawdry stuff was kept shut up in the back room, and brought out only for those who preferred that class of article.

And now he possessed the additional prestige of being the school champion, the fellow who had so strongly opposed the wretched Sefton. Langton wouldn't blackguard his own school; he would back the Magpies through thick and thin, and that was the sort of chap they wanted. Had the choice been determined by popular vote, Langton would have won by an overwhelming majority.

Perhaps his nearest competitor was Wynford, whose supporters were mainly in the upper part of the school, and they were not altogether sure of him. He was clever—too clever some said—and capable, but there was something in him they did not understand, a feeling even more strongly possessed by the juniors. Wynford was a bit of a mystery, and schoolboys dislike mysteries, at least of that sort.

Foster's name was occasionally mentioned by a few of the more thoughtful, but his handicap was that he didn't dress his windows at all, and if you wanted to examine his goods you had to go inside. This was a fatal bar to success, but Foster apparently didn't bother himself about success.

The fourth competitor had deliberately put himself out of the running. Had Hudson gone down a month earlier, the Soccer captain would have proved Langton's most formidable rival. The athletic crowd would have plumped for him as a sporting chap, and the real workers would have acclaimed him as a student. But things had changed! A chap who downs his own school, you know! Calls his own mates rotters! Says the Magpies are a dirty crowd! Pretty sort of leader that, what?

Sefton himself had heard the news with something like dismay. Hudson was of no use to him, but, on the other hand, he was not a hindrance. Langton was certain to stir up all the mischief possible. He would interfere in everything; use his influence and authority in every way, and make the Soccer captain's position intolerable.

"I am afraid Hudson going down has knocked your crusade on the head, old man," Wynford observed; "there wasn't much chance at any time of pulling it off, and now you'll be up against Langton. He's a cute chap, and has the Magpies behind him."

"Precious little good he'll do them."

Wynford laughed. "You are an old-fashioned beggar," he said, "not a bit up-to-date. We don't follow the chaps who will do us good, but the ones who flatter us, and Langton's all in at that game."

"I hope the Doctor will give you the job."

"Hardly likely, and I'm not sure that I'd care to take it. Strenuous work cleaning up the mess Hudson will leave behind."

"You can do that better than Langton."

"Perhaps so, my son, but then Langton won't do it at all. He's going to be the popular captain, the idol of the school, and that sort of thing. Not in Hudson's way; he's strong enough to hold the reins, without pulling on them. At the end of term we'll be crowning him with the laurel and the bays, though I doubt very much if Dr. Boyd will be a worshipper at his shrine."

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW CAPTAIN

Dr. Wellington Boyd was a comparatively young man for his important position, as Head Master at Waynflete, but he was shrewd, capable, and energetic. He also possessed a will of his own, and many theories, which he was never afraid of putting into practice. One of his ideas was that boys should be left to go their own way, with no more interference from the outside than was absolutely necessary.

He reserved to himself the appointment of the Captain and the monitors, and gave them considerable power. On the whole his system worked well, though, as in Hudson's case, it occasionally produced poor results. But failure rarely discouraged him, and he was always prepared to try again.

"The school is a miniature world," he argued, "and not a factory for cramming boys with information, as one fills soda-water bottles. The youngsters are bound to make mistakes, but, if the errors are their own, they will be all the more keen to set them right. And experience cannot come too early. Naturally it entails extra vigilance on our part, so that they shall not upset the coach."

Arthur Marriott, his second in command, smiled dubiously. "Poor old Hudson wasn't far off a smash," he remarked.

"No, it is a relief to learn that he is leaving. I was on the point of taking the reins myself. Frankly, Hudson was one of my failures, which makes the choice of his successor all the more difficult. Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"I should say your choice is limited to Langton, Wynford, and Foster. At the moment Langton is extraordinarily popular, and the school generally would be glad to have him as Captain."

"Showy and superficial," observed the Head Master, "and liable to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Besides, this excessive popularity is in itself a danger; he will fight shy of losing it."

The Second nodded. "That is so," he agreed.

"And Wynford is a bit of a mystery; I can't read him myself. He has uncommon ability, but where it will lead him is difficult to judge. Foster lacks imagination, and is too indifferent. Of the three Wynford comes nearest the mark, but why omit Sefton from your list?"

Mr. Marriott laughed. "Sefton is in the black books; the Magpies insist he has insulted them."

"He certainly showed little tact, but he is in earnest, and has the interest of Waynflete at heart."

"More royalist than the king," murmured Mr. Marriott.

"Just so, but isn't that what we need? Everywhere I hear the same story; boys are restless and excitable; they are picking up new ideas from the outside world, and, like many of their elders, are getting morally flabby. There seems to be a general laxness, which is creeping into the schools. Now the best antidote to that is a high ideal, which Sefton has, firmness of character, and an absence of self-interest. I don't believe Sefton cares a bit about his own position."

"I agree with you there," Mr. Marriott exclaimed warmly.

"I think," continued the Head, "that we can't do better than put him in Hudson's place; I'll talk to him to-morrow."

So it came about that Sefton, much to his surprise, was summoned to the Doctor's room. He concluded, after thinking the matter over, that the interview must be connected with the football trouble, but was undecided as to whether he was in for a wiggling or not.

Dr. Boyd invited him to sit down and opened his subject at once. "No doubt you have heard that Hudson is leaving almost immediately," he began.

"Yes, sir."

"And therefore Waynflete will need a new Captain."

"Yes, sir," answered Sefton, who found the trend of conversation not altogether to his liking.

"I am not entirely satisfied with the condition of things here," the Head continued slowly. "There is nothing seriously wrong, I believe; nothing at least that one can put a finger upon, but there is a subtle change in the atmosphere, and not for the better."

Sefton thoroughly agreed with the speaker, but did not feel called upon to offer any comment; he was nervous, and awaited developments with anxiety.

"You are aware of my desire that the boys should, as far as possible, carry on for themselves, without undue interference from the masters. Certain rules must be laid down and strictly adhered to, but within that limit there is considerable scope for self-development. I like a boy to do a thing not because he is ordered to do it, but because he sees the reasonableness of the order. Do you agree with me?"

"It is a good plan, sir, but it has its dangers."

"I am aware of that, and am of course responsible for the result. My idea is, however, that the Captain and his committee should do the ruling, with whatever guidance from me that may be necessary. You have already served on the committee, and now I wish you to take Hudson's place. It will not be a sinecure, but I am sure you are not in the least afraid of difficulties."

Sefton felt as a statesman would, called upon by his king to form a government. He was proud, and, but for the football episode, would have accepted unhesitatingly. That incident had altered things considerably, and he hesitated.

Presently he said, "As things are, sir, I should scarcely make a suitable Captain; I am very unpopular, and the school would resent my appointment. The boys would much prefer Langton, or, failing him, Wynford."

The Head offered no comment on the two names put forward. "I have heard something of this," he remarked quietly, "and agree that it makes a rather stiff hurdle. Now, I am going to put a direct question. Are you afraid of the consequences to yourself? or to the school?"

Sefton had no doubt as to the answer to that question. "To the school, sir," he replied promptly.

"In that case," said the Head, "I will risk my judgment being wrong, and ask you definitely to take over the Captain's duties. You may have a hard fight, and tact will be as necessary as firmness. In minor things you may have to learn how to yield gracefully, but on a matter of principle there will be no compromise. And remember always, that in everything concerning the true welfare of Waynflete I am at your back."

Sefton left the Doctor's study with very mixed feelings. He had not expected to be Captain of Waynflete, had never even consciously wished it, but, now that the grand position had been

offered to him, he felt honestly proud. Still, he fully recognised the difficulties in front of him; the juniors would be up in arms; Langton, Pember, and their friends would steadily seek to undermine his authority. He could not feel perfectly sure that Dr. Boyd had acted wisely in the interest of the school.

He said nothing of the interview until the evening, when Wynford came, as usual, to his study, and he felt a certain amount of diffidence in broaching the subject even to his chum. Fortunately, Wynford's first words offered an opening, of which he decided to take immediate advantage.

"Working?" asked his visitor, with a glance at the open books lying on the table.

"That's what I ought to be doing, but I can't concentrate. The fact is I'm up against a fairly stiff proposition; the Head has asked me to take Hudson's place."

"Captain of Waynflete?" and Sefton nodded.

The information did not appear to raise Wynford's enthusiasm. His first feeling was of complete astonishment. He had not considered his own chances, because he had taken it for granted that Langton would step up automatically. He realised Langton's shortcomings perfectly well, but on the surface he would have made an ideal Captain, and—a matter of some importance—the Magpies liked him.

"You aren't very encouraging," Sefton said.

"Well, the news comes as a bit of a surprise," Wynford admitted; "you see, I hardly expected the Head to look beyond Langton."

"I told Dr. Boyd the Magpies would prefer either you or Langton."

"Oh," exclaimed Wynford hastily, "I don't want the job; but Langton does; he will be savage, and so for that matter will the kids; they haven't forgiven that silly football stunt."

Sefton felt vaguely troubled. "Do you think I ought not to have accepted?" he asked.

"You are the only judge of that, but under the circumstances it won't exactly make for peace."

"I told the Head that, but he turned it into a personal matter; asked if I was afraid—and I'm not afraid. As far as that goes, I'll fight the school on my own."

Wynford laughed dryly. "Not a very hopeful beginning," he remarked, "but things aren't as bad as all that; some of the fellows will stand by you."

"And," brightly, "I can count on you."

"Oh, yes, I'll back you up, but things will be pretty disagreeable. Well, it's no use trying to work to-night; give you time to cool off, eh!" and, with a friendly nod, he went out.

Wynford was not feeling sure of himself, and wanted to think things over. Sefton and he had always been good chums, but now they stood on a somewhat different footing. As Captain of Waynflete Sefton would be his superior. The reflection was rather galling. He would have accepted Langton as a matter of course, but Sefton——! And after he had shown so glaringly his unfitness for the berth! Wynford gave Dr. Boyd very little credit for prudence or wisdom.

A rumour of the appointment circulated long before the official announcement. This was due to Hudson, who, in perfect innocence, mentioned the subject to a personal friend in the Fifth.

"He's a fine chap and I wish him every success," said the boy who was going down, "but he has a tough job."

The rumour was at first received with scornful laughter; no one believed in its truth, and the juniors especially treated it as a huge joke. Sefton, Captain of the School! Surely the Head had more sense than that! But the tale persisted, until even the most incredulous wondered if there was anything in it.

Pember minor organised a little group and marched round the yard in military fashion. At frequent intervals he sent up the cry, "What's the matter with Langton?" and his faithful warriors yelled in unison, "Nothing, he's all right."

Then came the announcement on the notice-board, which dispelled every lingering doubt. "The Head Master has appointed John Sefton Captain of the School, in succession to James Hudson, who is leaving Waynflete. (Signed) Wellington Boyd."

The juniors being very angry, were also very noisy; they spoke slightly of the new Captain, and talked a lot of what Ashley called "washy nonsense" about refusing to accept him. They were unaware of being shepherded into this position by Langton's friends; they really believed, like their fathers at an election time, that they were expressing their own opinions.

In reality they did not detest Sefton at all, but the ugly figure ingeniously palmed off on them for him. They objected to the boy who was going to have his own way in spite of everybody, the boy who had declared the Magpies to be "rotters!" Only a few, with Jim Cathcart at their head, possessed sufficient cuteness to realise that this Sefton had no existence, was merely a stuffed figure rigged up by Pember, Bathurst and Co.

An incident, trifling in itself, and yet not without a certain significance, happened during the evening. Langton, on his way to the gym, encountered a mob of juniors, who immediately pressed around him, cheering.

"Good old Langton!" shouted Pember minor: "it's Langton who ought to be the new Captain," and the cheering was vigorously renewed.

Langton, flushed and excited, made no effort to conceal his satisfaction; he thanked them cordially for their goodwill, and made it plain that he was in sympathy with their opinion. Of loyalty to the boy chosen by the Head to fill a difficult position, he did not hint a word.

"If Sefton called that chap a rotter," said Cathcart, later in the evening, "I'm with him. A dirty, low-down Bolshy, and any of you can tell him so from me. And if the Magpies are backing a cad of that sort they are rotters too."

