The High School Freshmen eBook

The High School Freshmen by H. Irving Hancock

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Page 1

THE HIGH SCHOOL SNEAK

“I say you did!” cried Fred Ripley, hotly. Dick Prescott’s cheeks turned a dull red as he replied, quietly, after swallowing a choky feeling in his throat:

“I have already told you that I did not do it.”

“Then who did do the contemptible thing?” insisted Ripley, sneeringly.

Fully forty boys, representing all the different classes at the Gridley High School, stood looking on at this altercation in the school grounds. Half a dozen of the girls, too, hovered in the background, interested, or curious, though not venturing too close to what might turn out to be a fight in hot blood.

“If I knew,” rejoined Dick, in that same quiet voice, in which one older in the world’s ways might have detected the danger-signal, “I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Bah!” jeered Fred Ripley, hotly.

“Perhaps you mean that you don’t believe me?” said Prescott inquiringly.

“I don’t!” laughed Ripley, shortly, bitterly.

“Oh!”

A world of meaning surged up in that exclamation. It was as though bright, energetic, honest Dick Prescott had been struck a blow that he could not resent. This, indeed, was the fact.

“See here, Ripley-----” burst, indignantly, from Dick Prescott’s lips, as his face went white and then glowed a deeper red than before.

“Well, kid?” sneered Ripley.

“If I didn’t have a hand—–the right hand, at that—–that is too crippled, today, I’d pound your words down your mouth.”

“Oh, your hand?” retorted Ripley, confidently. “The yarn about that hand is another lie.”

Dick’s injured right hand came out of the jacket pocket in which it had rested. With his left hand he flung down his cap.

“I’ll fight—–you—–anyway!” Prescott announced, slowly.

There were a few faint cheers, though some of the older High School boys looked serious. Fair play was an honored tradition in Gridley.

Ripley, however, had thrown down his cap at once, hurling his strapped-up school books aside at the same time.

“Wait a moment,” commanded Frank Thompson, stepping forward. He was a member of the first class, a member of the school eleven, and a husky young fellow who could enforce his opinions at need.

“Get back, Thomp,” retorted Ripley. “The cub wants to fight, and he’s got to.”

“Not if he has an injured hand,” retorted Frank, quickly.

“He hasn’t,” jeered Ripley. “And he’s got so fight, if he has four lame hands.”

“He can fight, then, yes,” agreed Thompson. “But remember, Fred, it’s allowable, when a fellow’s crippled, to fight by substitute.”

“Substitute?” asked Fred, looking uncomfortable.

“Yes; I’ll take his place, if Prescott will let me,” volunteered Frank Thompson, coolly.

“You? I guess not,” snorted Ripley. “I won’t stand for that. I’m a third classman, and you’re a first classman. You’re half as big again as I am, and-----”

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“The odds wouldn’t be as bad as you’re proposing to take out of this poor little freshman with the crippled hand,” insisted Thompson. “So get ready to meet me. I’ll allow one of my hands to be tied, if you want.”

Yet even this proposition couldn’t be made alluring to Fred Ripley. He knew Thompson’s mettle and strength too well for that.

Dan Dalzell, another freshman, had been standing back, keeping quiet as long as he could.

“See here,” proposed Dan, stepping forward, “isn’t a freshman allowed to say something when his friend is insulted?”

“Go ahead,” nodded Thompson, who knew Dan to be one of young Prescott’s close friends.

“Dick isn’t in shape to fight, and I know it,” continued Dan Dalzell, hotly. “But Ripley wants something easy, like a freshman, so he can have me!”

“And me,” cried Tom Reade, also leaping forward.

“He can have one with me, too,” offered Harry Hazelton.

“Same here,” added Greg Holmes and Dave Darrin.

All five of the speakers were freshmen, and close chums of Dick Prescott’s.

“Say, what do you think I want——to fight a whole pack?” demanded Ripley, hoarsely.

“Oh, you don’t have to fight us all at once,” retorted Dave Darrin. “But you’ve insulted our friend, and you’ve taken a sneaking advantage of him at a time when you *knew* he couldn’t handle anyone as big as you are. So, Ripley, you’re answerable to Prescott’s friends. I’ll tell you what you can do. There are five of us. You can take any one of us that you prefer for the first bout. When you’ve thrashed him, you can call for the next, and so on. But you’ve got to go through the five of us in turn. If you don’t, I’ll call you a coward from now on. You’re bigger than any of us.”

