

THE
CAPTAIN OF QUEENS

HERBERT HAYENS



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C.Q. Frontispiece
'The two boys lay with their arms round each other.'

THE CAPTAIN OF QUEENS

BY
HERBERT HAYENS

Author of "Midst Shot and Shell in Flanders,"
"Lords of the Air," etc.

With Coloured Frontispiece

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CHAPTER I A NEW HEAD

The Christmas vacation had ended, and Walter Ayling was packing his bag preparing for an early start in the morning. He was a sturdy, well-built youngster, with frank, open face, fresh colour, but no particular features to speak of, dark hair with a curl in it, merry, sunshiny eyes, thin lips, and a firm chin.

‘Just his brother over again,’ the captain had remarked when he first put in an appearance at Queen’s Norton; ‘poor kid. I pity him if he has to live up to Jack’s reputation.’

So far, young Ayling had not exactly set the Thames on fire. Although generally nearer the top of his form than the bottom, he had shown no particular brilliancy. He had his Fourth Form cricket and rigger caps, made a good show with the gloves, gained his swimming licence the first term, and always gave a good account of himself across country. He looked up from his packing, as the door opened and Jack entered the room.

‘Wish I were a few years younger and going back with you,’ exclaimed the elder brother, ‘we’d make the old Queens hum.’

‘I wish you were,’ Walter replied quickly; ‘we are likely to be in a hole this term. I don’t see why Doctor Bolton wanted to leave.’

Jack laughed. ‘Why, he has bagged the biggest plum in the school world. It’s an A1 honour to be Head of Manningham.’

‘I wouldn’t have swapped Queen’s Norton for fifty Manninghams,’ protested Walter sturdily.

The Queens generally were staunch, loyal sons of their school, but with young Ayling loyalty was a passion, amounting almost to a disease. There never had been, and never would be, a school equal to Queen’s Norton. Generation after generation of Aylings had sported the black and white colours which were to Walter what a flag is to its regiment. The names of his father and grandfather were inscribed on the roll of former captains; Jack had been a prefect, and captain of the first fifteen; numerous cousins had distinguished themselves inside the old buildings or on the playing-fields. It was perhaps excusable that Walter regarded the Headship of Manningham as a sorry substitute for that of Queen’s Norton.

Knowing his brother’s feelings, Jack exclaimed cheerfully, ‘Never mind, old boy, you’ll soon shake down comfortably under the new Head. The governors are sure to select a good man.’

‘It isn’t only the Doctor’s going, Jack. Most of the best fellows in the Sixth have finished, and Wilson, the new captain, is a regular mug. Good for anything in the way of scholarships and that sort of thing, but hopeless outside the classroom. He will let the school down for a dead certainty.’

‘Too much mince-meat and plum-pudding, Walter,’ laughed Jack, ‘you should ask the Mater for a blue pill. But seriously, you are probably making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Wilson may give you a surprise; I’ve known that happen before. It isn’t uncommon for a seeming King Log to prove a real King Stork. Anyhow, you keep up your end, and play the game. That’s the only motto, old son.’

Walter nodded, but did not speak. His belief in his brother had no limit, and Jack had ‘played the game’ all his life. His khaki uniform proclaimed that he was playing it now, like so

many thousands of bright, eager, healthy youngsters from every part of the Empire. It was the memorable Christmas of 1914, a Christmas of desolation, with every promise of greater desolation to come, and Jack Ayling had obtained a few days' precious leave, before being whisked across the Channel with his battalion.

Walter finished his packing hastily, and the brothers went downstairs. It was the last night they would spend together for a considerable time; perhaps it was *the* last night. The same thought occurred to both of them, but neither mentioned it—time to meet trouble when it came was the household motto.

Next morning Jack accompanied the younger boy to the station. 'Good-bye, Walter,' he exclaimed, as they grasped hands; 'have a good time, don't mope, live clean, and play the game. I hope you will make a decent show at the good old Queens.'

'And I hope you will get through all right over there,' replied Walter. 'Wish I were a few years older, so that I could go with you.'

'Gad, we'd make the Boches sit up, wouldn't we?' Jack exclaimed; but at heart he felt extremely glad that his brother was still only a 'kid.' 'It would be rotten luck for the Mater to lose both of us,' he reflected. 'Rather lucky Walter isn't in it.'

The village of Queen's Norton was situated on a branch line, and at the junction Walter joined a crowd of his returning schoolfellows. Stoneham and Caldecott, both prefects, greeted him with a friendly 'How do, Ayling,' and Charlie Wrigley seized his arm.

'Hallo, Walter, have a good time? I got in three days' skating. Scrumptious! Here's our apology for a train, with its wheezy old engine. The company ought to dig a big hole, and bury it decently. It's a perfect scandal. In you go—quick.'

Walter jumped in; Wrigley following, shut the door, and, leaning out of the window, cried tauntingly to the struggling mob on the platform, 'Compartment strictly reserved: directors of the line only.' A wild yell and a quick rush greeted his announcement, and after a hot scrimmage half a score of excited youngsters forced a way in.

'Children of the new age,' sighed Wrigley; 'greedy, grasping, selfish. Absolutely without consideration for the rights of others. And the vice is spreading; it has even affected the Babes. Look at Sproston and Dudley Minor, and I warrant they've only bought half-tickets. Defrauding the company, and interfering with the comfort of the travelling public who have paid up. The guard will chuck 'em out, that's one comfort.'

'Oh, rot, Wrigley, any one would fancy you were a royal prince.'

'Ever hear of an unroyal one, my son?'

Sproston, ignoring the question, demanded indignantly where Wrigley thought he ought to travel.

'In the luggage-van, my son,' came the quick retort; 'with a label attached, "To be delivered in good condition." Shows deplorable lack of judgment on the part of your godfathers and godmothers to send you any other way.'

'Don't listen to his tosh,' advised Dudley Minor; 'he's only in the Fourth; all those chaps think they own the earth.'

'Have you heard the latest news?' Wrigley asked gravely. 'The new Head is making a sweeping change, and a very sensible one too, I call it. The Babes are to have a governess instead of a master this term. Nice, quiet old lady, who will tuck 'em in at night, and sing 'em a lullaby.'

'I hope she'll see that they wash their faces,' said Norwood.

A howl of protest came from the three or four Babes—as the Lower Fourth were nicknamed—in the compartment, and Sproston asserted with considerable heat that he wasn't going to be taught by a woman, and that he should ask his people to send him to Manningham.

Dudley Minor endeavoured to laugh it off as one of Wrigley's yarns, but that young gentleman keeping a serious face, the poor Babes were impressed against their will, and five minutes after the train had stopped the story was being discussed with tremendous energy and excitement by the unhappy members of the Lower Fourth. It was a preposterous and unheard-of revolution.

'We shall have to part our hair tidy,' said Bradford, with intense gloom.

'And keep our collars clean!' 'And rub our boots!' 'And hang our hats on the pegs!' 'We'll be the laughing-stock of the school!' The Babes were filled with the most dismal forebodings; all the brightness had departed from life; they viewed the world through sad-coloured glasses and declared unanimously that it was an exceedingly evil place.

'The Babes will mob you to-morrow when they find how they have been hoaxed,' Walter suggested.

Wrigley laughed joyously. 'I'll forgive them,' he said. 'By the way, have you heard anything about the new Head?'

'No.'

'Comes from Bellcourt. Hubert Trafford Tracey, M.A., D.Sc., D.Phil., and most of the other letters of the alphabet after his name. A regular high-flyer from what I can make out.'

'Ever seen a cricket-bat or a football?'

'That's just where your sneer is thrown away, old son. Played for Oxford three years running, and rowed against Cambridge twice. Any more testimonials required?'

'Good enough,' laughed Ayling. 'The first part rather frightened me, but if he's a sportsman——'

'Much shall be forgiven him,' laughed his chum. 'Sport is like charity, it covers a multitude of sins.'

'Well, it makes things easier. 'Twould help Wilson, for instance, if he had ever knocked up a score or kicked a goal.'

Wrigley laughed merrily. 'Good old Wilson! Can you fancy him in the scrum or hitting a six?'

'He doesn't even show up on the field,' in an aggrieved tone. 'I believe he thinks we are all musty, fusty Greeks.'

'He'll get the Barclay this year.'

'Of course he'll get the Barclay; get it with his eyes shut.'

'And the Spencer.'

'And any other old thing you like to mention. Swots all day and half the night, and reckons it's fun. But how is that going to help the Queens? What we want is a strong man, who moves about and sees things.'

'Stoneham or Caldecott, for example?'

'Either of them would make a ripping captain.'

'At footer or cricket, but I suppose lessons must have a look in somewhere. It's a beastly nuisance, of course, but there you are, don't you know? People outside make a regular fuss about it. I've come back with a swinging ultimatum in my pocket. If I don't get my remove this year I'm to be withdrawn, so you'll see me swotting harder than old Wilson. Vinegar pads will be my portion for the next twelve months. Don't grin, I'm jammed tight with good

resolutions,' and they both laughed. The idea of the volatile Wrigley with a wet cloth round his forehead poring over Latin hexameters would have been a sight for the gods.

By this time the two chums, having reached the school, were speedily caught up in the whirl of bustle and excitement. A hundred or so boys were all chattering together, asking and answering questions; comparing notes on the holidays, describing the glories of skating or bemoaning the lack of it, breaking off in the middle of a sentence to welcome some newcomer, and conducting themselves generally after the manner of the average British schoolboy.

Sproston had started a keen discussion amongst his particular cronies by the suggestion that there would be no work the next day, and the Babes had seized upon the idea with avidity. Several of the governors, he explained, were coming to introduce the new Head, and it was ridiculous to suppose any one would want to start classes after such an exciting ceremony. According to the optimistic Sproston, the Chairman would finish his speech by saying, 'And now, sir, I think you cannot begin your rule better than by giving the school a day's holiday.'

'And when he says that, you chaps,' added Dudley Minor, 'don't forget to cheer.'

Unhappily for the Babes, Sproston proved a poor performer in the prophecy line. Up to a point everything proceeded favourably. The governors duly arrived, the school assembled in the great hall, and the Chairman introduced the new Head in a long speech, which perhaps a few of the Sixth, but no one else, understood. But he entirely forgot the part about the day's holiday, and the Babes looked at each other in dismay, and at Sproston in rising wrath.

'It's all right,' whispered the unabashed prophet; 'he'll do it presently when they pass a vote of thanks,' and hope sprang up afresh.

But now the new Head was on his feet. He was a clean-shaven, young-looking man, tall and muscular, with a firm, resolute chin, and keen eyes that seemed to single out each particular boy in the room. He spoke in low, even tones, but every word sounded distinctly. It was a great honour and a great responsibility to succeed Dr Bolton, but with the aid of the masters and of the boys themselves he hoped to maintain the proud reputation of Queen's Norton. He relied confidently upon every single boy to assist him. It wasn't a florid speech, but it had the unusual merit of brevity, and the Lower Fourth applauded vigorously. Every moment now they were approaching nearer to the magical words.

They listened with visibly increasing impatience while Mr Temperley, the senior master, proposed a vote of thanks to the chairman, and then husbanded their breath for the tiger cheers. Alas for disappointed hopes! The Chairman remarked pleasantly that he was happy to have come amongst them, and that he should depart with every hope and confidence in the successful future of Queen's Norton. That was all; not a single word concerning the holiday which Sproston had predicted. The tiger cheers failed to materialise; the Babes, under the watchful eyes of Mr Clark, marched off in gloomy silence to their classroom, breathing vows of vengeance against their discredited prophet.

'As if it was my fault,' he whispered to Dudley Minor; 'why didn't they have a proper chairman? No right to be there if he didn't know what to say. I'll punch your head, Wilkins, when we get out.'

Sproston was beginning to learn that it is dangerous to prophesy pleasant things unless one is sure they will come off. There was no doubt that the Lower Fourth regarded the inauguration of the new era as a distinct and glaring fraud.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW CAPTAIN

‘Chubby’ Wilson—Bernard was his actual name, but he had been called ‘Chubby’ on his first day at Queen’s Norton, and the nickname had clung to him—sat in his study with a pile of open books before him. He was a big, heavy fellow, strong as a bull, but slow in movement, and regarded by the Queens as an easy, tolerant, good-natured sort of chap.

From the way in which he glanced at his watch it was evident he expected a visitor, and presently, in answer to his ‘Come in,’ the door opened, and Stoneham and Caldecott entered.

‘A bit behind time, I’m afraid,’ apologised Stoneham, ‘but Henderson bagged us, and we couldn’t get away. Sorry if we’ve kept you waiting.’

‘Oh, it’s all right. Sit down, will you? Fact is I have something to say, and don’t quite know how you will take it. Have you realised, you fellows, that I am the Captain of the School?’

‘The knowledge is public property,’ replied Caldecott, puzzled by the curious nature of the question.

‘It is a great honour and all that, but it’s a big responsibility too. It seems to me that the captain has a good deal to do with keeping up the reputation of the school, or letting it down.’

‘That’s true, and well put,’ exclaimed Caldecott quickly; ‘a lot depends upon the captain.’

‘He ought to keep his eyes open, know what’s going on, turn up on the playing-fields, encourage the youngsters, put his foot down on things that aren’t in order, and preserve discipline. How does that strike you?’

‘Couldn’t be put better,’ Caldecott replied. ‘And if a fellow can’t do all these things, he isn’t fit for the position.’

‘Oh, go a bit slow there,’ Stoneham interrupted, ‘no one is perfect; a man can only do his best.’

‘Suppose he knows his best is a failure.’

‘He doesn’t until he has tried. “Play the game” is the Queens’ motto, Wilson, and a chap hardly does that if he chucks up the sponge before entering the ring.’

‘If he can’t box, isn’t he a fool to go in at all?’

‘Depends on circumstances. If it is his duty to go, he must go, and do the best he can.’

‘Well,’ said Wilson slowly, ‘instead of beating about the bush, let us take the actual case. Circumstances have made me the new captain, and I am not fit for the post. Either of you would tackle the job much better. No, hear me out; you can cut in afterwards. I don’t know what is going on, I never show at sports, and I never wanted to boss anybody in my life. I have weighed this all over carefully, lain awake o’ nights, neglected my books, and made my head ache. It seems clear to me that my duty is to resign and advise the Head to appoint one of you.’

‘Good,’ said Stoneham; ‘and now let me make one point clear. Neither Godfrey nor I would accept the post. Is that right, old man?’

‘Correct, Ralph. Get on with the palaver.’

‘In the second place, Wilson, what you propose is a long way from playing the game.’

‘For the sake of the school, Stoneham.’

‘It won’t encourage the school much for the chap who carries the flag to drop it.’

'Thanks, Stoneham. You hit me pretty hard, you know, but I asked for it. Now, there is just one more point—the Barclay.'

Stoneham and Caldecott moved uneasily. The Barclay was a sore point with the Queens. It was a competition open to pupils from seven or eight schools, and, by some unlucky chance, Queen's Norton invariably failed to secure the scholarship.

'It sounds a bit like cheap bragging,' Wilson continued, 'but I had rather set my mind on getting the Barclay; only it means a steady grind. My cousin, Beauchamp—he is at Manningham—is my strongest opponent, and if I put my back into it I can just beat him. This isn't gas, it's fact. But unless I am free to work, there is no chance. Naturally I wouldn't say this to any one else, but I want you to know how things stand. I can bring the Barclay to Queen's Norton, but only if my time is my own.'

The two prefects glanced at each other uncertainly; this was a delicate matter to decide, and they hesitated. To capture the Barclay was to stamp the school with the hall-mark of success, and they believed Wilson could do it, if he were not handicapped.

'Put me out of it,' Wilson continued quickly, 'and simply consider the claims of the school.'

Caldecott began to waver. Year after year he had hoped the Barclay would come to Queen's Norton, and now the splendid triumph, hitherto unattainable, was almost within their grasp. Why not take the easier course? Stoneham was the beau idéal of a captain, and Wilson would bring honour and glory to the school by gaining the coveted scholarship! It was a dazzling prospect, and after all——

'It's a pity to lose the chance of the Barclay,' his chum observed, 'and it's rough on you, Wilson; but I stick to what I said. It's dropping the flag, running away, and not playing the game. Besides, 'twould be a rotten example for the Queens. My opinion may be all wrong, but you asked for it, and you've got it.'

'Yes,' observed Wilson, with a slow smile, 'I've got it. Well, I will turn the thing over again, and let you know in the morning.'

'You don't mind, old chap, do you?' inquired Caldecott anxiously; 'we have been a bit blunt, but when it's a question of the school everything has to go.'

'No,' replied the captain, 'I am much obliged to you both. I want to do the right thing, but it's a bit of a puzzle. Do you think I should consult the Head?'

'No,' Stoneham replied emphatically, 'you have to fight this out on your own.'