"The fellow hasn't enough sense to be decent," Ashley declared. "Langton's a monitor, and here he is hob-nobbing with the rag-tag-and-bob-tail against his own leader. Sefton may be what you like, but you wouldn't find him playing a low-down game of that kind."

"Langton couldn't stop the fellows from cheering him," observed Bathurst sulkily.

"No," said Cathcart, "he belongs to their kidney, but if Sefton had been in his place you wouldn't have cheered very long."

CHAPTER V

THE MONITORS HAVE DECIDED

A strange atmosphere hung over Waynflete during the first week or so after Hudson's departure; the school seemed to be waiting for something, the nature of which no one was able to define. Thus far the new Captain had kept out of the lime-light; he had gone his usual way, practised with his team, and put on the gloves occasionally in the gym. It almost seemed as if the change of Captains would make little real difference.

"Cold feet," sneered Pember minor, "that's what's the matter with Sefton; he's jolly well certain that we aren't standing any nonsense from him."

"If the fellow knows which side his bread is buttered, he will keep on being quiet," exclaimed Bathurst, with a grin. "I guess he won't crow much while Langton's around."

This opinion, held by many others besides the Fourth Form boy, was somewhat rudely shattered at the end of the second week, when the periodical meeting of monitors fell due. Under the late Captain this ceremony had been scarcely more than a farce; the monitors, fully aware that their chief possessed no backbone, had themselves become lax, and had lost all interest in their duties.

Sefton, one of the earliest arrivals, was accompanied by Wynford, who looked far from pleased; others dropped in one by one, Langton, who had assumed a smile of scornful amusement for the occasion, being the last.

"Rather a waste of time, these meetings," he remarked airily, though addressing himself to no one in particular.

Wynford scented danger and regarded his chum uneasily, but Sefton's face was smiling. There was an unpleasant half hour in front of him, and he had determined that on no account would he lose his temper. He had wondered whether he should make any allusion to his being in the chair, but had finally decided to go straight ahead with the business.

"The first thing," he began, "is to ask if any one has a report to make or any suggestions to offer."

Langton laughed superciliously, the others exchanged glances, but no one spoke.

"In that case," he continued quietly, "I should like to say a few words myself. It's always unpleasant facing disagreeable facts, but some times it is necessary, and it is necessary now. As monitors we have the interest of Waynflete to look after, and it strikes me there is room for improvement."

"There's precious little wrong with Waynflete," protested Langton, "and I for one object to blackening the school's good name."

"No one wants to do that," coolly; "what I'm out for, and I am confident you are all with me, is to keep it good."

"Nothing to quarrel about in that," observed Todd Campbell, "but, if we are to set up as reformers, let us understand what we have to reform."

"Fair enough," said the Captain. "Well, the first thing is smoking. The other day I caught a Fourth Form boy puffing at a fag; I couldn't punish him, because both of us were well aware that some fellows in the Fifth and Sixth do the same thing."

"Good lord," interrupted Langton testily, "anyone would fancy you were preaching to a lot of kids."

"Not at all; I don't say there is any harm in smoking for you or me, though there is for the juniors. But that isn't the point; it's breaking a rule on the sly. If we must smoke, let us tell Doctor Boyd so, openly, and take the consequences. It's the sneaking, underhand tricks I'm up against, not the smoking. But as long as the rule stands we, as monitors, have to uphold it."

"Do you really expect us to report a Sixth fellow if we discover him with a fag?" asked Langton, maliciously.

"Any one," emphatically.

"There will be ructions," Campbell said gravely; "Hudson knew some of the fellows smoked, and he never interfered."

"Put a beggar on horseback," drawled Langton sarcastically.

Sefton kept his temper and stuck to his text. "The matter is perfectly simple," he said. "We are appointed to see that the rules are kept; if we knowingly let them be broken, we are playing Dr. Boyd a shabby trick."

"That's staggerer Number One," observed Campbell; "anything more?"

"Just one other matter for to-night," smiling, "cards. What I said about smoking holds good for cards, too. It isn't the game—I often play at home—it's the rule."

"I suppose," sneered Langton, "we are to dodge about the corridors in our stockinged feet, and peep through the study keyholes! Why not have a squad of detectives?"

"That is scarcely fair, Langton; I don't want any detective work, but I maintain we must uphold the rules."

"Don't you think that Dr. Boyd has a pretty shrewd notion of what goes on here?" Campbell asked.

"That question doesn't need answering; all that concerns us is the rule."

His fellow monitors were perplexed; there was nothing to get at, nothing to argue about. He confessed to smoking an occasional cigarette and to playing cards, himself, so they could not taunt him with being goody-goody. Whatever was brought forward he stuck to the one point, from which they could not move him. There was the rule; alter, get rid of it if they chose, but, as long as it remained, it had to be recognised. His position was so sound and well-founded that even Langton privately admitted it to be unassailable.

"We shall be the most unpopular set of monitors ever known at Waynflete," Campbell growled.

Thus far Foster had not spoken a word, but now he broke in suddenly. "That's nothing to do with it," he cried sharply; "the question is whether Sefton's right or wrong. If he's right there's nothing more to be said."

"And if I'm wrong," the Captain added, "show me where."

Now this was just what they were unable to do. They could prophesy a war against the monitors; call the policy unpleasant, unpopular, and disagreeable—Sefton was perfectly willing to concede all that and more—but in the end they returned to the same old touchstone; were

the monitors to see the rules obeyed or not? Naturally, there could be only one answer to this question, but the members of the committee displayed no wild enthusiasm over their decision.

"The chap's cranky," declared Campbell, as he departed with Langton, "why can't he let sleeping dogs lie? And we are bound to go with him—at least we can't appear against him."

"Fancies he can run Waynflete on his own lines," said Langton; "no doubt reckons himself a twentieth century Napoleon, and forgets that even Napoleon met his Waterloo."

"I'm wondering how the fellows will take it. Nice thing telling 'em that we've turned into real watchdogs and are going to bite, eh!"

"They won't believe the yarn for one thing, and when they're forced to will put us all in the same boat with Sefton."

This fear of becoming unpopular was pretty general. Under the Hudson régime the monitors had closed their eyes and stopped their ears, and had never come to a clash with any section of the school; now, things would be vastly different. Small wonder that one or two groaned at the prospect, and cast about for some plausible pretext to resign what had become a disagreeable honour.

Perhaps the only exception was Foster, and he hardly knew what to make of the new Captain's innovations. Foster was a logical sort of chap, who had no fear and very little enthusiasm; he would not have marched into battle with a joyous song on his lips, but the mechanism of his rifle would have been perfect, and his bayonet unlikely to bend.

"Sefton's stirring up a hornets' nest," he remarked to Wynford, "and the funny part is that he's right. As far as we stand in the place of the masters we have to act as they would act; there's no getting away from that."

"Then you mean to back him up?"

"Bound to, as long as he doesn't ask anything unreasonable."

"Unless you resign."

Foster turned sharply on the speaker. "I'll resign fast enough if Sefton attempts to ride the high horse," he exclaimed, "but as long as he plays the game I'll play it with him. I'm not the sort to turn tail because there will be trouble."

"I suppose," said Wynford reflectively, "he will put up an account of the monitors' meeting."

A smile slowly broadened over Foster's face. "I'm not sure that your friend is such a fool as some of us may fancy. 'The monitors have decided——' That ropes in every one. Langton's face will be worth studying. And he dare not put up a fight—at least publicly."

"Not on these grounds," Wynford agreed, "but if he catches Sefton napping——"

"Then Sefton must take the consequences," was the grim reply. Foster was no sayer of smooth things.

Pember minor and Bathurst paused next day after morning school to glance at the notice-board; a crowd of juniors joined them; several Fifth and a few Sixth Form boys stopped; the announcement was evidently of absorbing interest. Foster himself was there, and he chuckled at the opening words:

"At a full meeting of monitors the question of surreptitious card playing and smoking was brought up and discussed. The monitors have decided that these practices, being against the rules, must stop. In future any boy found playing at cards or smoking will be severely punished. And the monitors beg to point out that this statement applies equally throughout the school
(Signed by Order.)

JACK SEFTON,
Captain."

"Not the best of English, perhaps," muttered Foster, "but it gets there all the same."

The Magpies read the notice in silence and turned to look at each other. For the vast majority the announcement possessed no personal interest, yet even the smallest boy recognised dimly that he was affected by it. The sting, as usual, lay in the tail. "Applies equally throughout the school." That was too clear for the meaning to be mistaken. It was a direct challenge, a gauntlet thrown down, a proclamation of war. The monitors had determined to exercise their authority.

Pember minor was the first to break the silence. "A new broom sweeps clean," he exclaimed sarcastically.

"I wonder they didn't include playing marbles for keeps," said his chum, which caused a slight titter.

"What rot you fellows talk," Cathcart exclaimed. "There is nothing wonderful in the notice, it simply means that the monitors intend having the rules kept. And quite right, too."

"The monitors!" scornfully; "why don't you say Sefton?"

"Because the notice says 'The monitors'; Sefton is only their mouthpiece. Langton is in this, and Campbell, so you needn't grouse."

Pember minor, feeling on dangerous ground, shifted his position. "They needn't have been hypocrites, talking about all the school," he said; "we know what that amounts to. They'll pounce down fast enough on some poor kid in the Fourth, but when it comes to a chap in the Fifth or Sixth they'll shut their eyes. Catch the little fish and let the big ones go; that will be their motto."

"Sorry you have such a poor opinion of your friend Langton."

"Oh, Langton," spluttered Pember minor angrily, "Langton is——"

"A monitor," suggested Ashley.

This raised a laugh, in the midst of which Foster moved on. Whether Sefton had planned the scheme deliberately, or whether the result was a mere accident, he felt uncertain, but in either case his opponents were placed in a difficult position. As monitors they were equally responsible with the Captain for the notice. And they could not get up and publicly admit that they were in favour of breaking the rules!

"It's a very pretty situation," he murmured, "very pretty, indeed."

Foster was immensely tickled; he had never displayed such a lively interest in anything connected with the school. When he met Langton at the end of the corridor he was positively like a frisky kitten. Langton gasped at the sight; he was unaware that his fellow-monitor had so lately blossomed into a humorist. "Some one left you a legacy?" he inquired mildly.

"No," replied Foster, "I've just been reading our notice; I must say it does us credit; the kids' eyes are nearly falling out of their heads."

"Our notice!" in astonishment.

"How we have decided to put down cig smoking and all that. Discussed at the meeting last night, you know, and approved by the monitors. According to the talk, some of the young uns seem to think you'll shut your eyes when it comes to your own friends. But one or two stood for you; vowed you'd haul up the biggest man in the school."

"Do you mean to say——?"

"He who runs may read, though it will be awkward running through the mob. You'll save a pot of money by the end of term."

"How?"

"Not having to buy fags. Can't break your own order, you know," and the speaker laughed almost genially, while Langton, with the veneer off for a moment, scowled savagely. He recovered himself quickly, though, and read the annoying notice with a smiling face.

CHAPTER VI

VICTORIA PARK COUNCIL SCHOOL

Among a certain clique in the Fifth and Sixth, the notice not only aroused indignation, but induced a vague feeling of alarm and perplexity. The finding was alleged to be the monitors', but every one was fully aware that Sefton had started the movement and carried it through. But for his fussiness the subject would never have been discussed.

Pember was of opinion that it amounted to very little anyway. "The rule will be dead and forgotten in a week," he prophesied; "Sefton may be in earnest, probably is, but the others will think twice before hauling up a Fifth or Sixth Form chap. As far as they are concerned it's all eye wash."

"It puts me in a tight corner, and Langton, too, for that matter," commented Todd Campbell gloomily.

Fenwick turned toward him quickly. "You don't mean you are coming to heel when Sefton cracks his whip!"

"There's no question of whips," replied Campbell, with an angry gesture. "The Head makes a rule, the monitors are appointed to see that it is obeyed. Now, if you were a monitor, what would you do?"

"Not sneak on a chum, at any rate."

Bassett, who had voted for Sefton to stay on as Soccer captain, was not a monitor, nor did he belong to any particular set. He was not supposed to possess any particular sense of humour, but the situation tickled him immensely.

"Here's a straight question, Campbell," he said. "Suppose you found Fenwick smoking a cig, would you report him?"