“See here, Cub Darrin,” raged Ripley, starting forward, his face aflame, “I don’t allow any freshman to talk that way to me. I won’t fight you, but I’ll chastise you, and you can protect yourself if you know how.”

He made a bound forward, intent on hitting Darrin, who stood his ground unflinchingly. But Thompson seized the third classman by the shoulder and shoved him back.

“Now, stop this, Ripley, and you freshmen, cut it out, too,” warned the athletic first classman. “This is descending to a low level. We don’t want a lot of bickering or mouth-fighting, and we don’t intend to have anything but fair play, either.”

“As this is largely my affair,” broke in Dick Prescott, who had had time to cool down a bit, “let me have a chance to make an offer.”

“Go ahead,” nodded Thompson.

“Then,” proposed Dick, “since you won’t let me fight today, why can’t this meeting hold over until my hand is in shape? Then I’ll agree to give Ripley all he wants.”

“That’s the only sensible thing I’ve heard said in five minutes,” declared Frank Thompson, looking about him at other upper classmen. “Is it the general opinion that the fight hold over for a few days, or, say, a fortnight?”

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“Yes,” came back an eager, approving chorus.

“Then so be it,” proclaimed Frank. “And now, remember, Ripley, this fight is not to be pulled off until the school agrees to it. If you pick any trouble with Prescott until you get the word, or if you try to find any excuse for hitting him while his hand’s out of shape, then you’ll answer to the school for your conduct. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Humph!” snorted Fred Ripley. “All this fuss about the High School sneak!”

Again Dick started forward, but Thompson caught him firmly.

“Hold on, freshie!” advised the older boy. “Save it up. Bottle it. You can have all the more fun out of Ripley when your hand is in shape.”

“His hand is in as good shape as it ever was,” retorted Ripley, scornfully. “And he lies when he says he didn’t do this.”

Ripley swung, so as to display the tail of a short topcoat that was one of his treasures. The garment was fashionably made and of the best material, for Ripley’s father was a wealthy lawyer in Gridley, and the young Ripley hopeful had all the most costly things a boy can prize.

Along the tail of the coat some miscreant had daubed a streak of fresh white paint. Ripley had found it there when donning the coat to leave school at one o’clock that day. Fred knew that Dick had been in the coat room after recess, and, as he disliked the freshman, Ripley had accused Dick of the deed.

Having fired his parting shot, Fred turned on his heel, sauntering over to where the fluttering group of girls waited. One of them, Clara Deane, stepped forward to meet him.

“Fred, why do you have anything to do with such a low-down fellow as Prescott?” asked Clara, contemptuously.

“He’s the sneak of the school,” uttered Fred, harshly; “but I can’t let even a sneak streak my coat with paint.”

“And he never did such a thing, either!” broke in Laura Bentley, disdainfully. “Fred Ripley, you accused Dick Prescott of playing off a lame hand. I know how his hand became crippled. Dick wanted me to promise not to tell how it happened, but now I’m going to. Wait and you can hear, both of you.”

“I don’t want to, I’m sure,” rejoined Clara, with a toss of her head. “Come along, Fred.”

This pair of students walked away together. They always did, after school was out. The Ripleys and the Deanes were neighbors.

The other girls, however, followed Laura, as, with quick, resolute step, she marched over to where the High School boys still lingered.

"Boys," began Laura, "Mr. Prescott has been accused of pretending about a hurt hand. I know how he injured it; and, as he did it-----"

"Please don't say any more, Miss Bentley," begged Dick, flushing.

"Yes, I shall," insisted Laura, quietly. "It happened night before last. Dick Prescott didn't want anything said about it, and neither did the police, so-----"

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“The police?” chipped in several of the High School boys and girls.

“Yes, the police wanted it kept quiet, so they could have a chance to catch the fellow,” Laura hastened on. “But they’ve had time enough, now, to catch the rascal, if they’re ever going to. You see, it happened this way: Mother had forty-five dollars on hand that belonged to the church fair fund. So, night before last, she asked me to take it over to Miss Bond, the treasurer. I was going through Clinton Street, in one of the dark spots, when a man jumped out from behind a tree and made a snatch for the purse that I carried in my hand.

“Well, somehow—–I don’t just know how,” Laura continued, “I managed to keep hold of the purse and I screamed, of course. Then some one came running down the street as fast as he could—–and Dick Prescott leaped at the rascal. It was a hard fight—–a fearful one.”

The girl shuddered even then, in the telling, but she continued: “The wretch was twice as big as Dick Prescott. I thought Dick was going to be killed. Twice the fellow broke loose, and started to run, but what do you think Master Dick was up to?”