'There's a lot more in old Wilson that I ever gave him credit for,' observed Caldecott, when the two friends had left the study; 'but, d'you know, I rather hope he will stick to the Barclay.'

'Don't agree with you, Godfrey, not the least bit. Wilson isn't a coward, and it would be a bit cowardly to shirk his plain duty, wouldn't it?'

'Still, as he said himself, if a chap can't box, where's the sense of putting on the gloves? And honestly, he isn't cut out for the job!'

'I would have agreed with that an hour ago, but just now I'm not so sure. However, let the thing rest till the morning.'

Meanwhile the captain had closed his books, and drawn his chair up to the fire. The recent conversation had fogged him. Being honest with himself, he had expected the two prefects would gladly approve of his design. Naturally they wouldn't exhibit their relief too openly, but it would be there all the same. As it was, they seemed willing to abandon all chance of the Barclay rather than fall in with his views.

One of Stoneham's remarks worried him a good deal. He endeavoured to fix his attention on other things, but the phrase refused to be turned down. 'Dropping the flag,' he muttered, 'there's a nasty ring about that. In plain English, that means funking. Not a nice word for the Queens. Confound Stoneham. "He dropped the flag!" I'd have that humming in my ears if I won fifty Barclays. And there would be some truth in it. A better man would pick it up, but still it would have been dropped!'

His mind remained undecided when he went to bed, but he slept soundly, and woke up with a clear, steadfast purpose. For good or ill, he would keep the Queens' colours in his own custody. The two prefects met him in the breakfast-room, and he nodded cheerfully. 'I'm keeping the flag,' he announced quietly, 'and I hope the school won't suffer through the defects of its standard-bearer.'

'I'm honestly glad,' exclaimed Stoneham.

'And you can count on us to back you up,' his chum added.

Before the boys went to their classes that morning a notice signed by Ralph Stoneham and Godfrey Caldecott was posted up, announcing that a special meeting would be held in Big Hall, immediately after afternoon school. There was a buzz of curiosity; and numerous wild shots at the object of the gathering were made; Sproston reviving sufficiently to declare that the Sixth intended to protest against not having received a holiday on the previous day, a view which gained considerable favour in the Lower Fourth.

The secret, however, whatever its nature, was well kept, with the result that the Hall was thronged by a tumultuous pack all eager to learn the reason for the meeting.

'Stoneham's in the chair,' exclaimed Sproston cheerfully; 'he'll rub it in hot, you'll see!'

'Why isn't Chubby Wilson in the chair? He's the new captain.'

'Perhaps he has turned over to Stoneham; good thing if he has.'

'Rather,' from Wilkins; 'or to Caldecott.'

'Shut up, Stoneham's heaps better than Caldecott.'

'Hsh! Stop that row. He's getting up. He's on his legs.'

Stoneham was a good speaker, but on this occasion he did not detain his audience long. They all knew, he began, that several changes had occurred in the school. Doctor Bolton had gone to Manningham, and they had Mr Tracey in his place. Most of the prefects had left, and their captain (cries of 'Good old Stanley!') was already in France. Though it would be difficult for any one to equal Stanley's record, he felt confident that the new captain, who was seated on his right, would be found fully equal to carrying on. No boy had ever brought greater distinction in scholarship to Queen's Norton than Bernard Wilson, and he was convinced that the Queens would be as proud of their new captain as they were of Stanley. He called upon the captain to say a few words, and sat down amidst a salvo of cheering.

The cheers were succeeded by a profound silence as Wilson got up slowly. To the small fry he was an unknown quantity: they rarely saw him, and the general idea was that he lived in his study, with wet towels round his head and surrounded by Greek and Latin books. Some of the Babes, as a matter of fact, expected him to address them in Greek.

In the Upper Forms, curiosity, although from different reasons, was equally intense. It was the first time Chubby Wilson had occupied a prominent position at a public meeting, which made every one keen to hear what he would say, and how he would say it. Stoneham, Caldecott, and a few of the Sixth greeted his first words with a friendly cheer, and when the noise subsided he was talking easily and naturally.

‘It is a proud thing,’ he said, ‘to be the captain of Queen’s Norton, but as Stoneham told you, it is a pretty difficult job to follow Stanley. I can’t win a cricket match for you, as he did, or shoot a winning goal; but what I want to say is this. I have to carry the Queens’ Flag, to keep the old black and white colours flying, and to see that when I leave office, the reputation of Queen’s Norton stands as high as it does to-day. For, mark you, no one loves the old school better than I do.’

‘Bravo! Good old Wilson!’ from Ayling.

‘But you have to back me up.’

‘We’ll do that.’

‘I will do my duty without fear or favour, and if you do yours the Queens won’t suffer. I think that’s about all.’

As an oration it didn’t amount to much, but somehow it caught on, and the cheering was both hearty and genuine. Stoneham and his chum were relieved and delighted; the new captain had created a more favourable impression than they had hoped for.

‘Chubby’s coming out strong,’ said Wrigley, as he and Walter left the room. ‘Wonder if he will stand up to Melley and his gang?’

‘Why shouldn’t he?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, only somehow I can’t fancy Chubby Wilson holding his end of the stick against Melley and Hunter. Those two are thick as thieves, and Hunter is a prefect and jolly popular. He’s our finest half-back, and the best bowler we have had for years. Remember how he crumpled the Sidlip chaps up. Nine for twenty-three, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s so,’ agreed Walter, ‘but I don’t cotton to him altogether, and if it comes to a dust up between him and Wilson, I’m backing the captain.’

‘All right, Don Quixote, I’ll let Chubby know; it will cheer him up. Hallo, there’s the Sproston kid. Hi, Sproston, better slip into a clean collar, or you’ll have the governess down on you.’

CHAPTER III

A SURPRISE FOR THE FIFTH

Reggie Hunter was one of those unfortunates—you find them amongst men as well as boys—who, in spite of exceptional abilities, never succeed in getting right to the top. Either ill luck, unfair treatment, or some defect in their own character keeps them out of the first place.

Hunter was a prefect, but not the captain; the finest half-back in the fifteen, but not the leader; the most destructive bowler in the cricket team, but he had never spun the coin for choice of innings. A good Greek scholar, he had nevertheless no chance against Wilson; Caldecott deprived him of the Latin prize, while in English he was invariably a few marks below Stoneham.

This had been his depressing experience all through the school, and the constant repetition galled him. At first he blamed his luck, then by some curious kink he came to the conclusion that he was unfairly treated. Take the case of the captaincy, for example. It was absurd to pretend that Wilson, who couldn't kick a ball or defend his stumps for five minutes, had any right to be head of the school.

He had attended the meeting in the Hall in a dangerous mood, and the proceedings there had increased his anger. Naturally he would have refused to take the chair, but why should he have been forced to sit like a nobody listening to Stoneham's piffle? And then Wilson's high-faluting rot about being the standard-bearer, and keeping the flag flying, and doing his duty without fear or favour, as if he were an autocrat!

'The fellow's bumptiousness is perfectly sickening,' he confided to Melley, 'but I'll take good care he doesn't boss me.'

'Not much fear of that, old chap. If he tries any of that game, we'll make the place too hot to hold him. But he won't interfere; he'll be too busy swotting for the Barclay.'

'He's pretty sure to lose that anyway. A fellow named Beauchamp at Manningham has that in his pocket. One of their masters lives near us, and I heard him tell the Pater.'

Why Hunter had chosen Melley for a chum was one of those puzzles which no one ever attempts to solve. Stoneham had once described Hunter as a good apple going bad, while Melley was rotten at the core, and the remark contained a good deal of truth. Melley was a Fifth Form boy who had no hope of ever getting into the Sixth, and more than one disagreeable story was whispered about him. In the old days, he had endeavoured to chum in with Wilson, but his offers of friendship had been politely declined, and the rebuff still rankled.

A few days after the conversation with Hunter, he happened to run against Stoneham, and remarked casually, 'I say, have you heard the curious yarn going around about Wilson?'

'No,' replied Stoneham curtly.

'Well, you needn't snap a fellow's head off. I just wanted to let you know, if you hadn't heard. How the yarn started I can't say, but it's rather rough on Wilson. Of course there's no truth in it, but these silly rumours do get about, and they aren't nice.'

'What is this particular one?' Stoneham asked stiffly.

'It's about the Barclay. You know how keen the school is on its coming to Queen's Norton, and every one felt certain we should bag it this year. All over bar shouting sort of thing.'

'The fellows who thought that must be silly asses,' sniffed Stoneham.

‘Perhaps so, but they’d got it into their heads that Wilson was such a high brow he couldn’t be beaten. Now they are in a blue funk.’

‘Cut the cackle and come to the horses; you’re awfully long-winded.’

‘Well, it’s so ridiculous, and yet Wilson ought to know. Unless the rumour is killed it will undermine his influence. It’s pretty generally believed he is riding for a fall. Some one started the report that Wilson knows he hasn’t the ghost of a chance against a chap at Manningham.’

‘Well?’ as Melley appeared to hesitate.

‘So he is going to make his new duties an excuse either for backing out, or to cover his defeat if he does enter.’

‘It’s a lie,’ exclaimed Stoneham, blazing with anger.

‘Of course it is—you and I know that—but it’s unpleasant for Wilson. I caught several kids this afternoon grinning about keeping the flag flying, and all that kind of thing. I thought perhaps you might give Wilson a hint.’

‘Thanks, but I scarcely think it’s worth troubling him about.’

Secretly Stoneham was both puzzled and annoyed by this communication. Wilson had frankly admitted that he would have to work hard to beat his cousin, and that unless he resigned the captaincy the Barclay would not come to Queen’s Norton. It looked very much as if some one had overheard the remark and twisted it round to suit his own purpose. It was a rotten thing to do, and placed the new skipper in an utterly false position.

That evening, when his fag had finished laying tea in the study, he said, ‘Waldron, what’s this silly yarn going round about the Barclay?’

‘Why, we’ve lost it,’ responded Waldron promptly, ‘our man has let us down. It’s all over the school.’

‘What is?’

‘That Wilson has funked it. Knows he would be beaten and isn’t going to try.’

‘Who started the report?’

‘Oh, I can’t say. Everybody’s talking, and feeling pretty sore too. Of course he’s no good at games, but we did think he would have kept his end up over the Barclay. Funny way of keeping the flag flying, I think.’

Stoneham frowned. ‘Listen to me, Waldron, I don’t know who started this yarn, but it is a wicked lie. Wilson isn’t the man to funk anything, and if he doesn’t win the scholarship it will be because he is doing more for the school in other ways.’

‘That’s what Ayling said, but the others don’t believe it. They say he means to make that an excuse.’

‘Well, don’t you repeat it, because it’s a lie.’

‘All right,’ answered Waldron, ‘I’ll go and knock the stuffing out of young Sproston.’

It was an uphill fight for the captain’s admirers. No one knew how the story had originated, and few stopped to inquire; but it spread quickly, and like every other idle tale became so distorted in the process that before the end its very author would have failed to recognise it. Before long ‘Keep the flag flying’ had passed into a byword, much to the indignation of Wilson’s friends.

Happily the captain was not without his supporters. The Sixth, for the most part, remained loyal, and a few of the Fifth. In the Fourth, where opinion was pretty evenly divided, Wilson’s chief champion was Walter Ayling, who sturdily held the lists against all comers. Waldron, being handy with his fists, converted a number of the Babes to his way of thinking, and forced several others to remain neutral.

Meanwhile affairs were drifting into an unsatisfactory state; the more lawless spirits of the Fifth began to ignore the rules laid down by the seniors, and the prefects found difficulty in maintaining their authority. However, no actual collision occurred until one afternoon, Wilson, passing along the main corridor, perceived Waldron, whose left eye was puffed up and discoloured, evidently the result of a hard blow. A group of excited Babes clustered around, and Melley was lounging off.

‘Hallo,’ exclaimed the captain genially, ‘how did you come by that?’

‘Melley did it,’ cried three or four voices.

The captain turned. ‘Melley,’ he said quickly, ‘come here.’

At first the Fifth Form boy affected not to hear, but something in the tone of the second summons induced him to return.

‘Well,’ he exclaimed defiantly.

‘Did you strike this boy?’

‘Yes, and he deserved it.’

‘Perhaps so, but you are hardly the judge of that. Why did he strike you, Waldron?’

‘If you’ve finished with me, I’ll go,’ Melley interrupted with a sneer.

‘Oh, one moment, please, I’ll attend to you directly. Now, Waldron.’

‘Well, it was like this. Sproston was fooling about with a flag and saying things, so I told him to shut up, and while we were having a tussle Melley gave me a punch under the eyes. But it doesn’t hurt, really.’

The Babes stood hushed and expectant, wondering what the captain would say or do. What he actually did say electrified them.

‘There is strict rule that no senior shall strike a lower form boy, Melley, and of that you are probably aware. I will hear your explanation in the Sixth directly after prep. You may go now.’

‘Much obliged, I’m sure,’ sneered Melley.

‘Cut along, youngsters,’ exclaimed the captain pleasantly, ‘and you, Waldron, get that eye seen to.’

‘Did you hear that, you kids?’ asked Waldron triumphantly. ‘Told Melley to go to the Sixth after prep, cool as you please.’

‘Wonder if he’ll go?’ murmured Dudley Minor.

‘He’ll have to, fathead; Wilson won’t take any back talk from him. “I will hear your explanation after prep.” Just as if he had been a master. Not much funking about that, eh, Sproston?’

‘No,’ agreed Sproston, ‘I’m coming over to your side. ‘Ray for Chubby Wilson.’

The incident, which caused much excitement, was discussed eagerly everywhere. Ayling and his friends exulted openly, but there were black faces and angry comments in the Fifth, where the captain’s strong action was viewed with amazement. That Chubby Wilson, in front of a parcel of kids, should have ordered one of their number to appear before the Sixth was incredible. Several boys advised Melley to disobey, but he announced his intention of going.

‘And I’ll give them a piece of my mind before I’ve finished,’ he added, with a swagger. ‘Chubby Wilson won’t tackle me again in a hurry.’

‘Don’t be too hard on him,’ pleaded Arnott, who did not admire Melley, ‘let him down as lightly as you can.’

‘Keep your advice to yourself,’ exclaimed Melley, purple with rage; ‘it’s fellows like you that make the Fifth look so cheap.’

‘Good old Melley,’ Arnott laughed provokingly, ‘we are all right as long as you are here to keep the flag flying.’

This produced another giggle, but the sympathies of the Fifth were undoubtedly with Melley, and half a dozen excited boys escorted their hero to the door of the Sixth.

In obedience to Wilson’s summons all the prefects had assembled. Stoneham and Caldecott sat grimly resolute, determined to back the skipper to the hilt. Hunter was smiling scornfully; most of the others seemed fidgety and nervous. Melley was a power in the Fifth, and secretly they thought Wilson foolish to tackle such a formidable antagonist. It would have been much more prudent had the captain shut his eyes to the incident, which, after all, was very trivial.

What Wilson’s feelings were it was impossible to tell. In his slow, heavy manner he related what had happened in the afternoon, and finished by asking Melley to explain why he had broken a well-known rule.

‘Before Melley answers,’ exclaimed Hunter quickly, ‘I wish to protest. It is perfectly ridiculous to call a prefects’ meeting because a fellow has smacked a cheeky kid’s face; we shall make ourselves a regular laughing-stock.’

‘I have made a note of your protest, Hunter,’ the captain replied quietly; ‘now we will get on with the business. Have you anything to say, Melley?’

‘Quite a lot, but I’m not going to take the trouble of saying it. This is just a piece of tomfoolery.’

‘I hardly agree, but we will let that pass. I suppose you don’t plead ignorance of the rule?’

‘Oh, I dare say there is some asinine order or other, but no one ever bothers his head about it.’

‘Then that state of things must be altered. In the future, Melley, please understand that the rules of the school are made to be kept, and for the present I expect you to apologise for your conduct.’

‘Oh, look here, Wilson,’ Hunter broke in passionately, ‘this is carrying the thing too far. You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill. The prefects aren’t particularly popular as it is, and fellows won’t stand this high and mighty business.’

‘We can discuss that at a prefects’ meeting,’ replied the captain, ‘meanwhile I am waiting for Melley’s apology.’

‘Then you are waiting for what you won’t get!’ returned the Fifth Form boy angrily.

‘I am sorry, very sorry, but since you refuse to apologise you must be punished,’ and he turned to Stoneham and Caldecott, who instantly gripped Melley while Wilson produced his cane.

Hunter, though fuming with rage, did not venture to interfere, and Wilson coolly and temperately proceeded with his castigation.

‘Now,’ he said at the end, ‘you can go, and I hope you will not be summoned to meet us again.’