Campbell shifted a foot uneasily, hummed a little, and spent more time in clearing his throat. At that moment, to his great relief, Langton, strolling into the room, inquired casually what they were discussing, and Bassett repeated his question.

"We have to know just where we stand," he pointed out.

Langton was smart, and as a rule words came readily to his lips, but now he hesitated. Sefton's manoeuvre had forced him into a cleft stick. He dared not admit he would refuse to do his duty, yet he hated the idea of appearing to side with Sefton.

"To my mind the whole affair is pure foolishness," he began, "and if I had my way things would go on as usual."

"That's no answer to my question," Bassett insisted.

"It's difficult to give an answer just now; I must think it over."

"No need for thinking," chimed in Foster, who had listened to the conversation, "it's all as plain as a pike-staff. We can either do our work as monitors, or resign. And I'm not resigning over this."

"Then you would report me?" asked Fenwick.

"Like a shot, my son, or any one else," came the uncompromising reply.

There was no sense in arguing with Foster. You couldn't bully or wheedle him, or sneer at him for being a saint. What Foster said usually went.

"Much obliged for the warning," grinned Fenwick. "It wouldn't be a bad notion for the Head to change the name of the school into Sefton House."

"You might suggest it to him," said Foster coolly; "get up a petition and send a deputation; perhaps Langton will act as spokesman."

The further the malcontents considered the subject the more awkward it appeared, and, as Fenwick pointed out, this was only an insignificant portion of the new régime.

"It isn't just the cig and the cards, it's everything," he declared. "The chap means to boss the show, and if we knuckle down now we'll never get up again."

"Well, what can be done?" his chum asked.

"I don't know," gloomily. "He's got Foster on his side, and Wynford, and it doesn't look as if we can trust Todd Campbell, or even Langton."

"I wouldn't worry too much about them, old man; we'll force them to come out one side or the other. Let the thing drop for a few days, and see if anything turns up."

"If it doesn't we'll have to make it," Fenwick exclaimed savagely.

For the time being the monitors' decision was rather overshadowed by a new sensation, the innocent cause of which was the Twins. There was only one set of twins at Waynflete, and the Magpies publicly stated with great decision that one pair was more than enough for the largest school in the world.

The Twins were named Binney; they belonged to the Lower Fourth, and were so ridiculously alike that no one ever had the faintest idea to which of them he was speaking. They were rather plump, though not fat, and quite sturdy youngsters. Their hair had a reddish tinge, and was kept closely cropped. They had bluish-gray eyes, full cheeks, and a liberal sprinkling of freckles. Even the arrangement of the freckles failed to distinguish one from the other, the markings were so very similar. Their names certainly differed, but not much—Richard and Robert.

One evening the pair knocked at the door of the Captain's study, and, being invited to enter, marched inside. Sefton was working, but he looked up, and recognising his small visitors exclaimed, "Hallo, want to see me about something?"

"Dick does."

"Bob does."

"I take it that means both of you; so fire away."

"If you please, Sefton, our cousin Frank is a master at the Victoria Park School."

"It's a Higher Grade School."

"He's awfully keen on footer."

"Plays for the Corinthians."

"And he's built up an awfully good team; they've been top of their League two seasons

running."

"This is all very interesting," remarked the puzzled Captain, "but I don't quite understand."

"Well, you see, Sefton, it's like this. Frank was telling us about his team, and Bob said——"

"Dick said."

"Well, we both said why didn't he bring his chaps to play ours?"

"And Frank told us the Magpies wouldn't want to play his crowd, because they went to a Council school."

"That's rubbish," exclaimed the Captain quickly; "the days for that kind of rot are gone. The chief trouble is to fix a date. But I'd like to have a talk with your cousin; give me his address and I'll write to him."

One twin wrote the address, and both said, "Thanks awfully, Sefton."

Frank Binney was a well-set-up young fellow, with a pleasant face and engaging manners, and Sefton liked him immediately.

"Of course," said the schoolmaster when the talk had settled down, "my boys haven't met a team which carries such heavy guns as the Magpies, but they really can play, and will at least give you a good game."

"Shall I put up the First Eleven against you?" Sefton asked; "they are rather a hefty crowd."

"We would prefer to be beaten by your First than by your Second," said Mr. Binney, and they both laughed.

The news of the proposed match met with a mixed reception. The fixture was a distinct innovation; the Magpies had never before played any team but one from a Public School, and the more conservative did not altogether like breaking away from old customs and traditions.

Fenwick and his friends dexterously seized the opportunity to stir up ill feeling against the new Captain. Sefton cared nothing about the School, they argued; all that he wanted was to look big and show off against a pack of youngsters.

"He sees a chance of scoring a win," Pember remarked sneeringly, "it's the only one the team will get this season."

"'Twould be a scream of a joke if they lost," grinned Tilney.

Sefton was really glad of the opportunity to try out his new men before the return match with Erdington. The loss of the seceders was a heavy blow to the team, and the Magpies generally expected Erdington to secure a double victory. Sefton, however, had not lost hope, and if these youngsters could play at all the game ought to prove valuable.

He arranged the fixture for Wednesday afternoon, when both schools had a half holiday, and about two o'clock Mr. Binney appeared with twenty or thirty boys from Victoria Park. The Magpies turned up in large numbers, but showed little enthusiasm, though they were sportsmen enough to follow Cathcart's lead and greet the visitors with a rousing cheer, as they tripped on to the field.

They looked very trim and workmanlike, in white shorts and dark blue shirts, with a small crown worked in on the left breast, but they were obviously younger than their opponents and

nothing like as heavy. Skill and sound knowledge of the game alone could give them the slightest chance of putting up a decent show, and these things the Magpies scarcely expected.

At the end of the first five minutes they began to alter their opinion; when ten minutes had gone by they had forgotten their grievances against Sefton and were following the game with real interest. The visiting team played with beautiful precision; their forwards moved as one man; the halves plied them with the ball, or in moments of stress dropped back to help the defence; the backs punted strongly, and once, when Sefton got in a dazzling first-time shot, the goalkeeper cleared with coolness and confidence.

"Not a weak spot in the team," commented Cathcart; "if they were a bit heavier our chaps would have to look out. Oh, good shot, sir," as the ball, taken at a difficult angle, skimmed the post with the keeper helpless.

"Pretty play," said his chum; "it's easy to tell they've had jolly good coaching."

"Our cousin coached 'em," one of the Twins volunteered; "he plays for the Corinthians."

"Is that your cousin on the line? He knows the game."

Long before the change of ends it became apparent that the Magpies were not enjoying a walk-over. Their advantage in weight was discounted by the elusive skill and adroitness of their opponents, and more still by their wonderful cohesion. Perhaps the most striking feature was the unselfishness of the players. No man tried to get into the lime-light, each was content to help the game along in the best possible way. And the Magpies, being at bottom real sports, cheered impartially every bit of clever work.

Half-time arrived with no scoring, but by now the home team had settled down; the new men had found their feet, and their play began to dove-tail with that of their partners. All along the defence had been sound; now the forwards moved more evenly; height and weight produced their effect, and no one felt much surprise when, after twenty minutes, Sefton scored. A second goal ten minutes from the end put the issue beyond doubt.

"A fast, pretty game," was the general verdict, "with not a deliberate foul from start to finish."

Sefton had arranged that the visiting team and their friends should have tea before leaving, a courtesy greatly appreciated. The Magpies chummed in naturally with their guests, talked over the various points in the game, and had nothing but praise for their opponents' play.

"A perfectly glorious day," said Mr. Binney to the School Captain; "I have enjoyed the game immensely. I did not expect my boys to win, but I hoped they would give you a run for your money."

"They put up a splendid fight," Sefton replied, "and gave us plenty to think about. If you can keep them together, I would not wager much on beating them another year."

"Ah, that is just the rub: they slip away so quickly. I am continually re-building the team."

Before the parties separated, Hetherington, the Victoria Park captain, made a neat little speech. He was a dark-skinned, good-looking chap, and spoke really well. It was the first time, he remarked, that they had played a Public School team, and he thanked the Magpies for having given them the opportunity. His men, he admitted, had expected to be beaten, but they had resolved to do their best; then he thanked his hosts for their hospitality, and most particularly for the spirit in which they had been met.

Wynford, who, in his peculiarly detached manner, felt the pulse of the school, was surprised to discover that the visit of the Victoria Park boys had strengthened rather than weakened Sefton's position.

"A jolly decent crowd," said a boy named Morrow, "and they know a lot more about football than our fellows do."

"And they played a clean game—none of the hooligan touch about them."

"They've served their purpose," sneered Bathurst; "they've given the Magpies a win. Sefton will be hunting up another kids' school soon."

"And dropping Erdington," laughed his chum maliciously.

These remarks, however, met with small encouragement; the Magpies recognised that their visitors were fine players, and that even Erdington might find it difficult to beat them.

"I hope we shall make an annual fixture with them," said Ashley; "there's no reason why we shouldn't."

CHAPTER VII

NO EXCEPTIONS

For a few days after the match with Victoria Park, affairs at Waynflete appeared to run smoothly. Sefton's enemies were strong and numerous, but they dared not defy his authority openly, and the opposition for the most part was reduced to sullen grumbling. Bathurst and Pember junior, in particular, slew him "with their mouths," many times over, but their victim seemed little the worse for the operation.

No indication of the coming storm had appeared even when the monitors assembled for their usual meeting. Langton, it is true, strolled in, displaying his usual superior smile, but this the others, much to his secret irritation, ignored.

Sefton opened the meeting in rather good spirits. Thus far his firmness had been justified, and his personal unpopularity, whether temporary or permanent, counted for little. If he restored the proper Waynflete atmosphere he was satisfied. But Foster, with a few words, turned this seeming peace into what every boy in the room felt was open war.

Directly the Captain had finished speaking, Foster stood up in his place and announced tersely, "I have to report Fenwick for smoking!"

The bald statement, uttered calmly, almost casually, created considerable sensation; a dead silence fell in the room; the monitors glanced at each other uneasily, and then at the Captain. What would he do?

Fenwick, thank goodness, wasn't in the Sixth, but, after all, it was nearly as bad. He was, perhaps, the most prominent member of the Fifth, he had a strong backing in the school, and was bitterly opposed to the new order of things. To the more timid spirits this was clearly a case for compromise; he must be reprimanded, of course—to preserve their own dignity they must go as far as that—but anything beyond a wiggling was impossible.

Sefton himself was the first to break the ominous silence. Foster's simple statement, he realised, was conclusive; there could be no mistake. And there was only one thing to be done! He was vexed and perturbed, but he had no thought of shirking his plain duty.

"Fenwick must be fetched," he said.

"Just one moment," Langton interrupted; "I suppose Foster is sure of his facts."

"Quite sure, but Fenwick won't dispute them."

"It is very awkward to tackle a fellow like Fenwick," began Bunn, who had always sided with the peace-loving Hudson; "there will be an awful row. If he owns up, we ought to let him off; first offence and all that, you know."

"The rules are made for Fenwick as well as for the rest," observed Sefton quietly.

"But this is absurd," protested Langton angrily; "we can't treat Fenwick as if he were a kid."

"Why not?" from Foster.

"Because he won't stand it, nor the school."

"He has to stand it, and it doesn't concern the school, only the monitors."

"Well, I'll have nothing to do with it," angrily.

"That is a serious statement, Langton, made in the heat of excitement," observed the Captain quietly. "The issue, after all, is perfectly simple. Are we to rule or give up our authority? Our notice gave the school ample warning, and distinctly stated there would be no exceptions. To draw back from this case would be rank cowardice. Will some one kindly ask Fenwick to step round?"

"That's my job," said Foster grimly, and, getting up, he left the room.

Todd Campbell moved over to Langton, Bunn and Ward joined them, and the four talked together earnestly. The others drummed on the table and fidgeted restlessly. They were faced by a crisis of the most disagreeable nature. Whatever their decision some evil must result. Either they would create a bitter enemy, who would never forgive them, or make themselves a laughing-stock. If they failed now they would strike a fatal blow at all chance of restoring good order. Even Wynford was puzzling his brain to evolve some method of escape.

"Don't push things farther than you can help," he whispered; "if Fenwick puts up a plausible excuse I wouldn't examine it too closely."

"But suppose he offers no excuse?"