“What?” chorused the interested audience.

“Master Dick had his mind set on subduing the robber and holding him for the police. So he tried to stop the wretch from getting away. At last, however, the fellow hurled Dick backward, so that he fell. When he got up he was lame. You all may have noticed that Mr. Prescott limped a bit yesterday?”

“Yes; he *did*,” confirmed Frank Thompson.

“And his hand was hurt, too—–I know that,” insisted Laura. “For he escorted me to Miss Bond’s, and then home. When we got there, I asked my father, who is a doctor, to take Dick into the office. Father said, afterwards, that Dick’s right wrist was sprained, and his ankle wrenched a bit, too. He said Dick would be doing well to have the full use of his wrist in a week. Then the police came, when my father telephoned for them, and the police didn’t want anything said for a while.”

“So you, a fourteen-year-old freshie, are going about at night trying to waylay footpads, are you?” demanded Thompson, resting a friendly hand on Dick’s shoulder. “But why did you keep so close-mouthed, afterwards?” demanded the first classman.

“Well, for one thing, I guess I was a bit ashamed,” confessed Dick, reddening.

“Ashamed of rushing to beauty’s aid?” demanded Frank, laughingly.

“Nothing like it,” Dick protested, growing redder still. “I was ashamed over having let the footpad get away.”

“What? And he twice your size?” gasped Thompson. “Fellows, what do you think of the modest cheek of this freshie! Ashamed because he couldn’t bag a full-sized thug!”

“That kid’s the mustard!” broke in another first classman, approvingly.

“That’s what he is!” came from others.

“Wow! whoop!”

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They began crowding about the confused, blushing freshie, pumping his uninjured left hand. Then some one shouted:

“He’s all right, from the ground up. He’s a Gridley boy! He’s only a freshie in years, but he’ll get over that. Now, up with Dick Prescott! On your shoulders! Give him the High School yell!”

Before he could even dodge, this High School freshman found himself going up in the air. With all consideration for his injured hand the upper classmen rushed him out of the school grounds, onto the street, holding him aloft in the post of honor. The other boys followed. Even the few girls followed, waving their handkerchiefs, while a lusty roar went up:

“T-E-R-R-O-R-S! Wa-ar! Fam-ine! Pesti-lence! That’s us! That’s us! G-R-I-D-L-E-Y ——H.S. Rah! rah! rah! rah! *Gri-idley*!”

“What’s all that racket back there?” asked Clara Deane, turning at the head of the street. “Why, they’re yelling and carrying that odious little Dick Prescott.”

“Must be dragging him off to give him a ducking, as he deserves,” muttered Fred Ripley, gratingly.

“No, no! It’s the school yell, and the girls are waving their handkerchiefs.”

“Then they must be canonizing the school sneak,” returned Ripley, frowning hard.

“Well, don’t wait to see,” urged Clara. “We don’t care about mixing up too much with such a common crowd as the Gridley H.S. students are.”

“Prescott is nothing but a mucker, but he spoiled my coat, and I’ll make him smart for it!” uttered Fred, his face burning with sullen rage.

“You’ll only smirch yourself, Fred, by having anything more to do with such a fellow,” Clara warned him.

“When I’m even with the fellow, I won’t have anything more to do with him,” snorted Ripley. “But I’ll wait, watch and plan for years, if I have to, to take all the conceit and meanness out of that sneak. I’ll never quit until I can look at myself in the glass and tell myself that I’ve paid back the lowest trick ever played on me!”

CHAPTER II

DICK & CO. GO AFTER THE SCHOOL BOARD’S SCALPS

In Gridley High School, sessions began at eight in the morning. School let out for the day at one in the afternoon. The brighter students, who could get most of their lessons in school, and do the rest of the work during the evening, thus had the afternoon for work or fun.

Often, though, it happened that there were parties, or school dances in the evening. Then a portion of the afternoon could be used for study, if need be. Saturdays, of course, were free from study for all but the dullest—–and the dullest usually don't bother their heads much about study at any time.

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Gridley was not a large place——just an average little American city of some thirty thousand inhabitants. It was a much bigger place than that, though, when it came to the matter of public spirit. Gridley people were proud of their town. They wanted everything there to be of the best. Certainly, the Gridley High School was not surpassed by many in the country. The imposing building cost some two hundred thousand dollars. The equipment of the school was as fine as could be put in a building of that size. Including the principal, there were sixteen teachers, four of them being men.