Melley slunk away, too overcome with shame and astonishment to utter a word. He, Melley, who lorded it over the Fifth, had been caned—and by Chubby Wilson! It was monstrous, incredible! His friends waited for him, but, refusing to speak to them, he marched off sullenly to the dormitory. The physical pain was nothing; but the indignity! His heart swelled with bitter rage, and he nearly choked with passion. Manton, his particular crony in the Fifth, had mercifully been absent, but what would he say later?

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTAIN PUTS ON THE GLOVES

Next day Queen's Norton fairly hummed with excitement. Such a thing as caning a prominent Fifth Form boy was without precedent; even Stanley, the most feared and exalted of captains, would have hesitated: King Log had developed into King Stork with a vengeance. Chubby Wilson had put his foot down, and the malcontents to their consternation realised that he meant to keep it there. Had it been any one else they might have accepted the inevitable; but Chubby Wilson! No, the thing was impossible!

Even Stoneham and Caldecott were astonished. 'Rather took my breath away,' the former admitted. 'And the beggar was so cool about it. Never raised his voice or showed the least bit of flurry. Melley must have had the surprise of his life.'

'It means war to the knife, Ralph.'

'It meant that, anyway. Manton and Melley intended doing as they liked, and Hunter was standing in with them. They never dreamed Wilson would have the pluck to oppose them.'

'Well, they know now,' laughed Godfrey; 'but all the same there will be trouble.'

Had the speaker been present in Hunter's room that evening he would have felt justified in making his remark stronger. The prefect had three visitors—Melley and Manton of the Fifth, and Baker, who acted as Manton's jackal, of the Fourth.

'I'll pay him out,' exclaimed Melley viciously, 'if I have to leave through it.'

'We'll help you, old son,' purred Manton. 'I don't intend to hoist the white feather because of a bumptious idiot like Chubby Wilson.'

'But you can't defy him openly,' suggested Baker; 'after all, he has the power.'

'Oh, we will catch him tripping one of these days.'

'If you wait long enough!'

'Baker's right,' interrupted the prefect; 'whatever we do must be done quickly and without showing our hand.'

'What can we do?' asked Melley savagely.

'We must get the other fellows on our side first,' advised Baker. 'Hunter can work the Sixth and you two the Fifth, while I can win over most of my Form. Then we will make it so hot that the Head will have to interfere.'

'Can't see what good that will do,' growled Melley.

'Why, then we could draw up a petition, stating we had no confidence in Wilson, and asking for a change of captains.'

'The Head wouldn't agree.'

'It doesn't matter a scrap whether he does or not. It would knock old Wilson out. He'd be sick as death, and only too glad to resign.'

'That's a ripping idea,' Manton exclaimed. 'Melley and I can scoop in a heap of our chaps.'

'I believe there's something in it,' agreed the prefect thoughtfully, 'but we must go to work cautiously. Just set the fellows against Wilson, but without giving a hint of our real object. What do you say, Melley?'

'It's a lot too slow, but we will try it if nothing better turns up.'

So the great conspiracy was inaugurated, and for the next hour the four plotters eagerly discussed various schemes for overthrowing their arch-enemy. When they separated even Melley's gloomy face was a trifle brighter.

Meanwhile the position of Captain of the School was effecting a strange revolution in Wilson's life. Although having no personal ambition or desire for popularity, he recognised that a popular captain was an important asset to any school. He turned out on the playing-fields, kicked a ball about in practice games, and developed an interest in the juniors' sports.

Then one day an inspiration came to him. He had gone into the Gym where several youngsters, including Ayling and Wrigley, were boxing under the superintendence of Mr Estcott, the instructor.

'Glad to see you, Mr Wilson,' said the games master; 'you don't often favour us with a visit.'

'I'm afraid I haven't taken much interest in this part of school life.'

'Splendid exercise, though; good for the eye and wind, and the temper. Teaches you self-control. Look at those two youngsters, now. Left a little higher up, Ayling. That's better. Well countered, Wrigley; very well indeed. There's the making of a school champion in either of you, if you stick at it. Anyhow, one of you is bound to top your Form. Good, oh, good,' as Ayling got home unexpectedly with his left.

'School champion, Mr Estcott? I'm sadly ignorant on these matters.'

'Oh, yes, there's a grand night or two at the end of the season. The Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth, each has its own matches, and we wind up with an open competition for the School Championship.'

'Who holds the title now?'

'Manton of the Fifth. He beat Stoneham by a point last year. Haven't you ever had the gloves on?'

'Never. You see,' apologetically, 'I never went in for sports.'

'A great mistake, if I may say so; all the better for study, I'm sure.'

'It wouldn't be much use beginning now, though.'

'Why not?'

'I'm such an awful duffer, you know.'

Estcott laughed. 'You would soon pick up the points,' he said, 'if I knocked you about a little.'

'I would willingly let you do that, if you thought I could learn.'

'Come round at six o'clock, the Gym will be empty then, and have your first lesson.'

The captain nodded. 'I'll be here,' he said, and turned to watch Ayling and his chum.

There and then this amazing boy resolved that, if it were humanly possible, he would win not only the championship of the Sixth, but of the School! He could never shine in rigger or cricket, but here was a thing that might be done. He was strong and healthy, sound in wind and limb, with a clean body and a clean mind. Why shouldn't he succeed?

Punctually at six o'clock he turned up at the Gym, and for the first time in his life put on a pair of gloves. Mr Estcott showed him how to stand, to take guard, and to use his hands. It was naturally a woeful exhibition, but the captain was keenly interested, and at the close of the lesson eagerly requested permission to come again.

'As often as you like,' replied Estcott, 'but when you are as skilful as you are strong, I shall suggest your engaging another sparring partner.'

At the end of a week the instructor advised his newest pupil to try one of the boys. 'There is young Ayling,' he said; 'he has more science than any one in the school.'

'But I may hurt him,' Wilson protested; 'he is so small—I mean compared with me.'

'Ayling won't suffer very much,' Mr Estcott replied, with a laugh; 'I don't think you need fear;' so the next night the Fourth Form boy repaired wondering to the Gym.

'Mr Wilson has been taking a few boxing lessons,' the instructor explained, 'and I want you to stand up to him for a round or two.'

'But stop me if I hit too hard,' exclaimed the captain genially.

Estcott stifled a laugh, placed the boys in position, and gave the word. Wilson did not hit too hard; in fact he did not hit at all, because his opponent was never there, although he seemed to be everywhere else. The captain remembered his instructions, but somehow there was no opportunity of acting upon them. He swung his right, but the blow landed in the air; he tried again, with the same result; yet his small opponent appeared to have little difficulty in pummelling him all over the body, with an occasional nasty jar on the chin or mouth.

At the end of the third round he exclaimed laughingly, 'I hope I haven't hurt you too much, Ayling.'

Walter laughed too. 'No,' he said, 'but you came very near me once or twice!'

'Why didn't I get you quite?'

'Too slow,' replied Walter uncompromisingly; 'too long in making up your mind. Always gave me time to get out.'

'Ayling's right,' said the instructor, 'that's the capital fault. The body and the brain must be one, and work together. Do nothing if you like, but don't do something slowly. The brain is quick enough, but until now it has never had to act with the body.'

'I see,' observed the captain thoughtfully. 'Well, I am obliged to you, Ayling, and am glad I didn't hurt you. I say, Mr Estcott, there's more in boxing than putting on the gloves.'

The news that Chubby Wilson was learning to box created a mild sensation, although it was generally regarded in the same light as his appearance at practice games.

'It's rather decent of him to show up,' said Wrigley; 'not that he would ever be any good—too slow.'

'Slow as a funeral,' Walter agreed, 'but that's the only fault.'

'How many more do you want, my son? But it doesn't matter; it isn't as if he were taking the game seriously.'

'I wish he would. I believe he would train on.'

Hunter and Co. scoffed openly, and made numerous facetious remarks at the captain's expense, proclaiming him as the coming champion, and laughingly advising Manton to look to his laurels. Chubby Wilson as a boxer was a screaming joke which they thoroughly enjoyed. The captain did not hear these gibes, but continued his training, greatly to the satisfaction of Mr Estcott, who began to believe he had unearthed an exceedingly promising pupil.

To Wilson's unbounded surprise the hours filched from his beloved books appeared to make little difference in his studies. As a matter of fact, his brain seemed clearer, and he was able to work later without apparent fatigue. He even began to dream again of the Barclay. It was almost hopeless, but somehow it did not look quite as hopeless as before. At least he might be able to put up a good fight, and that would be better than nothing.

Certainly he felt fresher and brighter. The long walks and the strenuous exercises on which Mr Estcott insisted, had resulted in the vanishing of his superfluous fat; he was hard and

tough; he rarely felt tired, and slept every night like a top.

Meanwhile his enemies were working in secret, endeavouring to undermine his good name. The story of his finking the Barclay was revived, and one or two ugly rumours were put in circulation. Hunter gained over three or four of the Sixth; Melley and Manton gradually collected a respectable following, while Baker managed to instil a feeling in the Fourth that Wilson was not 'all right.' The jackal, though far too clever to make any definite charge, succeeded in creating an atmosphere adverse to the captain. It seemed a pity that while there were such rattling good fellows as Hunter and Caldecott the school should have to put up with a muff like Chubby Wilson!

No one attempted to capture young Ayling or his chum, but they could not help noticing the growing enmity to Wilson, and Walter was hotly indignant, 'Why have the fellows got their knives into him?' he asked.

'Melley and his gang, my son; they mean to pay him out somehow. That young hound, Baker, spends all his time trying to turn the chaps against him.'

'I've a jolly good mind to give Baker a licking.'

'He won't afford you an excuse; he's far too smart. Listen to him now.'

'I never heard before of a captain who couldn't play footer,' he was saying loudly.

'Are you talking of Wilson?' demanded Ayling.

'Didn't know it was considered good form for an outsider to break into a private conversation,' said Baker quietly; 'but since you seem so keen, I was. Any objection?'

'Depends on what you say.'

'I merely remarked that Chubby can't play football; I suppose you won't dispute that,' and there was a general titter. 'And I further remarked that a captain who can't play football or cricket is a sort of *rara avis*. I'm sorry if that offends you, but it isn't my fault.'

'It really doesn't seem the right thing,' said a boy named Nash.

'What doesn't?'

'To have a captain like that.'

'Be careful,' Baker advised. 'Ayling is a regular fire-eater, and he doesn't like his friend Chubby criticised.'

'I didn't mean any harm,' exclaimed Nash hastily; 'you said the same thing yourself.'

'Ah, that was just my private opinion; even Ayling doesn't object to a fellow having an opinion of his own.'

'Not at all,' laughed Wrigley. 'I have one, and it is that you are a dirty sneak, Baker. You are just stabbing Wilson in the back.'

'That's false,' exclaimed Baker, with an injured air. 'All I said was that I prefer a captain who can do something.'

'Well, Wilson is the finest scholar that Queen's Norton has ever turned out.'

'Yet the fellows say he has finked the Barclay.'

'That's a lie,' Walter declared.

'You needn't get waxy with me, Ayling; I'm only repeating the yarn that's all over the school.'

'Oh, come away, Walter,' exclaimed Wrigley, in disgust, 'the fellow hasn't the pluck of a mouse.'

CHAPTER V

A PUZZLE FOR THE CAPTAIN

Matters had arrived at this stage when an incident occurred, which not only deepened the excitement, but increased the anger of Melley and his friends a hundredfold.

The vicar of Queen's Norton, Mr Bell, an old friend of Wilson's father, was a distinguished scholar, and Wilson was in the habit of visiting him nearly every week. The hour of his return being fairly late, Doctor Bolton had entrusted him with the key of a small postern door so that he could let himself in, and the new Head had confirmed the privilege.

One evening when Mr Bell had been explaining some difficult Greek passages at considerable length, Wilson stayed longer than usual.

'You will have to hurry, my boy,' exclaimed the vicar pleasantly; 'I had no idea how fast the time was flying. But,' with a laugh, 'you are not the only late one to-night.'

They were standing at the door looking down into the village, which was alive with lights and music, and the movement of people. 'It is the opening night of the circus, and all the villages round about have sent a contingent of sightseers. They make a fearful din, but I suppose they enjoy themselves.'

'No doubt of that, sir; a circus is a great attraction.'

'Even to the Queens,' smiled the vicar.

'Why, yes,' Wilson admitted, 'I expect the majority of us would sink our dignity to see the performing elephants.'

Apparently the entertainment was at an end; a crowd of visitors from a neighbouring village streamed along the road, whistling, singing, cat-calling, and indulging in good-humoured horse-play. Down in Queen's Norton the red flares were extinguished one after another, and the proprietors of the various booths and stalls were locking up for the night.

Wishing the vicar good-bye, Wilson started off at a brisk pace towards the school. There was a short cut across the fields which he had used in coming, but he preferred to return by the road. 'Help to keep me in training,' he laughed to himself, 'and I shan't lose five minutes. Estcott ought to give me a medal.'

Heavy clouds obscured the moon, which broke through only at intervals, but the road was broad and smooth, and the going easy. The boy swung along in high spirits, vastly encouraged by his evening's work, and by the steady improvement he was making in the Gym.

'I must get young Ayling to try me again,' he said half aloud; 'I don't believe he will pepper me so easily this time. There's no doubt I'm a jolly sight quicker now on my pins. Mustn't get too conceited, though.'

At the spot where the short cut merged into the road he was almost run down by a fast trotting pony and gig, the driver pulling up only just in time.

'Keep your eyes open, young man,' he called out, 'you were nearly under my pony's feet.'

'Awfully sorry, Dr Evans; afraid I was dreaming.'

'Oh,' cheerfully, 'is that you, Wilson? Rather late, isn't it?'

'I've been to Queen's Norton.'

'That accounts for it,' with a jolly laugh. 'Living over again a glorious hour with the performing animals, eh? The proprietor should have a bill printed: "Under the distinguished

patronage of the Queens." Hope he let you in at half-price. Well, good-night. You will catch the others, if you make haste. They must have come across the fields.'

'Good-night, doctor,' Wilson replied.

He felt considerably mystified by the doctor's last remark. What did he mean by 'the others?' It was hardly likely that the masters had gone to visit the circus, and he had not heard of any boys having received permission. Surely no one had been foolish enough to take French leave after lock-up! If so, it was a serious matter, placing him in an awkward position. How could they have got out? And, more important still, how were they going to get in again?

He proceeded briskly, but saw nothing of 'the others,' until he had nearly reached the private door: then to his amazement he perceived the dim outlines of three boys. He remained watching in astonishment, when the door opened and two of the figures passed through. As the third followed, the moon broke between two clouds giving the captain a fleeting glimpse of Hunter.

Several minutes passed before Wilson moved. This was such a serious business that he did not wish to act upon impulse. The law against leaving school after lock-up was particularly strict, and the penalty was instant expulsion. 'And,' murmured Wilson to himself, 'the new Head isn't likely to be less severe than Dr Bolton. What a fool Hunter must be! I almost wish the moon had stayed hidden a minute or two longer. Now, what am I to do?'

He didn't sleep soundly that night. It was a horrid mess, through which he could not see his way. If he had not recognised Hunter! But then—he had! What was his duty? To report the offender to the Head! That was clear enough, however wilily he juggled with it. And Hunter would be expelled! A bad thing for the prefect, but not perhaps a bad thing for the school!

There he checked himself. He mistrusted Hunter, and he must be careful not to let his personal feelings sway him. But, again, the good of the Queens was paramount, and he felt strongly, if vaguely, that Hunter was an evil influence in the school. Should he give him a private warning, and let it go at that? Honestly he believed such a course would be futile.

Was there not some other way out, some middle course, neither too severe nor too lenient. As a prefect Hunter possessed big powers of working mischief. As a prefect—— Ah! he began to see a little light. There was something in that. He would do nothing hastily, but give the half-formed idea time to materialise.

In the circumstances he wished to avoid Hunter until his mind was made up, but accident brought the two together the next morning. Several of the Sixth were discussing the prospects of the approaching boxing competition when Hunter remarked, with a sneer, 'I hear you are becoming a don with the gloves, Wilson.'

'Hardly that,' replied the captain, smiling.

'Cook tells me you beat him squarely the other day. I suppose you will enter for the championship!'

'Perhaps so,' quietly.

Hunter laughed disagreeably. 'There's your chance gone, Stoneham, and as for poor old Manton, he had better funk it; say he is going in for the English prize or something.'

The gibe was so patent that most of the fellows showed some confusion, but the captain's features remained unruffled.

'That will cut you out,' observed Stoneham.

'Oh, never mind about me, I'm going in for the Barclay, in case Wilson doesn't feel up to the mark. Good thing for the school to have two strings to its bow; isn't it, Wilson?'

Then the captain made a surprising remark. 'If you put your whole mind into it, Hunter, and carried on right to the end, I would as soon back your chances as those of any other candidate.'