"In that case he must be punished, but, even so, I wouldn't cane him. Gate him for the rest of the term or something of that sort. That would keep us right with the school, and not drive the chap to extremes."

Meanwhile, Foster, not finding Fenwick in the study which he shared with Pember, had gone on to the Fifth common-room. The two cronies were there, with half a dozen others.

"Fenwick," said the messenger, "the monitors wish to see you."

"Let 'em wish," broke out Pember savagely; "that won't harm any one. You stay where you are, old man. Rotten impudence!"

Foster ignored the speaker entirely. "I've reported you for breaking the rule against smoking," he continued coolly, "and the monitors want to hear your explanation."

"Suppose I refuse to go?"

Foster shrugged his shoulders. "Answer your own question," he said.

"Don't act foolishly, Fenwick," exclaimed a boy named Morley; "an order from the monitors is the same as an order from the Head; you know that perfectly well."

"Stuff," cried Tilney; "they can't touch him."

"No," was the reply; "but don't you understand that, if Fenwick refuses to go, the affair passes out of their hands; there is nothing left for them to do but to report to the Head."

Foster turned deliberately to the door. "Come or stay," he remarked, "I'm not waiting any longer."

The Fifth Form boy got to his feet reluctantly. He was wild and angry, but a gleam of common sense mingled with his passion. "Sefton is mistaken if he thinks to bully me," he exclaimed truculently.

Foster made no reply. He disliked his task, but was compelled to carry it through. The only way to avoid unpleasantness was by resigning his monitorship, and Foster was the last person in

the world to show the white feather. As long as the Captain moved strictly within his rights, he intended to support him.

Fenwick entered the room flushed and excited. His lips curled scornfully as he glanced at the assembled boys. This pack of nobodies was going to sit in judgment on him! The idea was preposterous; his self-vanity was wounded to the quick; he felt humiliated even by the request to appear before them. That these fellows should presume to question *him*!

"Sorry we had to ask you to come here, Fenwick," the Captain began, "but you have been reported for smoking, and, before going further, we wished to hear what you have to say."

"Nothing," insolently.

"Do I take it, then, that the report is correct?"

"Take what you please; it's like your impudence to send for me."

"I think not. The rules are not of our making; we have only to see them carried out. And we can't make flesh of one and fowl of another. For the good of the school you must take your punishment the same as any one else."

"Punishment! Do you think I mean to knuckle down to you?"

"Not to me, but to the rules, which you admit you have broken. You will take all your cigarettes and smoking implements to my study, and you will not leave the school premises for the rest of term."

The silence succeeding the speaker's words was broken by Langton, who jumped up angrily. "This isn't a one-man show," he cried, "but a monitors' meeting, and before letting your tongue wag so freely I'll thank you to consult us."

"You're wrong, Langton," said Foster tersely; "the Captain has full power."

"That is so, but I am willing to leave the matter to the meeting."

"I protest," exclaimed Langton. "Here's a man practically on the same level as ourselves—he'll be in the Sixth soon—and because he smokes a cigarette we have all this silly rubbish. I, for one, won't stand by such tomfoolery."

The Captain controlled his temper. "Any other protests?" he asked.

"All this fuss won't do the school any good," stammered Bunn awkwardly, "and if Fenwick says he is sorry I think we should overlook it."

"We might pass it over since it's the first case," added Ward.

"Aren't you by way of leaving me out of account," sneered Fenwick; "suppose I refuse to obey your silly order?"

"I hope you won't," replied the Captain earnestly, "because then the monitors would be compelled to cane you."

For a moment Fenwick remained speechless, his features convulsed with rage and shame. "You would not dare," he almost screamed; "you would not dare."

And yet, at the very height of his passion, he realised that Sefton could and would dare. The knowledge left him gasping. He, Fenwick, to be caned by the monitors! He would have laughed

at the actual caning—but the indignity, the humiliation! Even the suggestion of such a thing was painful! He moved slowly toward the door.

But the series of surprises was not yet complete. Langton, now in a thoroughly ill-temper, began an angry attack on the Captain. Things had come to a pretty pass, he declared, when one boy took it upon himself to rule the school, and he, for his part, declined to bow down to any tuppenny-'apenny tin god.

The torrent of abuse apparently left the Captain unmoved. "Very well, Langton," he replied simply; "since you cannot work with us, we must learn to manage without you. I will post up the notice of your resignation."

It was now Langton's turn to gasp. He had never intended to resign, and certainly had not imagined that Sefton would force him to do so. In his anger he lost all sense of dignity, and flung out of the room like a pettish junior.

"We are making history," observed Wynford whimsically, when he and Sefton were in the latter's study, "even if it is only civil war history."

"It had to come," the Captain replied, "and the explosion will help to clear the air."

"Fenwick and Langton can be ugly enemies."

"They were that already; the only difference is that Langton must snipe from the outside now."

"There's something in that. Do you think Fenwick will bring the stuff round?"

"Certain of it."

"Who will take Langton's place?"

"I was thinking of Bassett; he's sound and solid, if not brilliant, and he isn't the chap to stand any nonsense."

"He isn't very keen on you."

"All the better—he will help to keep me from soaring in the clouds. With you and Foster and Bassett around, I'm not likely to leave the earth far beneath me."

"A jolly good thing, too," was Wynford's dry comment.

Meanwhile Langton had shut himself into his study. As his fit of passion grew colder, he recognised that he had acted like a fool, and had played into his rival's hand. The whole story would leak out, and the kids would know that he had been dismissed. "Resigned" was, of course, pure bunkum! And, as a rule, neither boys nor men care to worship a fallen idol. As a monitor he held a position in the lime-light, if not in the centre of it; now he had none.

Yet, in a way, he could not have avoided backing up Fenwick! It galled him to think that, with all his fancied cleverness, he had fallen between two stools! He should have resigned directly Sefton was appointed; plausible reasons were as plentiful as blackberries then; now there did not appear to be a solitary one. However, there were more days to come, and he would turn the tables on Sefton yet. With which charitable reflection in his mind he went to bed.

Fenwick also passed the evening with his own thoughts. He felt that Pember's, and especially Tilney's, sympathy would annoy and irritate him; so, instead of going to the study or returning to the common-room, he went straight to the dormitory. His spirit of bravado had gone, though

not his anger. Sefton had upset all his calculations. He had counted on Langton and Todd Campbell, and had believed they possessed sufficient influence to bring round the waverers. It had been a trial of strength in which he had been ignominiously beaten.

Worst of all was the certainty that he must throw up the sponge! He must accept his punishment without kicking. Pember and other fellows would sneer, probably call him chicken-hearted, but they hadn't seen the Captain's face! To surrender his smoking-kit and to keep within the precincts of the school! How the kids would howl with derision!

Naturally, he attributed all the sorry business to Sefton! When we get ourselves into a mess, the first thing always is to look around for a scape-goat. In this instance no search was needed, and Fenwick, like Langton, fell asleep with the resolve that Sefton should pay.

CHAPTER VIII

DRUMMED OUT

It was a great day at Waynflete, one of the most exciting the Magpies had ever known. The lordly Langton was no longer a monitor. The notice-board stated he had resigned, and that Bassett had taken his place, an appointment not well received by Sefton's enemies, because the new monitor, like Foster, could neither be coaxed nor bullied. The only crumb of comfort was that what the school couldn't do the Captain couldn't do!

"If Sefton tries to domineer, Bassett will kick over the traces," was the general and perhaps the correct opinion.

With regard to Langton, friends and foes were at one in believing that he had been dismissed from his post. As to the justice of the action the two parties were naturally opposed. The ex-monitor's friends pointed to it as another example of how Sefton was riding rough-shod over the school; the minority, led by Cathcart and Ashley, asserted that the Captain had ample reason for his action.

The story of Fenwick's humiliation, which became public later, created a feeling akin to consternation. The popular version of what had occurred was fairly accurate. Foster had reported him for smoking, he had been hauled before the monitors, ordered to surrender all his smoking material, and, in addition, had been "gated" till the end of term.

Many of the Magpies considered it hard lines; but the chief feeling was one of admiration at the Captain's courage, for no one pretended that the monitors had sufficient pluck to take the bull by the horns without him. Fenwick was a leading member of the Fifth, a popular athlete, and a boy of considerable influence. If the Captain could try a fall with him and come out on top, there was not much chance for the lesser lights.

"One thing is pretty clear," remarked Ashley to a group of the Fourth, "Sefton means to be boss; and, as long as he works for the good of the school, more power to his elbow. It's rather beastly for Fenwick, but I don't see why he shouldn't toe the line the same as the rest."

"Sefton's making a number of enemies for himself," one of his hearers exclaimed.

"He won't lie awake o' nights much because of that."

"I wonder why he chucked Langton?"

"Only the monitors know and they aren't likely to tell."

"Langton isn't the kind of chap to take it lying down, you'll see."

Ashley shrugged his shoulders. "What can he do?" he asked.

This was the very question which the ex-monitor and his friends were endeavouring to answer. They were angry enough to do anything short of murder, but what was there to be done? It was a simple matter to slang Sefton, but that afforded little real satisfaction and brought them no nearer to solving the problem. An appeal to the Head would be fruitless, because—and this was the mischief of it—in every particular Sefton had acted wholly within his rights. The conference, after a great deal of wild talk, broke up without having come to any decision, beyond that of making the Captain suffer at the first favourable opportunity.

But Langton was to undergo yet another indignity, and one that hurt the more because it contained a touch of ridicule.

From the time when Sefton had agreed to play Victoria Park, the Twins had been numbered among his devoted followers. It chanced also that they were not in love with Langton, who had on one occasion treated them very roughly. Added to these two things was the fact that Robert, just then, was reading an exciting military story, in which an unfortunate soldier was drummed out of the regiment.

"That's what they ought to have done to Langton," said his brother, with lively interest.

"And first they cut off his buttons."

"We could do that," observed Richard dreamily.

"What?"

"Cut off his buttons."

"Whose?"

"Why, Langton's, of course; they haven't been cut off, have they?"

"I don't think so."

"It seems as if that ought to be done, Bob. I don't suppose the Captain knew about it."

Bob agreed. "But it's too late to tell him," he added disconsolately.

"It isn't too late to cut them off, though."

"No," agreed Bob, "it isn't too late."

"And it ought to be done! Where's your pair of scissors?"

"In the desk."

"And I've just had my knife sharpened; that's lucky."

The discussion stopped abruptly; there was apparently nothing more to be said.

Now, although the Twins were good at most forms of sport, they prided themselves chiefly on their skill as scouts and trackers. Compared with them, Baden-Powell was a back number as a scout and Sherlock Holmes a duffer as an amateur detective. They had trained themselves to walk without making a sound, to take in everything at a glance, and to remember what they had seen; some of their feats were really uncanny, but they rarely performed them in public. For the purpose in view they were most admirably adapted.

That same night, when the big school clock struck twelve, two small, pyjama-clad figures stole quietly on bare feet into the corridor. Deep silence pervaded the building; the masters were in bed; the Magpies all soundly asleep; unless the adventurers met Joe, the night-watchman, on his rounds, there was small chance of discovery.

They were acquainted with every inch of the way, and their plan of campaign was simple. Fortunately for their purpose, Langton occupied the first bed in the dormitory, which made their design easier to carry out. They walked swiftly, but noiselessly as cats, listening intently for any sound, and ready at an instant's notice to slip into hiding.

It is strange how often fortune favours evil-doers. They arrived in safety, the door yielded to their touch, and they slipped into the room. A second later they had squatted on the floor at their victim's bedside. No time was lost in wondering or in fearing what might happen. Bob laid

a piece of card on the ground, Dick silently and dexterously unhooked the sleeping boy's jacket, and the nefarious work began.

Coolly, swiftly, and with the utmost precision every single garment was denuded of its buttons, and replaced. Not a hitch occurred, not a moment's waste of time; with a zeal and energy worthy of a better cause, the Twins plied their task to an end, then, like the Arabs, they folded their tents and silently withdrew.

"He's properly drummed out now," whispered Bob, as his brother softly closed the door behind them.

Three minutes later they were in bed, five minutes after that, I grieve to say, they were sleeping the sound sleep of innocence, and when the bell rang they awoke bright, cheerful, and with unruffled faces, as if they had not even one conscience between them.