In all the classes combined, there were some two hundred and forty students, about one hundred of these being girls. Nearly all of the students were divided between the four regular classes. There were always a few there taking a postgraduate, or fifth year of work, for either college or one of the technical schools.

With such a school and such a staff of teachers as it possessed the Gridley standard of scholarship was high. The Gridley diploma was a good one to take to a college or to a "Tech" school.

Yet this fine high school stood well in the bodily branches of training. Gridley's H.S. football eleven had played, in the past four years, forty-nine games with other high school teams, and had lost but two of these games. The Gridley baseball nine had played fifty-four games with other high school teams in the same period, and had met defeat but three times in the four years.

Athletics, at this school, were not overdone, but were carried on with a fine insistence and a dogged determination. Up to date, however, despite the fine work of their boys, the citizens of the town had been somewhat grudging about affording money for training athletic teams. What the boys had won on the fields of sport they had accomplished more without public encouragement than with it.

It was now October. Dick Prescott and his five closest friends were all freshmen. They had been in the school only long enough to become accustomed to the routine of work and study. They were still freshmen, and would be until the close of the school year. As freshmen were rather despised "cubs" Dick and his friends would be daring, indeed should they dare to do anything, in their freshman year, to make them very prominent.

According to a good many Gridley people Dick's father, Eben Prescott, was accounted the best educated man in town. The elder Prescott had taken high honors at college; he had afterwards graduated in law, and, for a while, had tried to build up a practice. Eben Prescott was not lazy, but he was a student, much given to dreaming. He had finally been driven to opening a small bookstore. Here, when not waiting on customers, he could read. Dick's mother had proved the life of the little business. Had it not been for her energy and judgment the pair would have found it difficult to rear even their one child properly. The family lived in five rooms over the bookstore.

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From the time he first began to go to school it had been plain that Dick Prescott inherited his mother's energy, plus some of his own. He had been one of the leaders in study, work and mischief, at the Central Grammar School. It was while in the grammar school that a band of boys had been formed who were popularly known as "Dick & Co." Dick was naturally the head. The other members of the company were Tom Reade, Dan Dalzell, Harry Hazelton, Greg Holmes and Dave Darrin. These were the same now all High School freshmen who had stepped forward and offered to take Dick's place in fighting Fred Ripley.

Dick was now fourteen, and so were all his partners, except Tom Reade, who was a year older. All of Dick's chums were boys belonging to families of average means. This is but another way of saying that, as a usual thing, Dick and all his partners would have been unable to fish up a whole dollar among them all.

Fred Ripley, on the other hand, usually carried considerable money with him. Lawyer Ripley usually allowed Fred much more money than that snobbish young man knew how to make good use of.

Fred and Clara Deane were undoubtedly the best-dressed pair in the High School, and the two best supplied with spending money. There were a few other sons or daughters of well-to-do people in Gridley High School, but the average attendance came from families that were only just about well enough off to be able to maintain their youngsters at higher studies.

Fred Ripley, despite his mean nature, was not wholly without friends in the High School. Some of his pocket money he spent on his closest intimates. Then, too, Fred had rather a shrewd idea as to those on whom it was safe or best to vent his snobbishness.

From the start of the school year, Ripley had picked out young Freshman Prescott as a boy he did not like. Dick's place in the moneyed scale of life was so lowly that Fred did not hesitate about treating the other boy in a disagreeable manner.

A week after the meeting between Fred and Dick the High School atmosphere had suddenly become charged with intense excitement. The school eleven had come out of training, had played almost its last match with the "scrub" team and was now close to the time for its first regular match. Oakdale H.S. was to be the first opponent, and Oakdale was just good enough a team to make the Gridley boys a bit uneasy over the outcome.

"My remarks this morning," announced Dr. Thornton, on opening school on Monday, "are not so much directed at the young ladies. But to the young gentlemen I will say that, when the football season opens, we usually notice a great falling off in the recitation marks. This year I hope will be an exception. It has always been part of my

policy to encourage school athletics, but I do not mind telling you that some members of the Board of Education notice that school percentages fall off in October and November. This, I trust, will not be the case this year. If it is I fear that the Board of Education may take some steps that will result in making athletics less of a feature among our young men. I hope that it is not necessary to add anything to this plain appeal to your good judgment, young gentlemen."

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It *wasn't*. Dr. Thornton was a man of so few and direct words that the boys gathered on the male side of the big assembly room looked around at each other in plain dismay.