'Thanks, awfully,' replied Hunter, with a flourish; 'coming from you that's vastly encouraging. Bucks me up no end. I'll make a start at once,' and he lounged off.

'I shall give that chap a hiding one of these days,' Stoneham muttered to his chum, as the party broke up; 'he gets on my nerves.'

'Mill between two prefects,' grinned Caldecott; 'great sport for the school. How the Babes would scream!'

'I wish Wilson would read the Riot Act to him.'

'You leave Chubby to manage his business in his own way; he is equal to it.'

'But the fellows may think he is afraid!'

'After the way he rounded up Melley? Not much. He scotched Melley and that gang at one stroke.'

'Scotched, old man, but I'll bet they are planning new mischief.'

Meanwhile the captain, having sent for Ayling to come to his room, asked him to be at the Gym punctually at six o'clock. 'And, look here, young Ayling,' he chuckled, 'do you know what a man does before going to fight a duel?'

'Make his will,' Walter replied merrily.

'That's right. Well, you make yours, and you had better write a farewell letter home too. Now, run away, and feel sorry for yourself.'

Naturally Walter was prepared to see some improvement, but what actually occurred fairly astonished him. For two rounds he put in his best and fastest work, aiming his blows with bewildering rapidity only to find them stopped. He seemed unable to get home anywhere.

'Rather a tougher handful than you imagined, Ayling, eh?' said Mr Estcott.

'You are right, sir,' replied Walter, panting, 'I'm fairly flabbergasted.'

'I think I am beginning to get the hang of the thing, sonny,' said the captain, and the third round proved he was not exaggerating. Instead of giving, Walter found himself receiving, a tap in the ribs, another on the cheek, then the ribs again.

'Well, Ayling?' said Mr Estcott, when he had called 'Time,' and the boys were removing their gloves.

'It's wonderful, sir, just wonderful. Oh, Chubby!'—in his excitement he did not recognise the lapse—'you will enter the competition, won't you?'

'Perhaps, sonny.'

'But you must! Mustn't he, Mr Estcott? Why, you can walk through all the Sixth, except Stoneham.'

'Would the boys like it?'

'Why, they'd be just crazy with delight if you won. It would be——'

'Yes,' kindly, as the boy hesitated.

'Well,' said Ayling, gathering up his courage, 'it would stop the mouths of the fellows who are always nagging about you being no sport.'

'I understand,' replied the captain gravely, 'and am glad you spoke out.'

Walter flew back to his chum, bursting with excitement. 'You'd never believe, Charlie,' he cried; 'we had three rounds, and I didn't touch him once.'

'Why not, you tender-hearted chicken?'

‘For a very good reason; because I couldn’t. Honestly, I put in every ounce I knew, and never got near him.’

‘I expect you were asleep, little boy. I shall have to try you out with Dudley Minor.’

‘Oh, you can gas, but I tell you it was an eye-opener. In the third round he got me half a dozen times. If he had put any weight behind it, Estcott would have had to carry me to bed.’

‘Poor little chap. Never mind, I will give you another lesson or two.’

‘Shut up, fathead; I’m serious. I tell you Chubby is good for any one in the Sixth bar Stoneham, and he can give him a run for his money.’

‘Well?’

‘Can’t you see, you wooden image? If Chubby enters the competition, and makes a good fight with Stoneham, it will send him up fifty per cent. And if he should win——’

‘Look here, Ayling, are you going dotty, or what? Chubby Wilson win a boxing championship! If it were the good old summer-time I should imagine you were sunstruck.’

‘All right,’ sulkily, ‘you can make your silly jokes, but——’

‘I say, Ayling, are you really serious?’

‘I have told you a dozen times.’

‘Whew, if Chubby can make a decent show against Stoneham, the kids will forgive him being a muff at rugger and cricket.’

‘And if he won?’

‘Why, then, they would almost forget the Barclay.’

‘I do hope Estcott will get him to enter.’

‘Tell him if he goes in for the Open, I’ll scratch,’ added Wrigley magnanimously, ‘that will be one hurdle the fewer.’

‘You won’t be able to do anything else after I have finished with you,’ laughed his chum.

Meanwhile Wilson had been having a talk with the sports master. ‘You heard what young Ayling said, Mr Estcott? It sounds awful rubbish. Why a fellow can’t be a good captain without shining on the playing-fields, I can’t conceive.’

‘It certainly isn’t easy to explain, but I am not sure there isn’t something sound at the bottom of it. At least it gives him more influence.’

‘You believe it would help me, if I entered this competition and made a decent show?’

‘I am sure of it.’

‘And if I mugged it?’

‘It would do no harm; but you won’t. I won’t guarantee you to beat Stoneham or Manton, but you have a chance even with them.’

‘That’s all I want, Mr Estcott. Attempting impossibilities I call folly, but if there is a chance it makes things different.’

‘Well, whether you enter or not, I think the exercise has done you good.’

‘Oh, I am sure it has; made a new man of me altogether. Well, good-evening, Mr Estcott,’ and the captain walked off briskly.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAPTAIN SOLVES THE PUZZLE

Meeting Stoneham in the corridor, the captain asked him to send Hunter to his study. 'Do it nicely, old man,' he said, 'don't ruffle him, but if he grouses make it plain that he has to come.'

Stoneham whistled softly as he departed on his errand. 'There's going to be trouble of a first-class kind,' he reflected; 'it's easy to see that from the skipper's eyes. Master Reggie Hunter will find he is butting his head against a stone wall if he tries to bluff Wilson. I wonder what the particular rumpus is!'

Finding Hunter in his room with Melley and Manton, he delivered the captain's message. 'Wilson is sorry to trouble you,' he added, 'but I gathered the matter is urgent.'

'Wilson's getting a jolly sight too autocratic,' grumbled the prefect; 'seems to fancy he can order us about like a lot of kids.'

'Tell him you are far too busy to waste your time,' Melley advised. 'Say you are working for the Barclay; that will touch him on the raw. Here, write the message down, and I'll take it.'

'Ripping idea,' laughed Manton; 'write it down, Reggie.'

'This isn't my funeral, you fellows, so I have no cause to interfere,' Stoneham observed quietly; 'but I rather fancy Hunter is a bit too decent for that sort of thing.'

'What is it he wants?'

'I really don't know; he merely said he wished particularly to see you.'

'Oh, all right,' grumblingly; 'stay here, you chaps, I'll cut the jaw short,' and his two cronies applauded his decision.

Stoneham proceeded to his chum's room. 'Heard of any fresh fuss lately?' he asked.

'No. Why?'

'Wilson has just sent for Hunter to his study, and he looked dangerous.'

'Who? Hunter?'

'No, the skipper. Very cool and quiet; you know his style, but the look in his eyes signalled danger.'

'It isn't over the silly rot Hunter was talking this morning!'

'Not likely. Wilson wouldn't remember that for two minutes. Not that sort.'

'Going to give him a little fatherly advice, perhaps.'

'A case of Love's Labour's Lost, my son. Advice would slip from Hunter like water from the proverbial duck's back.'

'Well, we might guess a hundred times, and not get near the mark, so we shall have to possess our souls in patience. Come and give me a hand with this Latin Prose; I'm tying myself in knots.'

Meanwhile Hunter had reached the captain's room. 'Stoneham says you want to see me,' he remarked, with a swagger.

'Yes; sit down, won't you? I have something rather important to say.'

Hunter sat down and sprawled his legs in front of the fire. 'You must hurry up,' he exclaimed rudely. 'My time is precious just now. I am reading hard.'

'I haven't much time to spare myself, but we both have to make it. I want to speak about a matter affecting the good name of the school.'

‘Oh, look here,’ exclaimed Hunter, half rising, ‘if you are going to preach, I’m off. You take yourself a lot too seriously, Wilson; you aren’t the only pebble on the beach, by a long way. I dare say the Queens would manage to rub along without you.’

‘Quite true,’ calmly, ‘but being the captain I must perform the captain’s duties.’

‘What has that to do with me?’

‘A good deal, unfortunately. You know, for instance, that breaking bounds after lock-up is a serious offence, so serious that the only punishment is expulsion.’

Hunter shifted ever so little, but beyond that gave no sign of the tremendous surprise the remark caused him. Had Wilson discovered anything? or was it only a case of suspicion? He must play his cards warily. Expulsion was not a pleasant prospect to contemplate, and he had a sudden vision of a father who did not err on the side of mercy. If Wilson could prove anything he was bowled out, but probably it was just a put on. Very likely some of the Queens had been spotted in the village the night before, and Chubby suspected him.

‘Look here, Wilson,’ he exclaimed vigorously, ‘if you have anything definite to say, say it, and don’t beat about the bush.’

‘Very well. Last evening three boys got out of the school and went into Queen’s Norton.’

‘How on earth did they manage it?’ with a show of aroused interest.

‘That I can only guess, but I know they let themselves in again by means of the private door.’

‘The private door! Are you certain?’

‘It was I who saw them.’

‘Oh,’ said Hunter, rather limply, ‘then you know who they are!’

‘I recognised you, but the others were too far in the shadow.’

Hunter got up stiffly, feeling he was cornered, and not even able to make a fight of it. He was bowled out with a vengeance. Wilson had him at his mercy. A word to the Head, and he would be invited to pack up immediately. No excuse was ever permitted for this flagrant breach of discipline. And Wilson would not spare him! What a fool he had been! He had gone to the village against his better judgment, and only because Melley and Manton had sneered at his lack of pluck. Well, he would not whine! Wilson shouldn’t have that cause for gratification.

‘Of course you have bleated to Tracey,’ he sneered.

‘At present you are the only person to whom I have spoken.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘First, I want the key.’

‘I haven’t it; never had it, as a matter of fact.’

Wilson regarded him steadily. ‘I will take your word,’ he said.

‘Thanks, awfully,’ with another sneer. It was a foolish exhibition of temper, but he did not mean to give his enemy a chance of crowing over him.

‘Better sit down again,’ the captain advised; ‘I am afraid neither of us will do much reading to-night. Don’t imagine I want to preach, but there are one or two hard facts to consider. The offence is serious, and is aggravated by the way it was carried through. Some one must have had a duplicate key made.’

‘I suppose you don’t expect me to sneak?’

‘No, I should rather despise you, if you did. We will leave the question of the key for the present. The second point is almost equally bad. The last person deliberately to break the rules

should be a prefect. I have worried a good deal about this. I suppose I ought to report to Mr Tracey, but it is a shameful thing to be expelled, and I don't want to bring that on you.'

Hunter gasped in sheer amazement. 'You aren't going to tell the Head?'

'No, but I cannot let you off entirely. I hope you will see it is necessary to resign your prefectship.'

'You mean to dismiss me.'

'It will look better if you resign.'

'Very well, do as you please; you have your foot on my neck.'

The captain did not reply, and for a long time both boys remained silent. At length Hunter got up. 'I am feeling pretty sore,' he said, 'but I must admit you have been very decent; more decent than I should have been,' and with that he departed.

He proceeded straight to his dormitory, sick and humiliated. But for Wilson's clemency that night would have been his last at Queen's Norton. Wilson, whom he had derided, and plotted against, had saved him! That was the dominant thought which crowded out every other. Chubby Wilson had him completely in his power and had let him off. It was astonishing, unbelievable. He lay with unclosed eyes, staring at the ceiling. This amazement even made him forget that he was no longer a prefect. After all, Chubby Wilson seemed to be a real sport, even if he couldn't play rugger!

As it happened, he saw nothing of Melley or Manton next morning or afternoon. He thought of sending them a warning note, but there seemed no real necessity. Wilson had behaved very decently in that respect. He had not pressed him concerning the key, nor asked for the names of his companions. It appeared as if the incident were closed. But they would be round during the evening, and he could explain what had happened.

On the way from afternoon class he received a nasty jar. Two or three of the Sixth stopped to read a notice in the corridor, and one called out, 'Hallo, Hunter, what new fad is this?'

It needed a big effort to control his features as he glanced at the announcement:—

'Andrew Wheeler is appointed Prefect in place of Reginald Hunter, resigned.—BERNARD WILSON.'

'It's a wrong move, Reggie,' remonstrated a boy named Peters. 'I know you and old Wilson don't pull together exactly, but it isn't sporting to throw up. Besides, it won't do you any good in the school.'

It was a horrible moment, but the ex-prefect retained sufficient composure to grasp the opportunity which Peters' remark offered.

'Look here, you fellows,' he began, 'I'm not going to deny that I am no particular friend of Wilson's, but Fluffy Peters is all wrong. I have my own reason for this,' and he nodded towards the notice; 'but it isn't because I thought it would hurt Wilson.'

'Hope you won't take any notice of my remark, old man,' said Peters. 'I'm always speaking twice before thinking once; but I am jolly glad I was wrong.'

'Oh, it was quite natural; in fact I expected it, and anyway it has given me a chance to set myself straight on that point at least. I hope you fellows will take my word.'

'Good enough, Reggie.' 'All right, Hunter,' one and another cried heartily, as he passed on.

He was sick at heart with the shame and disgrace, but Peters' outburst cheered him a little. The Sixth, more or less, would accept his assurance, but elsewhere every one would imagine he had thrown up his position in a fit of pique. Some would shrug their shoulders and call him a fool, but the majority probably would applaud his action as a mark of spirit and

independence. In any case no one would suspect the horrid truth that he had been dismissed. It says much perhaps, for both boys, that the idea of Wilson revealing the actual circumstances never once occurred to him.

Meanwhile the captain had taken another unusual step. Though feeling pretty sure that Melley was one of Hunter's companions, he possessed no proof and was not particularly anxious to obtain any. Since he had chosen to shield Hunter it was impossible to expose his confederates, but he must obtain the false key. Thus it happened that at the close of the last lesson, just as Mr Temperley had retired, and the Fifth were breaking up, he walked into the room.

'I won't keep you,' he said quietly, 'but I would like you to listen to me a minute. The fact is I have lost a key. I fancy some one has been playing a practical joke, but I am not asking any questions. Only the key has to be placed on the table in my study before bedtime. That's all; thanks,' and he was gone before any one had time to reply.

'What's Chubby got in his noddle, now?' asked Manton.

'Pretty high and mighty,' sneered Melley, 'might be the Kaiser! Any of you chaps been trying to take a rise out of him?'

'I haven't!' 'Nor I.' 'I don't know anything about his bally key.' 'Why can't he put it on a ring and wear it round his neck?'

'Aren't you fellows a little bit off the straight?' drawled Arnott. 'It seems to me that the skipper is playing a decent game. Some one evidently has been skylarking and he knows who it is, but doesn't wish to make trouble.'

'That won't wash, Arnott,' said Melley. 'If he knew who it was he'd stick his knife into him. Wilson's built that way.'

'Don't know so much about that. According to all reports he gave you plenty of chance when you were looking for trouble.'

Melley scowled. The memory of his caning still rankled, and he hated any allusion to the subject.

'You needn't try to whitewash Wilson,' broke in Manton; 'that won't go down in the Fifth. And I call it jolly cheeky coming here with his orders as if he were a Bashaw with three tails.'

'All right, my son; it is nothing to do with me, but if I had the key, it would be on Wilson's table pretty quick; but then I'm not a hero like some of you chaps,' and he strolled off with a lazy laugh. There was no doubt he could be extremely provoking.

'Arnott's a rotter,' exclaimed Manton airily, 'but I'm afraid he is right this time, so whoever has been ragging Wilson had better put his key back. It wouldn't be a bad idea to leave a note advising him to wear it through his nose.'

There were cries of protest and denial from every side, but none the less when the captain returned to his study at nine o'clock, after spending an hour with Stoneham, the key lay on the table.

CHAPTER VII

THE EX-PREFECT'S FRIENDS

Hunter would gladly have spent the evening alone, but he could not shut the door on his friends, nor had they any intention of being kept out. In spite of brag and bluster they were in a highly nervous state, and desperately anxious to learn how much Wilson knew. The demand for the key had told them a good deal, and the announcement of Hunter's 'resignation' made it certain that the escapade had been discovered.

'Funny thing Wilson didn't report him,' said Melley; 'can't understand it.'

Manton laughed. 'Easy enough. Reggie has hauled down his flag and capitulated. Going to be a good boy in the future and do what he is told. No more communication with evil-doers like you. We are going to get the cold shoulder, my boy, unless we promise to turn over a new leaf and behave ourselves.'

'What! Knuckle down to Chubby Wilson? Don't talk rot.'

'If he spotted us the other night we'll have to, or right-about-face, quick march, and that won't suit my book at present.'

'Cold feet,' sneered Melley. 'Well, go and kow-tow to your old Bashaw, you won't find me with you.'

'All right, old chap, you go in for martyrdom; it's rather interesting, I believe, but it doesn't attract my fancy.'