Langton, as yet happily unconscious of the midnight raid, awoke also. He yawned, stretched his limbs lazily, and sat up. Bassett, his nearest neighbour, was already half dressed.

"Remarkable energy," exclaimed the ex-monitor; "you leave me wondering how it is done." Then he caught sight of his braces hanging loosely over the rail of his bed and felt a trifle surprised. Next he stretched out his hand to his trousers, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Hallo, what's up?" asked Bassett, and followed his question with a long-drawn whistle, which brought the other fellows clustering round.

It was rude of them to laugh, but perhaps they had some excuse. Langton sat up in bed, gingerly feeling his garments one by one. They were all alike—buttonless. The laughter grew hilarious; the boy's face alone would have cured the most deeply-rooted melancholy. Anger, disgust, amazement, but chiefly amazement, were stamped on it. Langton looked as if he had been suddenly transported into a world of enchantment.

"You fellows may think this funny," he growled, "but I don't," which set every one off again, because to them the spectacle was not only funny but ludicrous. But a minute or two later the spectators realised that the entertainment was something more than a farce.

An exclamation from Bassett drew their attention to the card on which the buttons were piled. Across it in printed characters were the words "Drummed Out." It took a little while to grasp the real significance, and then the laughter stopped abruptly. This was no mere kid's practical joke, but a deep and biting insult. Langton's face was not pretty to look at, and one by one the occupants of the dormitory moved away. There was something in this affair beyond an ordinary rag.

The story went ahead of the ex-monitor, who had to get out a fresh set of things, and it formed the sole topic of conversation at breakfast. Opinions were very much divided, but even the boys who voted the rag a "ripping scream," objected to the printing on the card as carrying the joke too far.

Langton, though outwardly controlling his feelings, was white hot with anger. The insult wounded his vanity, since it exposed him to the ridicule of the school; he saw a grin on every face, and interpreted every word as a gibe at his expense. He ate his breakfast in silence, half choking with every crumb he swallowed. He was shamed and humiliated, and filled with a spirit

of revenge. Naturally, perhaps, he attributed the outrage to Sefton. Not that he believed the Captain had done the thing himself, but no doubt it was his idea carried through by others. Well, Sefton should pay!

Pember and Fenwick and Tilney joined him after breakfast. The three were full of sympathy for him and of anger against the Captain. "Though," remarked Fenwick, who was a practical sort of chap, "I can't see what he expects to gain by it."

As a matter of fact, the Captain was not only puzzled, but completely upset by the incident, which must have the effect of adding to the difficulty of his task. He guessed instinctively that Langton would suspect him of being the instigator of the outrage, and that he would never forgive it. Henceforth there was not the most remote chance of reconciliation with the ex-monitor. However, as Captain of the school, he must express his sympathy with the victim of the rag and endeavour to discover the culprit.

It was a disagreeable job, but Sefton, seeing Langton and his chums, resolved to get it over without delay. He walked straight across and began amiably, "I'm awfully sorry about this business, Langton, and I want——"

"You can keep your sympathy," growled Langton.

"To express my personal regret," the Captain continued placidly. "I shall naturally do my utmost to discover who is at the bottom of it."

"Waste of time," said Pember sneeringly; "*you* aren't likely to find out."

Sefton only imperfectly grasped the implied insult; "I am speaking to Langton," he said, "and would prefer that he answered for himself."

"You've had my answer," Langton returned gruffly; "I don't want your sympathy nor your company."

"I will not trouble you with it," said the Captain, smiling good-humouredly, and turned away, glad that the interview was over.

"It's a horrible nuisance," Wynford observed that evening, "especially as they believe you put some one up to the job."

"I?" His chum gasped with an expression of astonishment in his eyes. "You don't mean that, Reg! What on earth should I have to do with it?"

"Nothing, but they believe it all the same. And, don't forget, it's a clean knock-out for Langton. He's down and out and can never get back. The kids will never make a hero out of a chap they've laughed at. And they've done precious little else all day."

"It's the drummed-out stunt I'm chiefly sorry for."

"Yes, that's serious. I suppose there isn't much chance of discovering who did it."

"Véry little, I fancy."

"That's a pity, too, because it's either one of your out-and-out supporters, or a chap who has a personal grudge against Langton. I hope for your sake that we shall be able to clear up the mystery."

This evidently had been the meaning of Pember's sneering remark, and for a moment the

Captain felt uncomfortable. "Yes," he said presently, "it will be very awkward if we can't."

In spite of all his efforts, however, the mystery remained unsolved. Only the Twins could have thrown any light on the subject, and they elected to remain silent.

CHAPTER IX

THE RETURN MATCH

The affair of the buttons was still fresh in the public mind, when the day of the return match with Erdington arrived, bringing with it much animated discussion. The Magpies chattered incessantly as they went down to the field, and stormy passages occurred between Sefton's supporters and the Ishmaelites, as Cathcart had sarcastically nicknamed the opposition.

Various reasons helped to invest the encounter with exaggerated importance. Erdington had never yet won both games, but on this occasion they appeared likely to make history. They had won at home, although narrowly, against the strongest team the Magpies could put up; now they had the tremendous advantage of meeting a greatly weakened eleven. Sefton's thick-and-thin supporters were unable to gainsay that fact. Curtis Ward would not be missed—Sefton had indeed unearthed a much better substitute—but could the loss of three such sterling players as Langton, Pember, and Fenwick be made good? That was a question few cared to answer. Sefton himself was doubtful, but his chum regarded the situation coolly.

"There's no need to be anxious," he remarked; "we stand to gain either way. If we lose, the kids will blackguard the seceders."

"I'm not so sure of that, Reg; they already hold me responsible for Langton and Co.'s absence. However, if you can blanket Moggridge, we shall serve up a pretty stiff opposition."

Moggridge was the opposing centre-forward, speedy, tricky, and an opportunist in shooting, scoring goals from all kinds of unexpected places. Wynford, as the Waynfilet centre-half, had visions of a lively and strenuous afternoon.

Borden, a lanky youth, mostly arms and legs, "kept" for the Magpies. He was a player of unorthodox type, but he had a good reach, was agile as a cat, and possessed an uncanny anticipation. His peculiar methods often brought the hearts of the Magpies into their mouths, but the goals scored against him were generally of the unsavable order. Between him and his backs a perfect understanding existed. "Leave it to Borden," was the motto acted upon in times of stress.

The team had a final few minutes together previous to leaving for the field, and Sefton was encouraged by their quietly confident demeanour. There was no boasting or vainglorious talk, but it was obvious that every man was out to win.

"Fit as fiddles," was the Captain's unspoken comment as he looked round on the team; aloud he said, "If our play is up to practice form we shan't be far behind at the finish."

"We shan't lose for want of trying," remarked Wynford, as he moved off with his chum; "beating Erdington means beating the Ishmaelites, and our fellows are terribly keen on doing that."

"The Ishmaelites?" queried the Captain, in a puzzled tone.

"The kids' nickname for Langton and his party; originated in the Fourth; young Cathcart, I believe, is the author."

"I wonder if they will turn up?"

"Sure to; come on purpose to condole with us."

The Ishmaelites were indeed present in force, the main body flanked on either side by the

wobblers, who were prepared to cheer with the strongest party. Cathcart and Ashley had gathered their supporters, who greeted the appearance of the team with stentorian shouts of "Play up, Magpies!"

"We are all right behind," said Cathcart, with an air of confidence; "the main thing is, can Wynford bottle the centre?"

"If he does he'll need a long rest after the match," laughed Ashley. "Moggridge is slippery as an eel and the cutest man on the field."

"Well, this afternoon, you know, I'm rather inclined to back Wynford."

"To judge by their faces, all our men mean real business."

"Except the goalie; he looks as if he were going to a picnic," a remark which brought a laugh from the immediate bystanders.

"Trust old Borden," said Morley; "he won't let us down. I hope Sefton has on his shooting boots. Moggridge is spinning the penny. We've lost! *Absit omen!*"

"Not much advantage; there's no wind and precious little sun. Give 'em a cheer," and Sefton kicked off amidst a chorus of "Play up, Magpies!"

The opening minute was fraught with excitement, and it left the Magpies gasping. The Royals—Erdington played in royal blue—snapped up the ball, went off with a hurricane rush, smothered Wynford and bore down on goal. The ball got to the outside-right, who promptly beat his man, cut right in, and shot hard and true for the far corner of the net. The ball went like a flash, giving the astounded Magpies scarcely time to groan. It was a magnificent shot, more than worth a goal, but the lanky one was there, and by some cunning wizardry deflected the ball at the tips of his outstretched fingers round the side. The Magpies hardly knew whether to cheer more loudly for their opponent or for their goalkeeper. Magnificent shot, magnificent save! Players and spectators alike talked of the incident for weeks.

The corner proved futile, but the Magpies breathed freely only when play was transferred to mid-field. It did not remain there long; the Royals came again and again, straining their opponents' defence to the utmost. For fully a quarter of an hour the Magpies did nothing but repel harassing attacks, while the Royals' goalkeeper leaned idly against a post, and, with detached air, nonchalantly viewed the battle from afar. The Ishmaelites sarcastically advised him to go and dress, since it was evident that his services were not required.

But the Magpies, mainly through the sterling play of Foster and Borden, held out, and gradually, but surely, the character of the game changed. Wynford, who had scarcely covered himself with glory, came into the picture; hitherto the Royals' centre had done as he pleased; now he found an ever-increasing difficulty in getting through. He had not by any means shot his bolt, but Wynford was getting a strong grip on him.

Presently the effect of the centre-half's recovery became apparent; the ball travelled over the half-way line, Foster found time to rub his bruised shins, and the left back to gain his second wind. A big cheer broke from the loyal Magpies when Bassett lobbed in a beautiful centre, and the Captain, with a first-time effort, rattled the cross-bar with the keeper beaten. The Ishmaelites talked glibly of a fluke, and prophesied that the visitors would cross over three goals to the good.

But from this time until the whistle blew, the game was hotly contested in the middle of the field, the Royals showing a slight superiority. The duels between Moggridge and Wynford became more strenuous and exciting, but the Waynflete man stuck like glue to his opponent, rarely letting him get by. The hopes of the Magpies soared higher as the game progressed, and they were perfectly contented when half time arrived with no scoring.

"Not so dusty," exclaimed Cathcart, as the players sucked their pieces of lemon, "and Wynford's got the measure of his man, which is the chief thing."

"They've had an awful gruelling, though," said Morley despondently.

"Not worse than the other fellows, and they don't carry a single passenger. There isn't a weakling in the team."

"Lucky that Ward isn't playing," Ashley commented; "he would have been clean run off his feet by now."

"The new man's worth two of Ward any day."

"They are lining up. I guess this half will be a teaser. Moggridge will be desperate; he hasn't missed scoring a goal in any match this season."

"Well," laughed Cathcart, "let us hope he will get a new experience. There's the whistle."

The spectators breathed deeply as the second half of the game began. There was no mistaking the earnest purpose of the players on both sides; every member of the two teams was obviously bent on winning. The pace waxed hot and furious; Royals and Magpies alike were expending every ounce of energy, taking every risk in order to obtain victory. Once, Wynford, from far out, sent in a terrific and unexpected shot; it was saved brilliantly, and the Magpies gave the plucky goalkeeper a round of enthusiastic cheers. At the other end Borden, with a spectacular dive, saved a certain goal from the foot of the elusive Moggridge; but for the most part the defence outplayed the attacks.

At the end of half an hour a draw was freely prophesied, and then, in as many minutes, two sensational incidents occurred. Moggridge, eluding the centre-half, raced ahead, rounded the left back, screwed in again almost level with the goal-mouth, and, in spite of a desperate rush by Foster, slammed the ball high up into the far corner of the net. Borden's only consolation, as he disgustedly fished the leather out, was that probably the finest keeper playing would have been beaten.

"That settles Sefton's hash," remarked Pember.

"And now for the deluge," added Tilney.

The spirits of the loyalists sank to zero, but the very next minute soared magically. The Magpies' forward line swept down the field in perfect unison; the combination was flawless; the ball passed accurately from man to man with bewildering rapidity; the Royals appeared momentarily helpless; the backs were in a glorious tangle. Then the winger on the left shot; the ball flashed across the goal mouth; Bassett, running in, got his head to it, and the Magpies were again on level terms.