'If Hunter has split, you are down and out,' put in Baker.

'I'm not so sure. Wilson can't report us without reporting Hunter, which he hasn't done. Come along, we'll have a pow-wow with Reggie; probably he will be in a beast of a temper.'

They found their chum sitting moodily in front of his fire, and he displayed no particular pleasure at their visit.

'Shut the door,' he exclaimed irritably, 'this room isn't a public institution.'

'Thought it was,' said Manton; 'kind of hospital, and we came to cheer the patient. Now, don't get raspy, old man; we are awfully sorry you have come such a nasty cropper. How did Chubby get you?'

'He had been to the village himself and saw us coming in.'

'Did he spot Melley and me?'

'Oh, that's right; all you two care about is your measly selves.'

'Go on, old boy, nothing like throwing it off your chest. Of course you don't mean it, but the explosion will clear the air. I'd have felt just as ratty if he had nabbed me.'

Hunter pulled himself together. 'Don't take any notice,' he said apologetically, 'but I'm feeling pretty sick. You've seen the notice?'

They nodded, and Baker murmured, 'Hard lines.'

'It was that or instant expulsion, and I suppose old Wilson acted pretty decently.'

'Hum,' said Manton, in a non-committal tone, 'we can decide that point better when you have told us the yarn.'

'There's precious little to tell. He offered me the choice between resigning and being reported to the Head, and I resigned.'

'Very wise,' agreed Manton. 'Did he ask you for the key?'

'Yes. You had better give it to me.'

'Too late,' and Manton proceeded to describe the captain's visit to the Fifth Form.

'That's jolly decent of him; he evidently doesn't mean to say anything more about it.'

'Heaping coals of fire sort of thing,' Baker murmured.

'Shouldn't have thought Chubby was such a deep file,' sneered Melley.

'What do you mean?'

'That he has scored all along the line. Don't you see? Very high-minded and magnanimous is Chubby. Doesn't even dismiss you; spares your feelings by letting you resign.'

'That's so, and I was thankful.'

Melley raised his eyebrows. 'Didn't fancy you were so green, Reggie, 'pon my word! Don't you twig the dodge? Chubby knows well enough that yarn won't go down. Who do you think will believe it? The smallest kid in the school will know better. I'll guarantee the Babes are grinning already. Besides, he will have told all the prefects.'

'I don't believe it,' said Hunter sullenly.

'Why should he?' asked Baker; 'they will know without being told.'

'The worst part is that all kinds of yarns will be put about,' remarked Manton. 'Every one will have his own version, from murder downwards. But I don't go all the way with Melley; I hardly think Chubby planned it deliberately; he just meant to hang your scalp at his belt, Reggie, that was all. Still, he has the whip hand of us, and it will be prudent to come to heel like good dogs.'

'Speak for yourself,' cried Melley savagely; 'I'm not going to truckle to Chubby Wilson. To listen to you fellows one would fancy he is a little tin god.'

'Too strong for us anyhow. Don't you think so, Reggie? Chubby has us all in his pocket, and it's no use kicking. Melley tried it, and was caned like a kid in the Lower Fourth. The school thinks no end of you, and he turns you down like an old glove: it will be my turn next. As I remarked just now, our best plan is to come to heel.'

The others listened to this peace speech in amazement, Melley already in a towering passion, and Hunter smouldering. Manton continued calmly rubbing it in, exposing their own weakness, exaggerating Wilson's strength, and proposing finally that they should go in a body to Wilson, express their sorrow for what had happened, and promise to behave better in future.

Baker, hardly able to trust his own ears, but accustomed to play blindly to Manton's lead, approved of the suggestion. 'We may as well give in,' he said; 'Chubby doesn't care a straw what we do or don't do: he knows he can down us every time.'

'Who asked your opinion?' Melley demanded fiercely. 'You can all go and lick the bumpkin's boots if you like, but I haven't finished with him yet.'

'No use gassing, Melley; you can't do anything by yourself, and Reggie won't be fool enough to help you; been knocked too hard. Take my advice and lie down. Chubby will let bygones be bygones; he isn't a vindictive chap.'

'Why, you were as keen as any of us,' gasped Melley, astonished at his complete *volte-face*.

'That's so, but I am thinking of poor old Reggie; I don't want him to come another cropper.'

'Keep your sympathy to yourself,' growled Hunter; 'and I wish you would all clear out; my head aches.'

'I think,' said Manton to his jackal, when they were alone, 'the school ought to know Hunter didn't resign, but was kicked out.'

‘All right,’ responded Baker, ‘but I don’t understand your particular racket. Are you really going to hands up?’

‘Not much, you owl; but we can’t do anything without Hunter, and he is shaky.’

‘Oh,’ replied Baker slowly, ‘you are cute, Manton, and no mistake.’

Meanwhile Hunter, wretched and miserable, sat staring moodily at his dead fire. He had felt grateful to Wilson for permitting him to resign instead of dismissing him, but Melley and Manton had put a different construction on the captain’s action. If they were right, he had been tricked and deceived. As long as the fellows believed he had resigned of his own free will things did not matter much, but he dreaded the shame if the truth became public property.

Next morning he joined his fellows in a suspicious and irritable mood, reading into their looks and words all kinds of things that had no existence. He endeavoured to be agreeable to Andy Wheeler, and congratulated him on his appointment.

‘Much obliged, Hunter,’ said Andy, ‘it’s very good of you, but I would rather you hadn’t resigned. I can’t fill your shoes; every one knows that.’

‘Nonsense, you will manage all right, and if I can do anything——’

‘Thanks, awfully,’ and Andy went off fully convinced that there wasn’t much wrong with Hunter.

Meanwhile the jackal had been industriously spreading his report through the Fourth Form, from which it filtered to the juniors and ascended to the Fifth, but the result was not precisely what Manton had intended. Amongst a large section the tale increased Hunter’s popularity. Here it was believed that the ex-prefect had stood up for the rights of the school in opposition to the captain, and rather than give way had resigned. What the rights were, or how Wilson had meant to curtail them, no one bothered about; the ex-prefect had behaved like a hero, and was to be cheered accordingly.

On a second group, small in number, but composed of the more intelligent boys, the rumour produced a different effect.

‘Rummy start, this of Hunter’s,’ said Wrigley; ‘wonder what the truth is! Think old Wilson really knocked him off his perch?’

‘I hope not.’

‘Why?’

‘If he did there must have been some big reason for it; no one dismisses a prefect for a trifle.’

‘No, there’s something fishy behind, you bet. But, I say, Chubby’s coming out strong. Canes one of the Fifth, and chucks a prefect as cool as you please. And we thought he wasn’t good enough! Rather a sell, eh?’

The third section found its largest following amongst the juniors. Those young gentlemen cared little about the rights and wrongs of the case; they accepted the result. Wilson and Hunter had quarrelled, and the captain had the best of it; so they were ready to shout for the captain. There is small difference between a school and the world outside.

The person who chiefly suffered through the jackal’s industry was Hunter himself. Certainly it was rather pleasant to be cheered as he passed along the corridor, and to be greeted with shouts of ‘Good old Hunter’; but it was extremely disagreeable to find the Sixth, a few of the Fifth, and even part of the Fourth looking at him askance as if he had committed some deadly crime.

Insensibly his heart hardened against Wilson. Gratitude for the captain’s leniency vanished; he could think only of his present degradation, and his feelings grew more and more

bitter. Melley was right; he had been fooled. He laughed savagely at his own stupidity. He had believed in Wilson's generosity; now he realised his folly. Wilson had let him off in order to hold him up to scorn and ridicule! And he had felt sorry, had half resolved indeed to join the forces of law and order! He had actually called Wilson a decent sort, and a sport! He could have kicked himself for being so blind.

His friends' conversation did not tend to soothe him. Manton condoled with him hypocritically on the cat being out of the bag. 'I'm afraid you will have to come down from your high stool, Reggie,' he remarked. 'Every one seems to know you have been dismissed, but mind you, I don't believe that's Chubby's fault.'

'It's just as I said,' sneered Melley. 'He knew from the first it was bound to come out. And he won't give the reason, never fear. The mystery suits his book much better. I shouldn't like to tell you what some of the fellows are suspecting.'

'No need to take any notice of them,' said Manton, 'they are crazy. Still, Chubby has dropped you into a nasty bog, old chap, without meaning it, of course; but there you are. Melley cut up so rough last night that I hardly like to repeat my advice.'

'What advice?'

'If you went to Chubby and explained what a mess he had made of things he might be willing to do something. Take your arm, perhaps, and stroll round the fields with you, to let fellows see there's nothing really wrong. You might try it, Reggie, at any rate.'

'Thank you,' replied Reggie bitterly, 'I would rather pack my traps than go cap in hand to beg a favour from Chubby Wilson.'

'Glad you have some spirit left,' exclaimed Melley, 'I began to suspect you were like Manton, all white feather.'

'That's right: pitch into me because I'm advising you for your good. All the same, I don't see what else you can do.'

'What we agreed on before; make it so hot for Wilson that he will be glad to resign.'

'Well, if you are both agreed, I'm not the one to back out, but I thought Reggie had had enough.'

'You are mighty free with your thoughts, Manton. Show me a plan, and see if I funk my share?'

'That's more like the real Reggie,' said Melley approvingly. 'Chubby's knocked one nail in his coffin over this prefect business, and we will drive it in deeper yet.'

'Hunter is more popular than ever,' Baker declared, 'and if we can win over a few of the Sixth, the game is easy.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHAMPIONSHIP

It was unfortunate, perhaps, for Manton's purpose that the Boxing Competitions were close at hand. Boxing as an institution had been firmly planted at Queen's Norton for generations, and in spite of every counter-attraction had continued to flourish.

Naturally it was conducted under the closest supervision, although in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the boys might have been left safely to themselves. Now and then a 'black sheep' got in amongst those who indulged in the sport, but this was extremely rare, and as the sports master possessed unrestricted authority, the offender was always promptly requested to remove himself.

Dr Bolton had been an enthusiastic supporter of the game, and to the intense delight of the school Mr Tracey displayed almost as keen an interest. Any boy was allowed to enter in the annual competition, but during the early stages there was a drastic weeding-out by Mr Estcott; so that on the grand night only the cream of the candidates appeared.

This year the proceedings caused far more than the usual excitement. The news that Wilson had entered in the Sixth was public property, and every one was on tip-toe to see how he would shape. Few expected more than a moderate performance, but the fact that he had entered secured for him a certain amount of goodwill. Rather curiously, within the recollection of the oldest boy, no captain had ever gained the championship. Even the redoubtable Stanley had been beaten by a Fifth Form boy.

Willing hands had transformed the Gym during the afternoon. Seats had been erected for the Head, the masters, and the visitors, and accommodation provided for the pack of eager scholars. One part had been railed off for the aspirants, but in accordance with tradition they did not appear until every one else was in his place. Then to the accompaniment of an encouraging cheer they trooped in, each Form represented by two pairs.

The initial contests were too one-sided to arouse much interest. Wrigley and Ayling easily qualified for the final in their Form, while Manton and a boy named Duckwood emerged triumphantly in the Fifth. A round of cheering greeted Stoneham's victory over Joyce, and then amidst enthusiastic applause Hunter stepped into the ring. The captain followed, cheered by the Sixth, part of the Fourth, and by the Juniors. The few cries from the Fifth only made the otherwise stony silence in that Form more noticeable.

The boys presented a notable contrast; Hunter slim, graceful, full of energetic vitality; Wilson slow-moving, but sturdy, compact, and muscular.

'Strong as a horse,' commented Mr Tracey. 'If it were a test of endurance he would win easily, but I fancy the other boy will be too quick for him.'

'Estcott assures me Wilson is far quicker than he looks,' said Mr Temperley, 'but we shall see.'

There were to be four rounds, and the boys faced each other, Hunter smiling and confident. This was his first opportunity of making Chubby look small, and he intended to take advantage of it. At first he fenced warily, watching for an opening; then his left swung round at lightning speed, but to his intense astonishment the blow fell short, and, before he could recover, Wilson's right had landed on his cheek.

'Oh, good, good,' cried Ayling.

‘Old Wilson’s pretty deceiving,’ said Wrigley, ‘I thought Hunter had him.’

At the end of the third round the points were level, but Hunter looked hot and uncomfortable, and a trifle anxious. He had begun to wonder if his victory was as certain as he had imagined.

‘You were right, Temperley,’ said Mr Tracey, ‘Wilson is remarkably clever in concealing his quickness, and keeps wonderfully cool. Hunter seems over-anxious.’

‘Keep cool, Reggie,’ sang out Manton, but that was precisely what the ex-prefect could not do. Against any one but Chubby Wilson he would have given a much better exhibition, but anger and resentment upset his judgment; he lost his head and boxed wildly, without producing the slightest impression on his opponent. Then Wilson suddenly appeared to wake up, and Hunter fell to pieces. To the onlookers it seemed as if the captain were playing with him, and even Reggie’s most devoted friends did not dispute the justice of the verdict when Mr Estcott awarded the points to Wilson.

The Fifth sat lost in astonishment, but from various parts of the Gym came cries of ‘Good old Wilson!’ ‘Well done, Chubby!’ and Sproston led the Juniors in a full-lunged cheer.

For the next ten minutes the building echoed with the buzz of animated conversation, every one explaining to every one else what Hunter should have done and left undone, and showing incidentally how much more the speaker knew about the game than either of the combatants. Then the bell rang, and they all settled down more or less comfortably to watch the contest for the Championship of the Fourth.

‘Better have an ambulance ready for Ayling,’ laughed his chum, as the two boys got up; ‘he will need it when I have finished with him.’

They made a fine picture as they stepped into the ring—Ayling broad-shouldered, compact, sturdy; his opponent taller, slimmer, and much more graceful and lissom. It was Wilson and Hunter over again, but with a difference. These two youngsters were the firmest friends—the Inseparables, the school called them. Wrigley with his mercurial temperament, his jokes and sunny laughter, was the more popular, but the other boy had his band of supporters, and very few enemies; every one recognised he was straight as a die and loyal to the backbone.

It was a splendid contest. The rivals were so equally matched that the whole school looked on in breathless interest, trying to calculate what the decision would be.

Wrigley forced the pace, swinging now his right, now his left with bewildering rapidity, but always recovering if his aim missed. Walter, more cautious and more patient, was content to wait his opportunity, and without much show contrived to land once or twice on his rival’s body.

‘Glad I am not Estcott,’ exclaimed the captain, at the end of the second round; ‘I wouldn’t like to decide between the little beggars.’

‘Different styles,’ said Manton, ‘but not a pin’s point between them. Wrigley catches the eye more, but the other chap has the sounder defence. Oh, good,’ as Wrigley shot his left to Walter’s face.

It was a curious trait in Manton’s character that he always appeared at his best in the Gym. Though feeling sore at Hunter’s defeat he had congratulated Wilson ungrudgingly, and had meant every word. His dislike of the captain was not in the least lessened, but somehow where boxing was concerned he gladly gave praise where praise was due. Even to his friends Manton was a bundle of contradictions.

Time! The boys stood flushed and panting, but smiling and happy. Whatever the decision, they had enjoyed themselves hugely, and each was ready to congratulate the other.

‘You’ve just about got it, Charlie,’ said Ayling.

‘There isn’t much to choose anyway,’ Wrigley replied, with a laugh. ‘Old Estcott doesn’t particularly look happy.’

The spectators waited expectantly as the sports master, moving across to the Head, said a few words. Mr Tracey nodded and got up. ‘Boys,’ said he, ‘Mr Estcott has given a decision of which every one in the room, I believe, will approve. He has declared a draw, and the Championship of the Fourth will be held jointly by Ayling and Wrigley. I would like to add that I thoroughly endorse his decision.’

‘Hear, hear.’ ‘Bravo.’ ‘Good old Wrigley.’ ‘Well done, Ayling.’

‘There is just one other thing,’ the Head continued, when silence was restored. ‘I wish to congratulate Ayling and Wrigley on the fine spirit they have shown. Everything has been straightforward, manly, and honest, and not an ounce of temper. They have set a splendid example which I hope every Queens boy will follow,’ and he sat down amidst a renewed outburst of cheering.

The final in the Fifth attracted scanty interest, the result being obvious from the beginning. Duckwood, though giving of his best, was clearly out-matched, and Manton won comfortably.

Excitement rose again as the Sixth Form boys stepped out, and it was noticed that the Head had taken Mr Estcott’s place.

‘It would be advisable for you to referee, sir,’ the sports master had suggested; ‘Wilson is in some sense my pupil and I might unconsciously be prejudiced in his favour.’

At the beginning of the evening, the vast majority of the boys would have laughed at the idea of Chubby Wilson beating Stoneham, but the manner in which he had tackled Hunter caused many to alter their opinion. They began to think the result might be a close thing.

The opening exchanges rather favoured the more experienced Stoneham, but Wilson quickly settled to his work, cool, alert, vigilant, and unflurried. His guard was sure, while his seemingly slow action more than once deceived both his opponent and the spectators. Several times he got home when to all appearance Stoneham had plenty of opportunity to get out of the way.

‘What’s the matter with Stoneham?’ asked Melley viciously, as the captain got in fairly with a body punch; ‘he must be boxing with his eyes shut.’

‘If you kept yours open, you’d understand,’ drawled Arnott, ‘the skipper’s got him guessing.’

‘Looks uncommonly like cold feet to me,’ sneered Melley.

His own particular crony would not have agreed with him. Manton, watching every movement, was fairly puzzled. There was something uncanny about the way in which Wilson covered up his action, while Stoneham found it wellnigh impossible to get through his defence.

There was no doubt that Stoneham led at the end of the first round, but his opponent drew level in the second, and scored again in the third. The Head gave his decision without hesitation, and Stoneham in a clear, ringing voice, called for three cheers for the captain and Champion of the Sixth.

The response was quick and enthusiastic. ‘Ray-ray-ray!’ rose from all quarters of the building, clapping of hands and stamping of feet, and yells for ‘Chubby Wilson.’

‘Ugh! the silly goats would cheer for a turnip!’ said Melley.

‘Buck up,’ whispered Baker, ‘there will be another time presently. Manton will make him look like a kid;’ but Melley did not feel so confident. There was very little difference between Stoneham and Manton, and if Stoneham had done his best—but had he? Underhanded himself, Melley was ready to detect crookedness in every one, and he half believed that Stoneham had deliberately thrown his chances away. His face lit up with a glow of eager expectation, and he waited impatiently for the final bout.

Already his crafty brain was at work. Hunter’s defeat could be ascribed to ill-temper, and if Manton won—and he ought to win—Melley saw a perfectly glorious chance unfolding itself of covering Wilson with disgrace. It would be a simple matter to persuade the school that Chubby Wilson had obtained his honour unfairly. That would put him down and out effectually.

Mr Tracey again officiated as referee, and the silence became so intense that one might have heard a pin drop as the representatives of the Fifth and Sixth faced each other. This bout was naturally the outstanding feature of the evening. Not only did the Championship of the School depend upon the result, but there was the added rivalry between the Fifth and Sixth. And beyond that, vague and indefinable, something else filled the minds of the spectators. They did not understand precisely what, but there was a something, however dim and shadowy it might be, which marked this contest off from all others.

Manton was scarcely a lovable boy, but one must not deny that with the gloves he was a strictly fair fighter. Whatever he might do elsewhere, in the ring he was as honourable as any boy in the school, and would have scorned to take an unfair advantage. He desired passionately to win—for himself, for his Form, and for the sake of humiliating his enemy—and he meant to win if it were humanly possible; but he was under no illusion, and felt intuitively that he had all his work cut out.

The round opened slowly, the boys eyeing each other warily, and Manton feinting for an opening. Twice he thought he had succeeded, but on each occasion found himself pulled up. Then with a sudden swing of the left he just grazed Wilson’s cheek, and an exulting roar broke out from the Fifth, instantly followed by delighted cries from the Sixth as their champion got in a neat body blow.

In the second round Manton tried for a clinch but failed, and to his surprise found Wilson’s glove knocking against his ribs. Like Stoneham he was frankly puzzled; he had never met an opponent with such deceptive action. It was like that of a freak bowler, whose ball while seeming to hang in the air is shooting in to the stumps.

Conscious of dropping behind he altered his tactics, and instead of endeavouring to force the pace acted on the defensive, at the same time watching intently for any chance which he could turn to advantage.

The cheers of the Fifth had died away; the boys were looking on in surprise and consternation, their champion appeared to be in difficulties; they had a horrid suspicion that he might actually lose. ‘Hustle him, Fifth; hustle him,’ they cried excitedly, but Chubby Wilson was a difficult subject to hustle.

Time! A moment’s breathless suspense, and then in a body the Sixth were on their feet cheering vociferously. ‘Chubby! Good old Chubby! Ray-ray-ray!’ The totally unexpected had happened; the captain had fairly won the Championship of the School.

In the midst of the hubbub Manton did what under the circumstances must be called a surprising thing. Stretching out his hand he said, ‘I congratulate you, Wilson.’

‘Thanks,’ replied the captain quietly, ‘it is a pity we both couldn’t have won.’

CHAPTER IX

THE CADET CORPS

After a short speech from the Head, and renewed cheers for the heroes of the evening, the Gymnasium emptied slowly, the boys in a state of keen excitement trooping back to the school premises. Naturally the chief subject of conversation was furnished by the captain's unexpected victory, which, as Stoneham had predicted, raised his influence a hundred per cent.

'The Fifth talked rot about Wilson not being a sportsman,' Sproston exclaimed; 'he knocked their man out easy enough.'

'And Manton was the finest boxer the Queens ever had.'

'Well, he isn't now, anyway, and I'll knock the stuffing out of any chap who says a word against good old Chubby. Hunter, Stoneham, and Manton, one after another. Wilson's the goods. I reckon he could give Estcott something to think about.'

'Good man, Wilson, and no swagger; that's what I like about him;' added Dudley Minor, 'I didn't think he could beat Stoneham, though.'

'You have heaps to learn yet, Dudley Minor. I knew Stoneham was done from the word go,' which at least shows Sproston to have been a peculiarly wise and far-seeing youth.

Meanwhile the Sixth, with one or two exceptions, were engaged in congratulating the captain. They were delighted at his success, and none more so than Stoneham.

'You ought to have given me fair warning, Wilson;' he exclaimed chaffingly. 'I knew you had come on, but never guessed how much.'

'Estcott gave me a whisper the other evening,' Caldecott chimed in, 'but I hardly believed him.'

The captain's face beamed as he thanked them for their good wishes. 'It's awfully nice of you, and especially of Stoneham,' he said; 'and, if the school is satisfied, I am.'

This hero-worship was pleasant enough in a way, but it did not cause his head to swell. Chubby Wilson was indifferent to popularity, but it pleased him that the Captain of the School stood well in the eyes of the boys. 'Still,' he reflected, when the last of his admirers had departed, 'I would a thousand times rather bring back the Barclay.'

The majority of the Fifth took their defeat with an ill grace. Not one of them had ever dreamed of Manton losing his title, and to lose it to Chubby Wilson was peculiarly unpalatable.

'I wouldn't have minded so much if it had gone to Hunter,' one boy remarked.

'Hunter wasn't in it; got ratty and lost his head.'

'Stoneham didn't, nor Manton.'

''Twas Chubby's night out,' volunteered Duckwood; 'he couldn't do it again in a thousand times.'

'Oh, shut up, you fellows,' Arnott interrupted, 'you make me tired. Most of you are silly goats with as much idea of boxing as a wooden image, but I'm surprised at Duckwood. The Captain is the brainiest boxer Queen's Norton has turned out in my time. Ask Manton.'

Manton, however, was not at hand. He had gone with Melley and the jackal to visit Hunter, and a sweet little party they formed. The ex-prefect was sullen and moody, Melley blazing, and the jackal rather apprehensive of explosions. Manton alone preserved his

coolness, but how much of that was on the surface no one could judge. In fact it was always rather difficult to get at Manton's real feelings.

'Chubby has scored again,' he remarked pleasantly. 'I told you he would down me next time. The kids are crying him up all over the place.'

'Just sickening,' said Baker; 'you should hear young Ayling going on in the Fourth. He says Chubby can play with Hunter, and beat Manton and Stoneham three times out of every four.'

'Young Ayling isn't far out,' observed Manton placidly. 'Our friend Reggie can't control his temper, and Stoneham doesn't really put his heart into the game.'

'What about you?' snapped Melley.

'That's simple, my son. I'm pretty good with the gloves, but Chubby happens to be better. Blest if I can tell how he manages it. Seems as slow as a tortoise, but he isn't, and that's where you are left guessing. Eh, Reggie?'

'Oh, don't ask me, I ought to have beaten him.'

'So ought Stoneham, so ought I—but we didn't. That's where the joke comes in.'

'I don't believe Stoneham tried,' Melley burst out.

Manton whistled softly, he knew his Melley by heart. 'No thoroughfare, my son,' he observed coolly. 'Ingenious, but unconvincing. If he hadn't beaten me the plan might have worked, but as things have turned out——' and he waved his hand.

'Any one would imagine you were rather proud of being licked,' Melley rasped out. He was furiously angry. His hope of seeing Wilson humiliated in the Gym had been shattered, while the crafty scheme simmering in his brain was useless. And Manton seemed to enjoy their defeat.

'There's my bell,' exclaimed Baker, in a tone of relief, 'I'm off,' and he wished the others good-night.

'May as well go, too,' said Manton. 'Come on, Melley, and listen to the Fifth dress me down. We shall all be more cheerful in the morning. Ta-ta, Reggie. Keep your pecker up. It isn't your fault that Chubby wiped the floor with us. We will put in Melley to challenge him; he's the boy to do the trick.'

Long after the two had gone, Hunter sat brooding over his fancied wrongs, until he actually came to believe that Wilson was his bitter enemy, whose main object in life was to do him an injury. Had he been honest with himself and probed deep enough, he would have discovered that the real grievance lay in the fact that Bernard Wilson and not Reggie Hunter was the Captain of the School.

'I'll get even with him one day,' he muttered, and in this charitable mood went to bed.

The group of malcontents, however, found it extremely difficult to devise any scheme that would achieve their purpose. The result of the Boxing Competition had largely increased the captain's popularity, and an innovation of Mr Tracey's afforded him another outlet.

This was the establishment of a Cadet Corps open to all boys, from the Sixth to the Babes, who received the sanction of their parents to join.

'Shall you line up, Walter?' asked his chum.

'Rather!'

'We shall have to slack off footer or the Gym or something.'

'I don't mind. Besides, it will be livelier than the drill and exercises we are getting now.'

'What a chump! I hadn't thought of that. All right, here's one of the new cadets. Number off by the right. Odd numbers, one pace to the rear; even numbers, stand fast. Shall we wear

uniform?’

‘I expect so.’

The Babes were in an ecstasy of delight; they were going to be cadets to a man. Sproston declared it was a glorious scheme, while Dudley Minor had visions of himself swinging a light cane and inspecting the ranks. Very few parents raised any objection, and before long the new movement was fairly launched.

At a meeting of the prefects, Mr Tracey had explained his views and plans, winding up with the remark that he looked to them to make the experiment a success. ‘And I hope, Wilson,’ he added, ‘that as Captain of the School you will take the lead.’

‘I will certainly do my best, sir,’ Chubby answered; ‘and amongst us we ought to make it go.’

Naturally the innovation caused a certain amount of opposition. Dingles, who spent all his recreation lounging about with his hands in his pockets, and turning out only when compelled, ‘couldn’t see any fun in it,’ but a preemptory note from the Governor, ordering him to join up immediately, cut the ground from under his feet.

Hunter and his two friends discussed the advisability of staying out. ‘It’s a good enough notion,’ the ex-prefect admitted, ‘we ought to have started long ago; but Chubby Wilson will be head cook and bottle-washer, and I’m sick of being ordered about by him.’

‘The cricket will go to pieces,’ said Melley; ‘we can’t be playing this game and practising. We shan’t win a match this year.’

‘Any Sixth staying out, Reggie?’

Hunter shook his head. ‘Lodge isn’t particularly keen, but with this war on——’

‘Yes,’ said Manton thoughtfully, ‘makes a difference, doesn’t it? We can’t afford to be dirty slackers for the fun of annoying Chubby. The Head would be savage, and we shouldn’t do ourselves any good nor Chubby any harm. We have to toe the line, my sons, that’s my opinion. And Chubby will score again. Tracey couldn’t have given him a better opening. He will make a howling success of it, you’ll see.’

‘We shan’t see anything of the war,’ observed Melley; ‘it will be over long before we are ready.’

‘We can’t chance it,’ Reggie interrupted hastily, ‘we shall have to enrol.’

As Manton had prophesied the Captain took advantage of the new movement, throwing all his energies into putting the corps on its feet. His winter training had rendered him physically fit, and to his surprise he found his moral influence wonderfully strong. The old idea of his being just a mug anywhere but in the class room was slowly dying out, and the majority of the boys began dimly to realise that Chubby Wilson wasn’t exactly the worst Captain whose name appeared on the roll of Queen’s Norton.

He was genial and kindly, honest as the day, and straight as a die; no one had ever accused him of doing a dishonourable action. True, he was strict, and would brook no nonsense: but then he treated every one alike, showing no more favour to a prefect than to one of the Babes, and this endeared him to the small fry.

‘Good old sport is Wilson,’ said Dudley Minor, ‘ain’t afraid of anybody. I don’t believe that yarn about his funking the Barclay.’

‘Not he,’ agreed Sproston, ‘that was all tosh. I guess some of the Fifth put it about. Melley hates him like poison.’

‘Let him,’ said Dudley Minor; ‘I guess Melley won’t get much change out of the captain.’

The cadets did not turn out every day, and, as the spring advanced, bats and balls made their appearance, nets were erected, and the cricket fever broke out in full force.

Young Ayling and Wrigley practised assiduously. There was an off chance of being chosen to play for the School against the Sixth, and they intended to make themselves as fit as possible. It rarely happened that the Fourth had any representatives in the match, but this year, owing to exceptional circumstances, the Fifth were unusually weak, and beyond Melley, Manton, and Stirling, possessed few crack players.

Walter did not build much on their chances, but Wrigley as usual was optimistic. He went through the Fifth methodically, appraising the value of every possible aspirant, and concluded triumphantly that to complete an eleven at all Melley, who was the captain, would have to put in Sturgess and Power. 'And they are no good,' he remarked jovially. 'Old Sturgess is the biggest butter-fingers out, and what use is Power? Buck up, old chap; one is sure to get in, and perhaps both. You ought to be safe if only as a change bowler.'

'Melley won't be over keen; he doesn't love us overmuch.'

'Melley hasn't the only say. Stirling is as keen as mustard on winning, and he won't have any duffers. He has been prowling around the nets for days, and here he is now.'

A tall, fair-haired, keen-eyed boy strolled up, a bat under his arm. 'Wish you two would bowl to me for a bit,' he said pleasantly, 'will you?'

'Glad,' replied Wrigley, with his merry laugh, 'we'll train you on, won't we, Walter?'

'Much obliged,' Stirling laughed, stepping to the wicket, 'but mind, I shan't pay for your balls when they have disappeared.'

Wrigley was very fast and very straight—a veritable terror to the boys in his own Form, but he possessed no other qualities as a bowler, and a good batsman found little difficulty in playing him. Ayling on the other hand sent down a very puzzling ball, a peculiar swerve in it, now from the right, now from the left, hanging in the air at the last moment, and then shooting down swiftly.

Stirling batted for a quarter of an hour and thanked them. 'I say, Ayling,' he remarked, 'do you know what your bowling reminds me of?'

'No, what?'

'The skipper's boxing; it's awfully deceptive. If you could vary your pace more without showing it; it's too uniform just now. And the ball drops nearly always at the same distance from the wicket. Keep pegging away, I'll look you up again to-morrow,' and he strolled off.

'Keep it up, Walter, and you are as good as in,' cried his chum delightedly. 'Old Stirling is half inclined to be sweet on you, I can see that. You had him guessing several times.'

There was no room for envy in Wrigley's mind. He wanted desperately to get into the match himself, but if there was room for only one, why, let his chum have the place.

CHAPTER X

SIXTH VERSUS SCHOOL

‘I think it’s going to be fine.’

‘Old Billy’s certain sure. Never any rain, he declares, when the wind blows from the south over the Cap.’

‘Have you seen the School list? Ayling’s down, and Wrigley.’

‘Ayling’s all right.’

‘Wrigley may knock up a few. He’s a good field, and a safe catch.’

‘The Sixth’s bound to win.’

‘Who asked you, Smithson? Jolly fat lot you know about it.’

‘Well, the School can’t have much of a team with two of the Fourth in it?’

‘Oh, run away and play marbles. Young Ayling is as good as most of the Fifth. Stirling picked him, and he ought to know.’

‘Old Stirling’s been coaching him for weeks.’

‘Will they let him bowl?’

‘That’s what he’s there for, stupid.’

Some one sniggered. ‘If old Stoneham gets set, he’ll keep our men leather-hunting all day.’

‘Oh, stop croaking, Waldron, you’re worse than any old raven.’

‘Come on, boys, there’s Jimmy Lodge bowling to Caldecott at the nets.’

Mr Tracey and several masters had already appeared. Chubby Wilson was talking with Mr Estcott; many of the players were indulging in a preliminary practice, watched by sternly critical eyes, until the whistle blew, and the juniors rushed pell-mell to obtain good places from which to watch the game.