It was all so sudden and unlooked-for that for a moment the spectators remained dumb, scarcely crediting their own senses. But the referee pointed to the centre, and then the cheering broke out and caps sailed into the air.

"My aunt!" cried the delighted Cathcart. "Pat me on the back somebody; I can hardly believe it now."

"Good old Bassett," exclaimed Ashley; "now we are in for a win. Play up, Magpies!" and the stimulating cry was echoed by all his chums.

The noise ceased as Moggridge tapped the ball to his inside right; too much was at stake for cheering. Anything might happen during the next few minutes. Moggridge was away! No, the centre-half had stopped him, but the ball had swung out to the left. The winger dashed along the touch-line; there was only the back to beat, but Foster remained cool and steady, and the next minute had cleared his lines with a hefty punt.

"Good man, Foster," yelled Cathcart; "good man," and the band of loyalists took up the cry.

But incident followed incident in such quick succession as to leave little time for shouting. Now one side, now the other held the advantage, the issue hung in the balance; the onlookers felt that a goal would decide it one way or another. And the more observant began to fancy the Magpies' chances. Though tired, they were playing methodically and well together; their rivals, on the other hand, were over anxious, and too prone to rely on individual rushes. They were, like heated gamblers, staking everything on the result of a desperate throw. Time and again, when in a favourable position, they were dexterously robbed of the ball by their cooler and more calculating opponents.

"It's our game bar accidents," declared Cathcart confidently; "the Royals are dropping to pieces."

"Sefton's off!" "Well done, Sefton!" as the centre neatly slipped his man. "Oh, hard lines! No, he's passed out to Bassett." "Lovely pass, too." "Good man, Bassett!" "Don't let him edge it out." "Over the line," disgustedly. "It's a corner, though." "So it is; buck up, Magpies."

Fortunately, Bassett had nothing much in the way of nerves to trouble him. He took a comprehensive glance at the crowd of players and kicked with cool deliberation. The spectators held their breath as the ball mounted, hung for the fraction of a second in the air, and dropped plump in the goal-mouth. By a great effort the keeper saved, but could do no more than fist the ball out. The right back tried to get it away, but his shot was blocked, and the leather disappeared amongst numerous eager feet and legs. The crowd around the ropes bubbled over with excitement, and shouted words of encouragement, when suddenly Sefton, with a dexterous hook, secured the ball and guided it into the corner of the net. The unlucky goalkeeper, hampered by the crowd, was not even aware that the mischief had been done.

A few minutes for play yet remained, but the interest had evaporated; the match was as good as won, and the Magpies, led by Cathcart, spent the time in cheering Sefton. And when the final whistle blew and the tumult had subsided, a high-pitched voice (which was really two voices in unison) convulsed the field.

"What price the Ishmaelites now?" it piped, and a roar of mocking laughter from the loyalists gave the answer.

"Langton and his crew will feel pretty sick," said Cathcart, as he turned to cheer the retiring teams.

"It's one up for Sefton, and a jolly good one," exclaimed his chum; "the Ishmaelites never

dreamed we should win."

"Fenwick," announced Morley, with a grin, "prophesied we should be knocked out four—nothing."

CHAPTER X

IRREGULAR SCOUTS

The victory over Erdington was a personal triumph for Sefton, and helped considerably to strengthen his position; at the same time it did much to discredit the leading Ishmaelites. The Magpies felt somehow that if Sefton could win without their assistance, they were not of much account. This, perhaps, was illogical, but boys' opinions are not always governed by logic.

Arthur Marriott congratulated his chief on the success thus far of his experiment. "Sefton certainly has begun well," he agreed, "and already there is a marked change for the better in the tone of the school. But it needed some courage to tackle Fenwick and Langton in the way he did."

"That was the acid test," replied Dr. Boyd pleasantly; "had he faltered there it would have been good-bye to his authority. But Sefton is by way of being a root-and-branch man; he prefers digging up the poison tree rather than lopping off the branches. There will be rough weather, I expect, yet, but at present he appears to be sailing in fairly smooth water. He got a remarkable reception after the Erdington match."

"Yes," and Mr. Marriott chuckled at the remembrance, "the youngsters fairly let themselves go. After all, you know, one's own school is always the best school in the world."

On the surface, at least, affairs at Waynflete did seem to show a certain improvement. The monitors, inspired by their leader, grasped the reins more firmly; discipline was tightened, though not too stringently, and the better element in the school responded willingly. The leading Ishmaelites remained irreconcilable, but they had sufficient wisdom to realise that, for the moment at least, the tide was running too strongly against them.

By the juniors the truce was only partly kept. Pember minor and Bathurst carried on the war by spasms, chiefly by way of ragging Sefton's friends in the Fourth and Lower Fourth. As a rule the loyalists, not having any proof, were forced to suffer in silence, but occasionally the tormentors found the tables turned.

The affair of the snails, for example, which convulsed the house with laughter, was a case in which the engineer was truly hoist with his own petard. The credit for the idea belonged to Bathurst, but his chum took it up with amazing enthusiasm.

"I say," began Bathurst one afternoon, "I've thought out a ripping stunt. Give Cathcart the time of his life."

"Go on," said his chum eagerly.

"There's heaps of snails round old Thompson's place at Lyndhurst," mysteriously.

"I don't see."

"Shut up, fathead, and let your uncle talk. It isn't far away, and we could collect a couple of dozen without any one spotting us."

"And toast 'em? Don't know that I care particularly for toasted snails."

"They aren't for us, muggins, but for Cathcart. Arrange them nicely in his bed, they'll make a beautiful squash; he always drops down with a thud. There'll be some language. What!"

Pember minor, immensely tickled, roared and guffawed, and clapped his chum on the back. "It's priceless, Bathy," he declared, "absolutely priceless. And it 'ud be a shame to leave Ashley out

in the cold; ought to let him share in the treat, eh! It's only fair. And if we could pick up a few addled eggs, now! I like mixtures; I'm all in favour of mixtures."

"Right-o. I've got a couple of brown paper bags in my locker. We can plant 'em safely when we get back, and watch our chance to slip upstairs. My aunt! 'twill be a down for Cathcart and his pal. Waynflete will be a real scream in the morning. You slip off now; I'll fetch the bags and catch you up."

No one noticed the two conspirators as they walked briskly towards the moor. There was a broad grin on their faces, and they chortled violently as they thought of the coming snail squash. It was such a screaming joke that they wouldn't have abandoned it for all the contents of the tuck-shop.

"Priceless," chuckled Pember minor, "simply priceless. And we'll choose our spoil carefully, Bathy; give 'em the best, only the best. Nothing stingy about us, Bathy, eh! We might even go as far as a slug or two, nice fat, juicy ones; old Thompson won't grudge us a couple of slugs apiece," and he exploded with laughter.

"And perhaps a blind adder," suggested his chum; "I know the harmless kind."

Pember minor considered this thoughtfully, but finally turned the proposal down. "Slugs and snails are all right," he decided; "they'll make a jolly good mixture by themselves."

They reached the wall surrounding the Lyndhurst estate; their luck was in—they had not met a soul. They began the search immediately, with much laughter and many jests as they discovered a particularly valuable find.

"Here's a whopper," cried Pember minor, "a very grandfather of snails; Cathcart simply must have this one."

"I've just picked up a beauty, too," Bathurst announced gleefully.

"A rotten egg or two would go well with the mixture, old son. How about climbing over? I don't expect any one is about."

"Right-o! Leave the bags; they'll be in our way."

They glanced around sharply, discovered that the coast was clear, and climbed to the top of the wall. Here they waited a minute or two listening, but there was no sound, and at length they dropped quietly to the ground.

Almost at the moment of their disappearance any one on the spot would have perceived a startling apparition. From a gorse-covered gully close at hand two red heads appeared on a level with the top, two pairs of keen eyes were fixed on the wall, and two freckled faces broke out into broad grins. Then one body crept from its hiding place, paused a second or two at the foot of the wall, and returned swiftly. The Twins might not be good boys, but they were good scouts.

"Two brown paper bags with a collection of slugs and snails," reported the explorer tersely.

"And an addled egg or so to give flavour. I thought the blighters were up to some dirty work. That's Bathurst's notion."

"Beats the apple-pie stunt to a frazzle. Lucky for Cathcart and Ashley that we got on the trail; we must give 'em the office."

"Not on your life," came the unexpected reply; "not a word to a soul," and the speaker, who was Richard, wriggled about as if on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

"Oh, my aunt," he gasped; "hit me on the back, Bob; it's better than raspberry-tart, and ice-cream, and peppermint drops all together. Oh, here's a go!"

For half a minute Bob regarded his brother with severe displeasure, then his eyes laughed, and his face laughed, and he stuffed a handkerchief wildly into his mouth, stifling his gurgling sounds.

"The way of the transgressor is hard," quoted Dick, "but the way of these particular transgressors will be soft."

"And squelchy, and splashy, and—if they get the eggs—sweet smelling. Can we do it, Dick? Oh, say we can do it."

"I suppose the Chief Scout wouldn't call it a good action," murmured Dick thoughtfully, "but, brightening up, "we are only Irregulars, and much is forgiven them."

"Besides, it is a good action really," said Bob. "It may soften their hearts and turn them from their evil ways. They may become reformed characters and live to thank us."

"We oughtn't to look for thanks, Bob; we aren't that sort. We do good by stealth and blush to find it known."

"We'd blush all right," sniggered Bob, "only it would be black and blue, after Bathy had finished with us. I hope, I do hope, that they'll steer clear of the keepers."

"Glad you show a proper spirit, Bob," his brother said; "we ought always to hope for other people's success. Besides, if the keepers scare 'em, they'll forget the bags, and we don't want to carry their dirty menagerie."

"'Twould be losing the cream of the joke," said Bob. "Duck."

His hearing was very keen, and by the time they had dropped into hiding, Bathurst's head appeared at the top of the wall.

"Hold these till I'm down," the unseen watchers heard him say; "don't want to smash them yet."

"Hardly," replied his chum; "let the other blighters do the smashing," and they both grinned broadly.

They had indeed reason to be merry; their quest had been amazingly successful; no one had spotted them, and they gloated over their coming triumph.

"Scoot," said Dick, in a whisper, "and watch where they hide the bags. Leave sign. I'll get a wiggling for being late, but one suffers gladly in a good cause."

The conspirators, carrying their precious booty, turned back in the direction of Waynflete. They were as merry as grigs; they laughed and joked with each other, made jesting remarks about Ashley and Cathcart, and congratulated themselves on having avoided all chance of discovery.

"No one can suspect us," Bathurst chortled, "and in any case nothing can be proved. There's a cunning little place at the back of the workshop where we can hide the bags, and one of us can get them later while the other keeps watch."

"Why not carry 'em straight to the dorm.?" asked his chum; "it may be difficult for us to get out again."

"We can always squeeze through the lumber room window, and your plan's too risky."

"Right-o! have it your own way, but you'll have to fetch the things."

"Trust me," his chum replied cheerfully; "oh, my aunt, what a night we shall be having."

"I wish it was Sefton," said Pember minor.

"We'll give him a dose later; better to try our 'prentice hands on the other blighters—gain experience, you know," and the speaker chuckled, while his chum reluctantly agreed there was something in what he said.

Occasionally they glanced around, but there was no one on the moor, or at least no one visible, for the Irregular Scout was far too cunning to be spotted by such lubbers, and indeed there was no reason why he should take any risks. Obviously they were returning straight to Waynflete, where brother Bob would take them in charge.

Before reaching the gate they hid the bags under their jackets, though really there seemed to be small need for precautions; even the yard was deserted.

"This way," whispered Bathurst; "we can get rid of the bags and still be in time. Our luck's right in, old son."

They skirted the school buildings for a short distance, and then, turning off to the right, ran lightly to the workshop, where, at the back, stood a galvanised iron tub, half full of rubbish: inside this receptacle they carefully placed the bags. And, as soon as they had disappeared, a red-headed, freckle-faced imp, who had been doing mysterious things with bits of twisted grass, laid down the last of his "sign" and quickly followed them.

"Easy to find that," he muttered, "easy as falling off a log. And old Dick will trump up some wheeze for being late."

The Twins did not meet again until prep, when an almost imperceptible glance from Dick assured the other that all was right. It might have been dangerous to pass a note, but presently Dick's right eye began to twitch in a most remarkable manner, opening and shutting at irregular intervals. No one but Bob noticed this curious action, and he seemed to derive considerable satisfaction from his brother's strange affliction. After a while his own eye became affected, though only for a short period, and then both boys settled down to their studies. But one had delivered his message, and the other had understood and replied.

"Left in tin," Dick had telegraphed by the dot and dash system; "you go;" and the other had answered, "Right-o."

As soon as the small boys had dispersed, Bob scooted for the lumber room, opened the window, let himself down, and returned with the precious bags, which he hoisted up to his brother, who had followed in more leisurely fashion. Dick put the bags on the floor and helped his fellow conspirator up; then they quietly re-fastened the window, and the next instant the room was empty.

"All the tricks to us so far," whispered Dick, with satisfaction.

The real difficulty, however, lay ahead, and it needed all their craft and cunning to dodge the

other boys, and to make their way unobserved to the dormitory. As usual, they lost no time in considering ways and means; their plan was cut and dried, and in a few minutes, with happy hearts and untroubled consciences, they were proceeding to their own peaceful beds.

"I feel good," said Dick; "I want to sing. But we ought to be there to hear the blighters."

"No can," replied Bob gloomily; "'twill be all over before our fellows go to sleep. Never mind, we'll hear about it from Cathcart in the morning."

"But it isn't the same," cried his brother dolefully. "What about going back and hiding under one of the beds?"

"The chaps would miss us, and there'd sure to be a hue-and-cry."

"We'd only get a caning and the fun would be worth it."

"Oh," said Bob carelessly, "I shouldn't mind that, but the whole thing might go wrong if they began searching for us."

Suddenly both glided into the recess of a doorway and almost ceased breathing. Bathurst and his chum were stealing along the corridor in the direction of the lumber room.

"On the wrong trail," said Dick, when they had passed. "What a scrumptious lark!"

CHAPTER XI

THE BITERS BIT

Bathurst and his chum entered the lumber room and closed the door softly behind them. They bubbled over with suppressed merriment at thought of the screaming farce in front of them, and as Bathurst got through the window Pember minor begged him to hurry up.

"Plenty of time," his chum replied; "no need to be too early."

He dropped quietly to the ground, and Pember minor watched him stealing along under cover of the wall until he disappeared. It wasn't really a long time before his return, although to the waiting boy it seemed an age.

"Hand 'em up one at a time," he whispered; "we don't want an accident—yet. What? What do you say? Gone? How can they be gone, you silly owl?"

"There's nothing in the tin. I reckon Joe's been round and cleared everything out."

"Rot," exclaimed the other hotly, "the bags are bound to be there; you're off your chump."

"All right," sulkily; "come and find 'em yourself if you're so mighty clever."

Pember minor promptly got out. Bathurst was a blind bat who couldn't see an inch beyond his nose. It was perfectly ridiculous! After all their trouble, too! Followed by Bathurst, he crept along, fuming with passion, which increased in violence when, having removed the lid, he discovered that his chum's yarn was literally correct. The tin was empty; not even a scrap of paper remained.

"Well," said Bathurst nastily, "who's the silly owl now? We're bowled out, my son; even if we found the stuff 'twould be too late. And there's no sense in kicking up a fuss about it; there are plenty more days. Best thing now is to skip back before any one spots us."

They darted back to the friendly shelter of the wall, and stole along in the direction of the lumber room. Both were bitterly disappointed at the collapse of their gorgeous scheme, and many unkind remarks were silently addressed to the absent Joe, who had so unwittingly upset their calculations. Still, as Bathurst had remarked, there were plenty more days, and next time they would see to it that their plans didn't miscarry.

But the present adventure was not yet finished; Fate, in the horrid shape of the School Captain, was about to descend on the luckless practical jokers. Fortunately, they were some distance from the tell-tale open window, when a voice suddenly exclaimed, "Hulloa, who are you? What are you doing here?"

Their first thought was to run, but that idea was instantly abandoned. For one thing there was nowhere to go, and for another Sefton was too close. They stopped sullenly.

"Pember minor and Bathurst," said the Captain slowly. "What are you doing here after lock-up?"

Of the two culprits Bathurst had the readier wit and the nimbler tongue, but he felt dismally that no assurance would save them. They might, by a stroke of luck, have bamboozled an ordinary monitor, but it wasn't easy to get past Sefton, confound him! Still, he must make some sort of answer.

"We've been to see the owl," he said, with a fine air of candour; "swotting up natural history, habits of birds, and that kind of thing. And the only chance of finding out anything was after

lock-up. We ought to have asked permission, of course, but the truth is, we didn't think of it. Some one left the door open and we just slipped out."

"I'm glad to learn you're so keen on natural history," said the Captain; "it's a most interesting subject. And there are lots of odd things to be learned about owls. You can both write out a full account of the habits of these curious birds, and bring to my room to-morrow after prep."

Bathurst groaned inwardly. What he knew about owls or any other beastly birds could be written down in five minutes, but that wouldn't satisfy Sefton. They would have to give up every minute of their spare time next day. But, after all, Sefton was letting them off pretty lightly; he had expected a jolly good switching.

But Sefton was jawing again; what a blethering idiot he was! And yet, was he?

"Rather lucky I met you," he was saying; "the door's shut and you would have been locked out all night. That didn't occur to you?"

"No," Bathurst replied glibly; "we acted on the spur of the moment."

"Ah!" said the Captain—Bathurst began to wonder if he had his tongue in his cheek—"enthusiasm's a dangerous thing; mustn't let it run away with you again; lead you into all sorts of scrapes."

He opened the door and stood aside to let them pass. They slipped inside quickly, and were bolting off for their own room when he called them back.

"I'm afraid you must come to my study first," he remarked. "It's a pity, perhaps, to check your burning desire for knowledge, but rules mustn't be broken even for natural history."

As in the case of royalty, the Captain's invitation figured as a command, and there was nothing for it but to accept. To complete the misery of these natural history students, they plunged right into several Fourth Form boys, who sniggered, and made rude faces, and offensive gestures.

They left the Captain's study in both physical and mental discomfort, and went in a fit of sulks to their dormitory, where they were received with a chorus of mocking laughter.

"Some chaps are getting awfully chummy with Sefton lately," said Ashley.

"Invitations to supper and all sorts," murmured his chum mischievously, "especially all sorts. Did you have a good spread, you fellows?"

"Shut up, you cackling ass," growled Pember minor, "or I'll heave my boot at your head."

"Too high and mighty for us, now they are such chums with Sefton," said Ashley.

It really was galling for the crestfallen conspirators. They watched their intended victims get into bed, and heard Cathcart's mighty flop as he settled himself. How different things would have been but for that dunder-headed Joe. Their failure was simply maddening!

And the switching had been a painful operation! Sefton was a disagreeable cad—both were heartily agreed on that point. And every silly cuckoo in the room was sniggering! Pember minor resolved savagely to "take it out of" Cathcart in the morning. They undressed slowly without exchanging words, and, as it chanced, both were ready at the same time to turn in.

The unscrupulous Twins certainly missed the best part of the performance, for their wildest fit

of imagination fell short of the reality. As Cathcart said, it was a mercy that no fellow in the dormitory suffered from heart disease. A startling yell from Pember minor, an unearthly howl from his chum, and a simultaneous bolt of both boys from their beds excited the liveliest curiosity.

"Hulloa, what's up?" cried Cathcart.

The natural history students stood trembling with rage, vowing vengeance on all the world, and the occupants of their own dormitory in particular. Their pyjamas were sploshy with a nasty mess, and a distinct, though far from agreeable, aroma began to steal through the room. The addled eggs in the mixture were most certainly a pronounced success.

"Who did this?" roared Pember minor; "I'll break your neck, Cathcart, if it was you," a promise which would hardly have induced Cathcart to confess, even had he been guilty.

"Don't act the silly goat," he exclaimed roughly; "how do we know what the fuss is about?"

"Any chap got any scent?" inquired Ashley, holding his nose; "seems as if some one had been digging up a graveyard."

"Might open a drug store if we could bottle a little of this perfume," observed Cathcart.

By this time every boy was out of bed, gaping at the strange antics of the victims, who were howling with rage and dancing about like mad dervishes.

Pandemonium was at its height when Foster, the monitor of the dormitory, entered the room. Instantly every one, except Bathurst and his chum, got into bed.

"What's all this fuss about?" demanded Foster, who was holding one hand firmly to his nostrils.

"Some dirty cad's been putting rotten eggs and things into our beds," spluttered Pember minor, half choked with passion.

"Smells uncommonly like it," agreed the monitor, and, turning down the clothes, he surveyed the sticky mess.

"This is more than a joke, and I'll have something to say about it presently," he remarked. "Take out that sheet, you fellows, and throw the stuff out of the window. Don't drop any of it about."

Cathcart and Ashley could have screamed with delight at the gingerly way in which this order was executed, but Foster looked far too grim for any exhibition of even the mildest frivolity.

"Take the sheets into the lavatory and leave them there," he continued; "you must sleep on the blanket. And clean one another down; I'll wait here till you come back."

There was nothing high and mighty about the two boys as they slunk off, nor when they returned. Foster examined the results of their scraping efforts, and then ordered all the other occupants of the dormitory to sit up.

"This is a serious matter," he began. "I don't mind a silly joke, but this is a dirty trick, and I want to know the truth. Which of you did this?"

No one answered, and indeed every face wore an expression of perplexed amazement.

Foster shrugged his shoulders. "You aren't a bad bunch, taking things all round," he said, "and I should have thought the fellow who played this trick would have enough pluck to own up. I'll

give you another chance."

The boys stared at him and at one another, but no one spoke.

"Very well," he exclaimed, in disgusted tones; "I'm now going to put a straight question to each of you, so that you can't wriggle out of it without telling a direct lie. Do you know anything about it, Cathcart?"

"No," came the prompt reply.

Foster repeated the question to every boy in the room, but without result. He was not only angry but disappointed. "The Captain wasn't far out in talking of a dry rot among the Magpies," he said scornfully.

Cathcart, touched to the quick, half sprang out of bed. "You've no right to say that, Foster," he cried impulsively; "the thing is as much a mystery to us as to you. It couldn't have been done without my seeing it, and I'll swear no fellow even went near the beds. I give you my word for it, and that ought to be good enough for any one."

"And if it isn't," said Ashley, "you can add mine. D'you think Cathcart or I would funk a swishing?"

Looking keenly at the flushed, eager faces, Foster decided that both these fellows at least were quite innocent. "Sorry, Cathcart," he exclaimed genially. "I spoke too harshly. Now, lie down, all of you; perhaps we'll be able to clear the mystery up in the morning."

As Foster slept in a cubicle at the end of the room, there was no further disturbance, though the majority of the boys lay awake a long time puzzling over what had happened. Bathurst and his chum, in particular, were absolutely dumbfounded. Who had discovered the bags? and why had he chosen them for his victims? The more they studied the matter, the more puzzling it appeared. It seemed almost as if they had been shadowed from the first. However, they fell asleep at length, angry, sore, and altogether puzzled boys.

But the sensation of the evening was succeeded by one in the morning equally mysterious. On the wall between the two beds a piece of paper had been methodically pinned, and it bore in printed characters the legend—The Biters Bit.

The inscription conveyed no information to any one but Bathurst and his chum—to them the meaning was obvious. The faces of their companions expressed surprise and wonder and curiosity, but certainly not guilt. Every one was asking his neighbour who had put the paper up, and what it meant. Evidently there was something in the rag beyond the comprehension of the dormitory.

Foster was very angry. It was useless asking questions to which he would get no answers.

"Pember minor knows what it means," he decided; "so does Bathurst, and both will hold their tongues. Looks as if the joker was the same chap that ragged Langton. An artful dodger whoever he is."

Before breakfast the story of the rag had circulated through the school, and the natural history students were received with roars of mocking laughter, which did not help to make their tempers any sweeter. Both scowled fiercely at their tormentors, and Pember minor cuffed a few of the smaller boys, but that yielded little satisfaction. What he really wanted was to discover who had played the scurvy trick, and to chop him up into minute pieces.