‘Stoneham’s won the toss, and is going to bat.’

‘Rather! Think his head is a turnip like yours?’

‘Our men are coming out, give ’em a cheer,’ and a yell arose of ‘School! School! Play up, School!’

It was a pretty and animated sight. The green field neatly cut and trim as a lawn, the players in their white flannels, the ring of excited spectators formed a picture that one hopes may be seen for many generations yet. One had a sense of pleasure, too, in the atmosphere of keen but good-natured rivalry, and in the lively chaff bandied about amongst the onlookers.

‘Stoneham’s taking Caldecott in to stone-wall, while he knocks the stuffing out of the balls. Oh, my aunt!’

‘Melley’s going to bowl.’

The Sixth were quietly confident; the School not exactly hopeful of victory, but keen to put up a good fight. Every ball sent down was severely criticised, every good hit promptly noted, and the glory of it all was that the applause was bestowed equally on friend and foe. Stoneham was a Sixth, of course, but when he late-cut Melley to the boundary the juniors cheered him to the echo. The ‘Well played.’ ‘Oh, well played, sir,’ came as heartily from them as from their opponents.

Stoneham, fully alive to the importance of making a good beginning, hit vigorously, and twenty appeared on the board, of which he had bagged fifteen. Then he cut one for two,

proceeded to treat the next in a similar manner, and the School, getting on its feet, yelled. Duckwood flung the ball into the air and rubbed his hands ruefully. As Dudley Minor said, it must have been a stinger.

The School settled down with a sigh of relief. Stoneham gone for seventeen; not so bad, he might have got his half century.

‘Who’s next? Hunter? I would rather see him going out than coming in. Good for anything up to a century if he is in the mood.’

Apparently the ex-prefect was in the mood. He was not only a skilful but a pretty batsman, and it was delightful to watch his crisp, clean hitting. Playing with an ease and grace that made the bowling appear simple stuff, he rattled up thirty-six, and then, stepping out to a ball from Manton, missed it and was stumped.

The School clapped its approval, the Sixth applauded, and before the outgoing batsman reached the pavilion, Wilson, coming on to the field, shook his hand warmly.

‘A splendid innings, Hunter,’ he exclaimed heartily. I don’t expect I appreciated all the fine points, but the batting was a treat to watch!’

The blood mounted in the other boy’s face; there was a fierce but momentary struggle; then he said, ‘Thank you, Wilson.’

Fifty-eight for two. Not bright for the School; still in cricket one never knows. The next man having made a couple drove the ball into Wrigley’s hands, where it remained. Sixty for three. The School began to hope a rot might set in, but their spirits fell again when they perceived Lodge.

‘Oh, my aunt!’ cried Sproston, who appealed to that relative on any and every occasion, ‘Caldecott and Lodge; enough to break any bowler’s heart. Five runs an hour, and stick there all day.’

‘Tire out the bowlers,’ sighed Dudley Minor.

As it chanced the gloom lifted at the first ball. Lodge called his partner for a run, hesitated, changed his mind, endeavoured to get back, and was walking angrily to the pavilion, almost before the spectators had time to realise what had happened. Then there was a babble of conversation and ejaculations. ‘Prime.’ ‘Ripping.’ ‘That will help us.’ ‘It was his own fault.’ ‘There wasn’t a run in it.’ ‘Yes, there was, if he hadn’t baulked.’ ‘Well, he can’t blame Caldecott.’

Unfortunately that is exactly what Lodge did do. Shaking with mortification he stalked back, and explained volubly to his chums that if the ‘silly blighter’ had started at once it would have been all right; as it was he had to chuck away his own wicket. And Stoneham’s sympathetic ‘Hard lines, old man,’ did not sweeten his temper, because naturally Caldecott could do no wrong in the cricket captain’s eyes.

However, another man was in, and the game proceeded. Nothing else of particular importance occurred, except perhaps that Ayling, put on at Stirling’s request, took the two last wickets for a single, and the innings closed for eighty-seven, Caldecott the sticker, carrying out his bat.

‘Not so bad,’ said the School contentedly, ‘Melley and Manton ought to knock off fifty of those.’

The Fourth declared their men had done as well as any one, and that Ayling ought to have been tried before. The Babes, led by Sproston, made a point of cheering them as if they were the only players that counted, which perhaps was excusable.

A big cheer greeted Manton and Melley as they went to the wickets. Stoneham sent down a maiden over to Manton, and Lodge took the ball. Now the Sixth confidently counted on Lodge. He was incomparably their best trundler; far superior to Stoneham. Unhappily his brief performance at the wicket had upset him; he was moody, sullen, and nursing a grievance, and his bowling suffered in consequence. Melley picked up ten with delightful ease, while his partner wished himself at the other end. The School howled for joy, and the Sixth shook their heads dolefully.

His second attempt was even more ragged than the first, and while changing over Stoneham whispered, 'Bit off colour to-day, old man; I'll let Wheeler try his hand.'

'Do as you like,' Lodge growled sulkily. Run out by 'that blighter' Caldecott, taken off by Stoneham, he was in no mood to play cricket. Matters went from bad to worse; he let a ball pass him to the boundary, and muffed a catch which Manton by a bad stroke obligingly placed in his way. The remarks from the Sixth were the reverse of complimentary, one or two boys even asserting that he was throwing away the game out of spite.

As if to atone for his shortcomings, the remainder of the team fielded magnificently, keeping down the runs, accepting catches, and throwing in with accuracy and judgment. Still, with the dismissal of Manton, Melley, and Stirling, the board showed fifty and the School were jubilant.

'Beat them on our heads,' exclaimed Sproston.

'An inning's victory,' prophesied Dudley Minor.

When six wickets were down and the figures remained unaltered their faces lengthened considerably.

On Stirling's recommendation the captain sent in Ayling to 'stop the rot.' 'Don't try to make runs, keep your end up, that's all I ask.'

'I'll do my best,' the Fourth Form boy answered. It was up to him to play the game, and he played it with a coolness that aroused Stoneham's admiration. 'Plucky little beggar,' exclaimed the Sixth captain; 'there's the making of a good cricketer in him.'

The wickets however fell with monotonous regularity, and when Wrigley, the last man, went in the total had reached only fifty-eight. The School groaned as he faced the bowler, but he survived the remaining ball of the over. Walter succeeded in making two off Stoneham, who, throwing the ball to Caldecott, arranged his field for a catch.

Now Wrigley possessed a very meagre stock of patience, and it was an instinct with him to hit a ball when he saw it; but his activity was tempered by judgment, and he managed to bag five, one of which was patently stolen, with safety.

'Keep it up, Wrigley.' 'Good old Wrigley,' yelled the School uproariously. Every run now made one fewer to be knocked off later.

Meanwhile Walter, who in Sproston's phraseology was safe as the Bank, kept his end up, while his chum added five more to the score. The end came with the last ball of the over. It was slow and irresistibly tempting. Opening his shoulders Wrigley drove. It was a beautiful hit, sharp and crisp, and as the ball travelled to the boundary the School hastily cleared their throats to cheer. But a slim figure came running along the line with incredible speed, a hand shot out, and it was the Sixth who did the yelling.

'Good catch! Oh, good catch, sir!' 'Well done, sir,' as Hunter started for the pavilion.

'Seventeen behind,' said Melley, as the School took the field for the second time, 'it isn't deadly. Buck up, you chaps, and save runs. That's the game, save runs.'

It was an exciting second innings, every fielder was keen as a razor, letting nothing go by him, and the score mounted slowly. To the intense delight of the Fourth, Ayling was given an early chance with the ball, and his puzzling deliveries, frequently catching the batsman in two minds, caused disaster.

Melley surpassed himself. He always bowled with his head, but his deliveries had never been so crafty and insidious. Caldecott was sent back to ruminate wonderingly over a nice round O; the great Stoneham failed to reach double figures; Hunter alone saved his side from a debacle, contributing twenty-seven out of a total of forty-five.

'Sixty-three to win,' shouted Sproston, 'Oh, my aunt! we've got 'em on a piece of string. Beat 'em by eight wickets, you see.'

'Nine,' corrected Dudley Minor, 'if it isn't ten.'

'Melley's taking Stirling with him. What's that for? Where's Manton?'

'Going in first wicket down, I expect. He's talking to the Head.'

'Shut up, you fatheads, Stoneham is going to bowl.'

'Hope he will put Lodge on,' chuckled Sproston; 'my aunt, wouldn't that be prime?'

'Lodge is ratty; says Caldecott got him out.'

'Didn't he send down some stuff, eh! A kid could have scored off him. 'Ray for Stirling; he's broken his duck.'

'Oh, well hit, Melley,' as the Fifth captain made two from a pretty late-cut.

The score mounted steadily to twenty-one when Stirling left with a dozen to his credit, and Manton followed in. Then the fun began. The pair fairly collared the bowling, and Stoneham was at his wit's end. He took off Wheeler in favour of Hunter, and played Joyce at his own end. The double change produced no effect; the score rose merrily, until the jubilation of the School, Manton with a magnificent drive to the boundary made the winning hit.

'Why didn't you try Lodge again?' Caldecott asked his chum, as the two walked off together.

'He refused; said he was shaky, and couldn't bowl.'

'Oh,' said Caldecott, shrugging his shoulders, 'got the hump. Silly beggar.'

Meanwhile there was a stampede of the juniors to cheer their favourites, and if volume of sound counted for anything Melley and Manton stood in high estimation. Yet with that wonderful fairness and true sportmanship characteristic of the British boy, the School applauded Hunter almost as much as their own champions, for they recognised that he had saved the Sixth from a woeful beating.

CHAPTER XI KING HUNTER

The match continued to form the sole subject of conversation until bedtime. From the first ball to the last the theme was worn threadbare. Every one had something, and the vast majority a very great deal, to say about it. Opinions for the most part were coloured according to the status of the speaker. The Babes made heroes of Melley, Manton, and Hunter; the Fourth inclined to the opinion that Ayling and Wrigley really won the game; the Fifth accorded the highest honours to their own two champions.

From the midst of the criticisms, however, two points emerged; Hunter had played the game of his life, and Lodge was a 'silly ass.' The schoolboy is apt to take broad views, and does not trouble himself with the nicer shades.

Sproston expressed the sentiments of the Babes. 'Old Lodge ran himself out and tried to shift the blame on to Caldecott. After that he mugged everything, and couldn't play for nuts. Went to pieces, and lost his head.'

Young Wheeler went further. Having no close friends in the Fifth, and being brother to the newest prefect he had not been so keen as the others about the School winning. Now he stated his opinion that Lodge had purposely lost his side the game, declaring that after Stoneham took him off he never tried. His assertion received scant encouragement from the Babes, but more than one boy in the Upper Form made the same comment.

The happiest boy in the School that evening was undoubtedly Reggie Hunter. It was the invariable custom at Queen's Norton for the two teams to have high tea, presided over by the Head, and a social function afterwards. As an Old Blue, Mr Tracey was able to speak with authority, and the players listened to his criticisms with respectful attention.

After complimenting the School on its fine victory, he reviewed the game, pointing out a few defects and their remedies, praised Melley and Manton for their vigorous batting, and Hunter for his all round skill, and finally gave warm encouragement to the two Fourth Form boys, who had so fully justified their inclusion in the team.

It was altogether a pleasant evening, and Hunter went to his dormitory in a brighter frame of mind than he had enjoyed for a considerable period. He loved to be popular, to be cheered, to be talked about; and in a sense he had been the hero of the match. Wilson had congratulated him with generous warmth; Stoneham, Caldecott, and every fellow who counted helped to swell his triumph; an old Blue had made the most flattering remarks on his cricket. He felt ashamed of his recent petty spite and folly, and determined to alter his attitude completely.

Unhappily it was easier getting into than out of the net of his own constructing. When the Sixth had shown unmistakable signs of giving him the cold shoulder, the one boy who had stood up for him was Jimmy Lodge. Basking in the sunshine of his own popularity the ex-prefect had taken little notice of the gathering storm, but next day, sorely against his inclination, he found himself dragged into the quarrel.

Andy Wheeler, whose average had suffered sadly through indifferent fielding, openly accused Lodge of letting his side down, and several of the Sixth agreed with him. 'You muffed a catch that a kid could have held,' he exclaimed, 'and how many runs you lost us I don't know. It was a shabby trick.'

‘You have no right to say that,’ Hunter protested. ‘A fellow isn’t always in form, and there is no sense in howling at a chap because he had an off day.’

‘He didn’t try,’ Wheeler retorted; ‘we all know that. He got ratty with Caldecott, and flew into a rage because Stoneham took him off. It was mean and shabby, and a chap who would act in that way isn’t fit to be in the team. If I were the captain, I’d take precious good care his name wasn’t in any list that I drew up.’

‘Well,’ said Hunter, with the disagreeable sneer he sometimes affected, ‘you aren’t the captain, and not likely to be, so that’s all right.’

‘Don’t answer him, Reggie,’ said Lodge; ‘ever since Wilson gave him your place his cap’s been too small for his head. Stoneham treated me like a kid, but he found out his mistake in the second innings. He was keen enough to put me on again then; but I wasn’t having any, thank you.’

‘That proves my words,’ said Andy; ‘you don’t know what playing the game means.’

Stoneham had not mentioned the incident to any one but Caldecott, and when the Sixth heard it from Lodge himself they were furious. Hunter didn’t like it, in his heart he felt it was shabby, but Jimmy had backed him up, and he couldn’t desert him. Besides, he didn’t believe that Lodge had fielded badly on purpose. So once again he was in opposition, and running counter to almost every boy in the Form, including Stoneham and Caldecott.

‘We would probably have lost anyway,’ the cricket captain remarked to his chum, ‘but Lodge’s rotten fielding, whether deliberate or not, snuffed out what chance we had.’

Most quarrels have a nasty habit of dragging in an ever-widening circle of combatants, and this one proved no exception to the rule. Manton and Melley especially were highly indignant, because what was being said detracted materially from their own glory as victors. They had won the match fairly, which was true, and now Stoneham was hinting, which he wasn’t, that they owed their victory to Lodge.

‘That’s your Sunday School Sixth,’ snapped Melley. ‘With all their jaw about honour, and playing the game, and keeping the flag flying. ’Pon my word, Reggie Hunter is the only decent chap amongst ’em. Wonder Stoneham doesn’t say he sent down easy ones on purpose for us to score.’

‘Keep your wool on,’ drawled Arnott; ‘no one is trying to filch your halo, but all the same Lodge played a rotten game. I’m not saying he didn’t do his best, but on his form he certainly isn’t worth his cap. You can have your choice.’

From the Fifth the outcry spread to the other Forms; the original cause of the dispute became misty and obscure; a feeling sprang up that Lodge was a martyr, that Melley and Manton were zealously upholding the cause of the School, and that Reggie Hunter was a glorious patriot fighting nobly for truth and justice, and sturdily refusing to be browbeaten by those in authority.

Reggie swam lightly and gracefully on this sea of popularity. All his good resolutions dropped; being a hero was far nicer than truckling to Chubby Wilson. He smiled graciously on his admirers, listened condescendingly to their complaints, and assured them with a grand air that while he was at Queen’s Norton none of them should suffer unjustly. Of what their suffering was supposed to consist no one paused to inquire.

Manton backed him up strongly, but in private broke into fits of laughter. ‘Old Reggie is as good as a play,’ he confided to his jackal; ‘looks on himself as a sort of uncrowned king. Rather a good joke if some one presented him with a crown and sceptre and royal robes, eh.’

‘Ripping,’ agreed Baker slowly, ‘absolutely ripping.’

These two choice spirits never wasted words, and nothing more passed, but one evening a week or so later, when the boys trooped back from the playing-fields, they saw hung up conspicuously in the large corridor a pasteboard crown highly ornamented, a decorated wooden sceptre, and a roughly cut out robe made of coarse paper and coloured a deep purple. On a card suspended above these insignia of royalty was printed in bold characters, 'King Hunter, presented by his adoring subjects.'

The first knot of spectators gazed in silence, the second began to giggle. Wrigley, who dearly loved a jest, positively shrieked; the laughter became contagious. Even the sober Sixth stayed to join in the general merriment, and Manton severely reproved Andy Wheeler for 'insulting a boy who is a thousand times better than yourself.'

In the midst of the tumult Reggie arrived on the scene wondering what had drawn such a crowd together. At sight of the staring inscription he realised the nature of the bitter gibe; his face went deadly white, his eyes blazed, for a second he was beside himself with anger.

It is hard to say what might have happened, had not Arnott laid a gently restraining hand on his shoulder. 'Don't give yourself away, old man,' he whispered.