It must have been one of the boys in the dormitory; no fellow would have had the cheek to prowl about the building in the middle of the night. He had suspected Cathcart and Ashley, but even he was conscious that they wouldn't have lied to Foster. Well, he would find out the blighter yet, and then it would be his turn!

CHAPTER XII

A CHAPTER IN NATURAL HISTORY

Essay writing was not Pember minor's strong point, while his knowledge of owls would go into a small compass. He began bravely, "The owl is a bird of prey; it wakes at night and sleeps by day."

"Ripping," exclaimed his chum admiringly, "you're coming on; regular poet."

"That's better than a blinking ass," savagely, "trying to stuff Sefton with your bally owl."

"Ought to have stuffed the owl instead, old man."

"He wasn't likely to fall for a yarn like that, and now we've got this silly truck to do. Here, Wickham, you know all about owls."

Wickham, also in durance vile, was plodding steadily through his customary two hundred lines. He was apparently a harmless, inoffensive young gentleman, with a marvellous faculty for getting into trouble. Mr. Abbot, his Form master, often declared, with a prodigious sigh, that Wickham would certainly bring down his gray hairs to the grave. He frequently tried desperately not to catch him, but Wickham was one of those chaps marked beforehand by the gods to be dogged by ill-luck.

This sudden accusation of knowing all about owls, made in such threatening tones, apparently threw him into a cold sweat, and he hesitated a moment before asking mildly, "What owl?"

"What owl, you silly coot? Any owl. What's the difference?"

"There are ever so many sorts, Pember."

"Well, go ahead, and tell us all about them. Throw it off your chest, or I'll knock the stuffing out of you."

Thus adjured, Wickham plucked up courage. He was pretty good at owls, and his information turned out to be both extensive and peculiar.

"There's the white and the tawny," he began in an impressive manner, "the barn-door, the bald-headed, the graveyard—that's the kind that lives in graveyards—and the ring-straked. The owl lays eggs——"

"Skip that," said Bathurst quickly; "we don't want to hear anything about eggs. What's its grub?"

"It lives on small birds," Wickham felt on sure ground here, and proceeded as if reading from a book: "particularly the chaffinch, blue tit, and the lap-wing. It entices them to its nest, where as many as seventeen birds have been found at one time. Often in the middle of the night it will cry 'Toot, Toot,' in the most melancholy manner."

"That's wrong," interrupted Bathurst; "it says, 'Too-it,' 'Too-it.' Any ass can read that in the poetry books."

"Have it your own way," replied the lecturer uncomplainingly, "but we had an owl once and it used to say 'Toot Toot' before we stuffed it."

"And what does it say now?"

"Oh, shut up," broke in Pember minor angrily; "you go on, Wickham."

Wickham went on. He didn't feel a bit tired. It was a privilege and no mistake to be teaching things to two such chaps as Pember minor and Bathurst. It was remarkable what a lot of things he remembered about owls, and he dealt them out lavishly.

"That ought to do," exclaimed Bathurst at length; "we can write up now from our notes. You're a decent little chap, Wickham," and, after fumbling in his pocket, "here's tuppence for the tuck-shop."

Pember minor, not to be outdone in generosity, added a similar amount. "You go on stewing up about owls and things," he said graciously; "you never know when it may come in handy. Old Sefton will swear we've mugged this out of a book."

"Oh, thanks awfully," replied the grateful naturalist, "but I didn't do it because I expected anything."

"That's all right," exclaimed Pember minor. "Give me a clean sheet of paper, Bathy. And, I say, each of us had better write from his own notes; mustn't be exactly alike."

Wickham returned pensively to his lines. But his task had lost all interest for him; he wrote very fast and his letters were very large, a few covering a lot of space. He wrote down the last six lines, folded his paper, put his fountain-pen in his pocket, and strolled out, leaving his pupils busily writing up their notes.

They might have felt less chirpy had they heard their mentor five minutes later holding forth in great style to the Twins on the power of knowledge.

"Pember minor and Bathurst are in there," he began, with a backward jerk of his arm, "writing up an essay on owls for the Captain. They'd have been jolly well stumped, I can tell you, if I hadn't gone in a few minutes to improve my handwriting. You chaps are wasting your time playing or strolling about. You should——"

"Get two hundred lines per diem from Abbott," scoffed Dick.

"Make money out of your superior education. See here," and he displayed his four pennies proudly. "Bathurst gave me two, and his chum two."

"What on earth for?"

"Helping 'em, of course. They don't know anything about owls; didn't even know there was more than one kind till I told them."

The Twins gazed incredulously at the speaker, and then at each other. Wickham instructing chaps about owls! Why, he scarcely knew the beak from the tail! This was vastly interesting and worth getting to the bottom of. They plied him with questions, and shrieked immoderately at his answers.

"Did you really stuff 'em with the barn-door and the bald-headed owl?" Bob asked.

Wickham drew himself up. "I don't know what you mean about stuffing 'em," he exclaimed stiffly, "but I certainly told 'em all I knew."

"And the blue tits and the yellow-hammers and all! Oh, my aunt! And they're writing it out for Sefton! They'll skin you, Wicky, as sure as fate—skin you alive, and drop your body into boiling oil. Oh, Wicky, some chaps think you're a fool, but——"

"I may be a fool, but I know all about owls—Pember minor said so. And," with a gleam of triumph, "they gave me fourpence."

"They'll get it back," Bob prophesied.

Wickham did a bit of thinking, with a definite result. "Not if it's turned into peppermint balls and gets sucked away," he observed.

The Twins patted him on the back, and declared he had a great brain; they also, very unselfishly, consented to come to his assistance, although neither was very partial to peppermint. Still, it was up to them to help a friend in need, and, linking arms, they marched off to the tuck-shop.

"I hope," said Wickham, putting his fourth peppermint into his mouth, "that I didn't make any mistakes. Of course, a chap gets a bit flustered being called on suddenly like that."

The Twins regarded him with affection, almost with reverence. "Oh, Wicky," Dick cried, "you're a jewel, a priceless jewel. And they didn't tumble! It's your face, Wicky, that's what it is. It's as solemn as an owl's."

"A bald-headed one's," roared Bob. "Oh, my stars, I'd give a fortune—if some chap would give it to me first—to be in Sefton's study when they take up the papers."

"Perhaps he'll think they've cribbed it all out of a natural history book," observed Wickham sadly, at which the Twins broke into a fit of laughter that nearly brought on apoplexy.

Meanwhile, the two essayists, blissfully unconscious of anything amiss, finished their task, and the same evening, after prep, proceeded to the Captain's study, where they sulkily handed in their papers.

Sefton, who had been discussing some school matter with Wynford and Foster, scanned Bathurst's effort, at first idly, then with interest, then with amazement and growing anger.

"Is this your work?" he demanded.

"Yes," replied Bathurst proudly; "I didn't use a book, honour bright, Sefton. I got a chap to give me a few facts, that's all."

The Captain turned to the second paper and found the same "facts."

"Essays on the owl, by two learned naturalists," he remarked, passing the papers to his companions.

It was the authors' turn to be amazed. Foster grinned broadly and made inarticulate noises, but Wynford fairly rocked, and doubled up with quite childish merriment.

"For curious facts and accurate description, White of Selborne isn't in it," he declared. "But, surely, you haven't discovered all these things for yourselves. I've never seen a bald-headed owl, and I know a little about birds. You must have cribbed that."

"No, we didn't, Wynford; Wickham told us that."

"Wickham!"

"Yes, he's only a kid, but he's a moth on owls and all that kind of thing."

"I should say so," dryly, "and he deserves credit for his learning. Must have put in a lot of time

studying."

"I know Wickham," said Foster, when the authors had been dismissed; "he's a baby-faced chap in the Lower Fourth. Looks too harmless to hurt a fly, but in his own way as mischievous as a monkey."

"Do you mean he humbugged them? I was rather inclined to think it cheek."

"Not a bit, they were innocent as babies; he just stuffed them, and I'll warrant his face was as grave as a judge's. He's a crony of the Twins, and they will all call it a ripping joke."

Meanwhile, Bathurst and his chum had departed, thirsting for blood. Even now many things were dark and obscure, but enough was plain to show they had been spoofed. Wickham had spoofed 'em—a kid in the Lower Fourth! It seemed incredible; if the school learned the truth they would never hear the end of the story. They panted for vengeance; for the rack and the thumb screw, for the pleasant Indian custom of scalping, for all the horrors of the mediæval ages. They would scalp Wickham and put heavy weights on his chest; they would lure him into the basement, and leave him to starve slowly to death.

But one has to catch one's hare before cooking, and Wickham had disappeared, leaving no trace. And with him the Twins had disappeared. And when bed-time arrived vengeance was still unappeased. Their original rag had gone sadly astray. They had fallen into the pit so carefully dug for others; had been deprived of their play-time, had made themselves a laughing-stock to that horrid Sefton, and—crowning indignity—had tipped a Lower Fourth kid for humbugging them. And by this time, no doubt, the rotten little hypocrite had guzzled the money away!

And the trouble was not yet over! Directly after breakfast Bathurst was besieged by several small boys, led by the Twins.

"Oh, if you please, Bathurst," they cried eagerly, "will you take our names? We're awfully keen on natural history."

"What do you mean, you little idiots?" he demanded, his colour mounting.

The kids shrank back at this display of anger, but one of the Twins protested mildly: "We didn't know the class was only for the Fourth; we thought——"

"Class!" shouted the bewildered Bathurst, "what class?"

"Yours and Pember's."

Before Bathurst, now slightly off his head, could make a reply, several of the Fourth came along and joined the crowd.

"Jolly sporting of you and Pember," said Cathcart. "I'll be glad to put my name down."

"And I," added Ashley, and several more.

"Is there any subscription?"

"When's the first meeting? The notice doesn't fix a date."

"What are you fellows all raving about?" stormed Bathurst angrily; "are you off your chumps? What's all this silly rot about classes?"

"You know best," said Cathcart. "I suppose Pember didn't put up the notice without consulting you."

"What notice?" demanded Bathurst, more than ever dazed.

"It's on the board. And I must say it was a shabby trick to make an offer that you didn't mean to carry out."

Two minutes later the distracted Bathurst was gazing at a sheet of paper containing the announcement:

"A class for the study of natural history is to be opened immediately. Special attention will be paid to owls. All boys who are interested in the subject, and would like to join, will please give their names to the undersigned, who have agreed to take charge of the class."

V. PEMBER.

B. BATHURST."

He tore down the offending paper, angrily cuffed an innocent small boy standing near, and strode off to find his chum. Obviously the author of this rag was Wickham, though that would be difficult to prove.

After morning school it became evident that the story was leaking out. There was much laughing and shaking of heads, and animated discussions as to which of the naturalists was the bald-headed, and which the barn-door owl. The juniors naturally kept these pleasantries to themselves, and as for the Fourth, well, it was impossible to punch all their heads.

It seemed difficult even to do anything to Wickham. He was sad eyed and tearful, though very cool, and the innocent expression of his face would have deceived an astute lawyer. The notice had been done on a copying-press, and he pointed out that he had no such article. He denied indignantly (and truthfully in a sense) that he had ever seen the notice before it appeared on the board.

As to his information, he declared he had done his best to help them, and it wasn't sporting to "down" a chap because of a mistake or two. A chap might easily get mixed between barn and barn-door, and he was positively certain there was a bald-headed eagle. As to the birds in the nest—Wynford had passed some scoffing remark on this—Wynford was a stuck-up ass, who didn't know anything. And it was all so sudden anyway that perhaps he had got a bit confused.

"He's a stupid little beggar," said Cathcart, who, with Ashley, had made sure of being present at the interview, "but I don't see that you can blame him; he did his best."

"My very best," said Wickham breathlessly.

"And, as for the yarn getting about, Wynford and Foster were sure to talk; too spicy to be kept to themselves. And other fellows would fasten on."

"I'd like to wring Wynford's neck," declared Pember minor savagely; "and as for you, you little idiot, clear out before I lay hands on you. If I were sure you had done it on purpose I'd smash you into a pulp."

"But I'm sure you couldn't think that, Pember," and Wickham slipped away, as Ashley declared afterwards, with his tongue in his cheek.

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[The end of *The New Captain* by Herbert Hayens]