Arnott rarely interfered in other people's affairs, but he possessed a real if unrecognised influence, and now the friendly touch, and the soothing, half-caressing drawl steadied the furious boy. By a great effort he controlled his temper, and passed on.

The next instant Wilson appeared. 'Hallo,' he exclaimed, 'what is all the fuss about? Oh, I see! Take away that rubbish instantly.' Then noticing several of the Sixth he added curtly, 'I am surprised at you fellows permitting such a fool's game, and disappointed. You have placed yourselves on the same level as the cowardly skulkers who played the trick. Now, you youngsters, vanish. Let the corridor be cleared at once.'

The captain was distinctly annoyed. Ever since the cricket match he had hoped that Hunter would abandon his absurd attitude and let bygones be bygones. Now this piece of stupidity would make matters worse than ever. He walked straight to the ex-prefect's study.

'I want to apologise for this piece of tomfoolery, Hunter,' he exclaimed, 'and I hope you will not let it have any effect on you.'

Reggie regarded him sourly. 'It would be more to the purpose if you made your friends apologise,' he exclaimed stiffly.

The captain looked nonplussed. 'I don't understand,' he replied.

'It isn't difficult to understand. There is no one outside the Sixth who would have done it. Can't you see that?'

'The Sixth! Surely no Sixth Form fellow would be such an arrant fool!'

Reggie sniffed. 'You know the Sixth are making a dead set at me because I backed up Lodge, and it isn't likely that my friends would have served me such a shabby trick. But I will find the fellow yet, and whoever he is I will make him pay; no matter who tries to shelter him.'

The innuendo was sufficiently plain, but Wilson refused to notice it. The boy was half wild with anger, and argument could lead only to further bitterness. The same evening, however, the captain called a meeting of the Sixth and sternly demanded that the perpetrator of the outrage should stand out. No one moved.

'I think, Wilson,' said Stoneham, 'that every one should be placed on his honour to state what he knows about this. I am quite willing to declare that I had no part in it either directly or indirectly.'

‘I pass my word also,’ exclaimed Caldecott; ‘it was a rotten game, and the fellows who are responsible ought to be ashamed of themselves.’

One by one, every boy in the room getting up denied all knowledge of the practical joke. To the captain’s mind this was conclusive. He did not believe that any of the Sixth would deliberately lie; yet there was a good deal in Hunter’s remark that he had no enemies outside the Sixth.

The School almost unanimously adopted this view. Hunter was in bad odour with his Form because he had stood up for Lodge, and this was an insult devised by the fellows he had offended. The lower Forms, though laughing thoughtlessly at the joke, realised later that its object was to make their champion look ridiculous in their eyes. A reaction quickly set in; Reggie became more popular than before, and the breach between the School and the Sixth widened.

Wilson had taken the unusual proceeding of hanging up a notice to the effect that every boy in the Sixth had denied on his honour all knowledge of the affair; but this had little effect except to set going sneering remarks about ‘the honour of the Sixth.’ The captain had committed a tactical error, and was the first to admit it.

‘After all,’ he confided to Stoneham, ‘we can’t blame the School too much. It would be an extraordinary thing for Hunter’s own friends to do.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Stoneham replied; ‘at least it has made us extremely unpopular, which just suits Melley and Co.’

CHAPTER XII

STONEHAM'S THUNDERBOLT

'Ray-ray-ray!' 'Good old Stanley!' 'Ray for Stanley!'

The splendid news had come at the close of morning school, and Mr Tracey had promptly abandoned lessons for the day; much to the relief of the masters, who fully recognised the impossibility of getting any more work out of their excited pupils. For this was the first battle-honour awarded to Queen's Norton—many more were to be added before the horrible war ended, and many announcements of a far different nature were to be inscribed on the scroll in the great hall—but this was the first, and Stanley was a school hero.

Only the most recently admitted scholars were unacquainted with Stanley; the Fifth and Sixth knew and loved him; he was adored by the Fourth, and revered by the Babes. Stanley, the great captain who had led the school valiantly and well, who on the threshold of a brilliant career had stepped aside without sigh or regret to uphold the right, who rather than wait had joined the ranks and fought his way up step by step to a commission, had brought honour to the black and white colours.

'Ripping, ain't it?' exclaimed Dudley Minor, with enthusiasm. 'All the officers were casualties—that means they were down and out, my son—and old Stanley rallied the company, and took 'em straight at the Boches, captured a machine gun single handed, and then held on tight.'

'Never could shift old Stanley when he'd got set,' said Sproston. 'I say, Ayling, that's one to the Queens, eh?'

'Jolly good,' replied Walter; 'the old Queens will keep their end up all right.'

'Rather. Military Cross to begin the board with. Not so dusty.'

'We'll have a V.C. or two before it's all over,' suggested Dudley Minor hopefully.

'And a good many other things, too, I'm afraid,' said Walter as he passed on.

He was proud of Stanley's M.C., but he knew that not only medals came to the brave fellows fighting across the water, and his mind dwelt somewhat insistently on Jack, his brave, noble-minded brother, who also at the first summons had stepped forward to 'play the game,' and who now, for all Walter knew, might be lying dead in some sodden trench.

Not that he would have had him hold back! It was up to Jack to face the risk, and no one would ever have dreamed of his shirking. Still one cannot overcome one's natural feelings, and at times Walter could not help picturing his bright, sunny-hearted brother in the cold and the rain, with shells bursting, machine guns grinding out death and wounds, trenches reeking with poison gas, and deadly snipers securely hidden picking off men as if they were rabbits.

The war did not enter largely into the life of the smaller boys; they were fortunately incapable of realising its horrors and ghastliness, although at a later period they, too, began to understand something of its tragic nature; but the majority had fathers or elder brothers engaged in the desperate strife, several of whom had already made the supreme sacrifice.

To the seniors the brutal conflict was more of a reality, and the older ones chafed sorely at their own inaction. They said little, but as the prospect of a long war opened out it became noticeable how their keenness and eagerness in the Cadet Corps increased. To them it was no longer a game or piece of make-believe, but real, earnest work. Hunter and his friends were as enthusiastic as the rest, and on the drill-ground they put aside all thought of hostility to the

school captain. Their animosity remained, but young as they were they had heard and recognised the call.

Indeed, any opposition to Chubby Wilson in the Cadet Corps would have brought instant disaster to those who indulged in it. The change from the heavy, rather lumbering, awkward, studious boy who had been called to captain the school at a time of crisis was simply marvellous. Even Stoneham and Caldecott, who were most intimate with him, wondered.

Every trace of shyness and awkwardness had long since disappeared. He marched firmly and lightly, the khaki uniform set off his powerful figure to advantage; his commands were prompt and issued without indecision, he mastered his drill almost by intuition, and really seemed, as Sproston declared, to be a 'born soldier.' His interest never flagged or weakened, and his presence was an inspiration to the corps.

'I always believed in Wilson,' remarked Stoneham one day, 'but he has done far better than I ever expected. What is the secret?'

'Love for the school,' replied his chum instantly, 'and a dogged determination that it shan't go down under him. I tell you what, Ralph, he has made a better captain than either you or I would have done.'

'That's true, old man; I was thinking the same thing this afternoon. I suppose he will join up at Christmas if the war lasts.'

'Bound to. He is the sort that can't help himself. Hates the whole rotten business like poison, but it has to be done, and there you are. For one thing he would fancy it reflected on the Queens if the captain didn't lead the way.'

'Yes, he would do anything for the school. I believe he still means to have a fling at the Barclay!'

'Nonsense. He hasn't the time.'

'I'm not so sure. He is working like a horse; never wastes a minute. Remember last Tuesday when we marched in from Tedbury?'

'Remember! Shall I ever forget? I never was so dog-tired in my life.'

'Neither was I. Well, have you any notion how Chubby spent his evening?'

'Dropped down like a log and groaned. I did.'

'He had a bath and rub down, went to his room, and did a steady four hours' grind.'

'What!' Caldecott ejaculated in astonishment.

'It's quite true.'

'But where's the sense of fagging like that? If he joins up he can't hold the Barclay even if he gains it.'

'My dear chap,' replied Stoneham, 'you don't exactly understand Chubby yet. For himself he doesn't care two pins about the scholarship; it's Queens' Norton that's in his mind.'

'Good old Chubby! I am glad the youngsters are beginning to appreciate him.'

'Yes,' said Stoneham. 'I fancy the factions are pretty well squashed.' A belief that at no distant date was to be rudely shattered.

The excitement over the M.C. had barely subsided when the Queens received another pleasant surprise, of which they were all secretly proud. In spite of young Ayling's hot partisanship, there was no doubt of Manningham being a swagger school far in front of Queen's Norton. It contained five times as many pupils, possessed a high reputation for scholarships, and excelled in every form of sport. The Manningham blue and gold colours were rarely lowered in defeat; so, when it was announced that Doctor Bolton had arranged a

match between Manningham and Queen's Norton, the Queens privately thought it rather an honour to the school.

The eventful day arrived at last, bringing with it Dr Bolton and the Manningham eleven. As travelling difficulties necessitated a late start, the two Heads had decided that the game must be a one innings' match, which secretly pleased the Queens' supporters.

The Queens came on to the field keen and eager; not confident, but determined. The defection of their best men had produced a marvellous effect. Every member of the eleven was bent on playing to the top of his form. If the black and white colours had to go down they should go down fighting. Each boy was prepared to sacrifice himself for the good of the cause; to play the game, to play for the team. Each one was filled with a feeling of the most intense loyalty to the school, and devotion to the cricket captain; they would not let Stoneham down.

That they intended to strain every nerve in order to put up a keen fight was apparent from the beginning. The visitors opened cautiously, playing themselves in, and the score moved upwards very, very slowly. The batsmen were compelled to struggle for every run; to steal one was impossible. The fielding was magnificent; Dr Bolton declared emphatically it was the finest exhibition Queen's Norton had ever given.

'They are playing with the spirit and zeal of Crusaders,' he remarked, and Mr Tracey smiled enigmatically. Understanding what it was that prompted his boys, he rejoiced.

Although runs came slowly, the stumps remained intact. At the half century Stoneham took himself off and handed the ball to Ayling. The school held its breath. What would the youngster do? Stoneham was asking a big thing of him.

'Keep cool, Ayling,' whispered Stirling, 'just fancy you are at the nets, and don't worry if you get knocked about a bit.'

Three balls the Manningham captain played carefully; opening his shoulders to the fourth he drove it clean over the boundary to the accompaniment of tremendous cheering and shouts of 'Well played, sir.' 'Well played,' for the Queens were gallant sportsmen.

Stoneham, turning a trifle anxiously to glance at his youthful colleague, was reassured by what he saw. The next ball appeared to be an exact replica of the preceding one. Again the batsmen opened his shoulders and the spectators waited in tense silence for the mighty swish. It did not come. The batsman was obviously in difficulties. Unable to detect the variation in pace he waited a tiny fraction of a second too long, the ball seemed literally to jump on to his bat and bounce off into Caldecott's hands.

So the game continued, and the Queens watched breathlessly its rising and falling fortunes. They applauded impartially a good hit, a smart pick-up, an accurate return; but when Wrigley leaping into the air brought off a miraculous catch that made the batsman gasp they shouted themselves hoarse.

'Fourth! Fourth! Ray, Fourth!' 'Good old Wrigley!' 'Well done, Charley! Oh, well done!'

Presently Arnott, careless, good-natured, drawling Arnott, who had stepped into the breach as it were at the last minute, sent them wild again. All along he had picked up cleanly and returned with precision, but now, when two men were well set, he had thrown in so swiftly and with such unerring aim that the stumps were shattered with the batsman still a yard outside his crease.

Meanwhile Stoneham was handling his freak bowler with skill and judgment. He studied the play of each batsman with the greatest care, keeping Walter on or taking him off

accordingly. And Ayling seconded his captain's efforts zealously. Not a loose ball left his hand; he bowled with his head, and every delivery was well thought out.

The last three wickets went with a rush, Sproston having barely time to clear his throat to lead the enthusiastic cheering.

'All out for 137.' 'Might have been worse.' 'Good enough.' 'Hope old Stoneham's in form.' 'Not a passenger in the boat.' 'Ayling got five for forty-three.' 'We've a sporting chance yet.' 'Sporting chance,' scornfully, 'why, we have won!'

Meanwhile in the pavilion the Queens were reckoning up their chances.

'We have plenty of time to go slow,' Stoneham decided. 'Get all the runs you can, but don't throw your wickets away foolishly. It isn't a walk-over, but we have a chance.'

The Queens never played for a draw; it was an established principle to do everything possible to finish a match—win or lose.

'Just one final word, boys,' the captain said, before going out with Caldecott; 'don't think about your own scores; play for the team.'

A rousing cheer greeted the two prefects as they emerged from the pavilion. Though far from confident the Queens were more hopeful than when the game started. Stoneham and Stirling ought to be good for twenty or thirty apiece, while Caldecott as a rule could be depended upon to wear out the bowlers. That was his forte, a dozen or so not out being his usual performance.

Stoneham took the first over—a maiden, and Caldecott broke his duck with a pretty two through the slips. The game proceeded quietly and without any unusual incident. The freak bowler, chiefly owing to the Queens' familiarity with Ayling's deliveries, did not prove a success, much to the disgust of the Manninghamites.

When Stoneham left the score was thirty-eight, to which by stylish and correct cricket the captain had contributed twenty-seven, and Stirling followed in.

'Good enough,' exclaimed Sproston cheerfully; 'old Caldecott is rooted in for the day.'

Stirling having knocked up twenty-nine, was out to a fine catch on the boundary, the second wicket falling at seventy-four.

The hopes of the Queens mounted skyward, but the glorious uncertainty of cricket once again made itself evident, and half the side were back in the pavilion for eighty-nine.

'Oh, my aunt,' cried Sproston, 'here's a go! There's nobody left at all.'

'Arnott's going in,' cried Dudley Minor, 'Yell, you silly blighters, yell. It will make 'em believe old Arnott's a regular scorcher,' he added, in explanation. So the Babes yelled according to order.

Amott was by no means a pretty player, and indeed rarely found a place in important matches, but he possessed a style of his own which sometimes proved effective. With a little luck to aid him he stayed until the score reached the century, and the Queens were grateful.

Master Wrigley gathered a dozen by bright, merry hitting; 115 for seven.

Sproston revived. 116—8. Sproston swallowed a jujube and meditated gravely. A hush fell on the spectators.

'Twenty-two,' murmured Dudley Minor, 'and only young Ayling to count on.'

The excitement was becoming actually painful to the Babes. Caldecott was facing the bowler. 'No ball,' from the umpire.

'Good,' whispered Dudley Minor, 'do it again, old chap.'

A two through the slips and a stolen run. Ayling was batting. Whatever happened he had justified his inclusion, but now, oh, now, if he would only keep his end up! Wrigley actually

forgot to smile as he watched the ball go down, and a sigh of relief escaped him as Walter met it fairly. He survived the next one also, and then Caldecott took a full over without scoring, although two were added for a bye.

‘Sixteen,’ cried Sproston. ‘My aunt, what’s sixteen? Four boundaries would do it.’

The boundaries did not materialise. The visitors were playing with desperate keenness, the bowlers forgetting they were tired, the fielders scarcely ever making a mistake. The score, helped by byes, advanced with shocking slowness. One now and then, very occasionally a couple, but the wickets remained intact.

‘Eight!’ announced Dudley Minor solemnly. ‘Isn’t it torture? Talk about the rack!’

‘Seven, you chump,’ as the batsman ran for a bye.

Then the school shook itself and roared; Caldecott lashing out at a short-pitched ball secured three. It was almost a unique performance for the stone-waller, and the cricket captain fairly chortled with delight.

Four! Oh, if only a kind fate would let them do it. A shiver of apprehension as Ayling put one up dangerously in the slips, and a gasp of relief as the ball dropped harmlessly.

‘Ugh,’ said Sproston shivering, ‘that made my spine as cold as ice.’

Three! Two! Oh! Caldecott had another slash and was caught.

‘One to tie; two to win,’ chanted Dudley Minor in accents of woe, ‘and only a duffer to do it.’

‘If he can stand one, just one, Ayling will get the bowling.’

‘Out first ball, for a bull’s eye.’

‘Oh, good, good.’ The exclamation was not a tribute to the last-comer’s prowess, but merely an appreciation of the fact that the ball was off the wicket.

Ayling realised acutely that everything depended on him. Unless he hit a two in the over, the Queens could not win. That was absolutely certain. The visitors realised that also, and especially the bowler. His first two balls were simply unplayable; the third gave a doubtful chance for a run. Walter decided to avail himself of it. Win or lose. That was the Queens’ tradition.

The fourth ball offered an opportunity and he took it. It was barely a two, but the two batsmen scrambled home flushed and panting. Then pandemonium was let loose.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *The Captain of Queens* by Herbert Hayens]