"That miserable old Board of Education is equal to shutting down on us right in the middle of the season," whispered Frank Thompson to Dent, who sat next him.

"You know the answer?" Dent whispered back.

"What?"

"Give the board no excuse for any such action. Keep up to the academ. grind."

"But how do that and train-----"

A general buzz was going around on the boys' side of the room. Several of the girls, too, were whispering in some excitement, for most of the girls were enthusiastic "fans" at all of the High School games.

Whispering, provided it was "necessary" and did not disturb others, was not against the rules. These were no longer school children, but "young gentlemen" and "young ladies," and allowed more freedom than in the lower schools. For a few moments Dr. Thornton tolerated patiently the excited buzz in the big assembly room. Then, at last, he struck a paper-weight against the top of his desk on the platform.

"First period recitations, now," announced the principal.

Clang! At stroke of the bell there was a hurried clutching of books and notebooks. The students filed down the aisles, going quickly to their proper sections, which formed in the hall outside. The tramp of feet resounded through the building, for some recitation rooms were on the first floor, some on the second and some on the third.

Two minutes later there was quiet in the great building. Recitation room doors were closed. One passing through the corridors would have heard only the indistinct murmur of voices from the different rooms. Within five minutes every one of the instructors detected the fact that, though discipline was as good as ever, Dr. Thornton's words had spoiled the morning's recitations. Try as they would, the young men could not fasten their minds on the work on hand. The hint that athletics might be stopped had *stung*.

Dick & Co. were all sitting in IV. English.

"Mr. Prescott," directed Submaster Morton, "define the principle of suspense, as employed in writing."

Dick started, looked bewildered, then rose.

“It’s---it’s-----” he began.

“A little more rapidly, if you please.”

“I studied it last night, sir, but I’m afraid I’ve clean forgotten all about that principle,” Dick confessed. He sat down, red-faced, nor was his discomfiture decreased by hearing some of the occupants of the girls’ seats giggle.

“I shall question you about that at the next recitation. Mr. Prescott,” nodded the submaster.

“Ye-es, sir. I hope you’ll have luck,” Dick answered, absently.

“What’s that?” rapped out Mr. Morton.

Dick, aroused, was on his feet again, like a flash.

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“I beg your pardon, Mr. Morton,” he came out straightforwardly. “That sounded like slang, or disrespect. I beg to assure you, sir, that neither was intended. The truth is-----”

“Your mind is busy with other things this morning, I see,” smiled the sub-master.

“Ye-es, sir.” Dick dropped once more into his seat. Ralph Morton sighed. That very popular young submaster, only three years out of college, was the hugely admired coach who had led the Gridley eleven to victory during the last three seasons. He was as disturbed as anyone could have been over the rumored intention of the Board of Education to take some unpleasant action regarding High School athletics.

It was a terribly unsatisfactory hour in IV. English. Five minutes before the period was up Mr. Morton dejectedly closed the text-book from which he had been questioning, and remarked, tersely:

“At ease!”

Instantly the buzz of whispering broke forth. It was required only that not enough noise be made to disturb the students in adjoining rooms.

Dick, Tom and Dan sat in the front row. Directly behind them were the other three members of the “Co.”

“Say,” muttered Dan, in a low undertone, “Mr. Morton looks half glum and half savage this morning, like the rest of us.”

“Seems to,” muttered Tom Reade.

“What do you make of *that*?” challenged Dan.

“There must be strong foundation for the little hint Dr. Thornton let fall this morning,” guessed Dave Darrin.

“And Mr. Morton knows it’s a straight tip,” added Harry Hazelton, sagely.

“It’ll be a confounded shame, if the Board does anything like that,” glowed Dick Prescott, indignantly.

“They’ll be so many dead ones, if they *do*,” flared Tom Reade, hotly.

“Yes,” agreed Dave Darrin. “But the worst about that Board of Education is that, though they *are* dead ones, they’re so very dead that they’ll never find it out.”

“Won’t they, thought” whispered Dan Dalzell, hotly. “Say, I’m inclined to think they will! I-----”

“Dan!” whispered Dick, warningly.

“Yep; you’ve guessed right,” grinned Dan. “I am hatching a scheme in my mind. I’m getting up something that will bring even that dummified Board to its senses.”

“Then you can achieve the impossible,” teased Reade.

“Say, but it’s a warm one that’s forming this time,” whispered Dan, his eyes dancing. “I’ll see you fellows at recess. Not a word until then. But you-----”

Ting-ling-ling. The bell connecting with the annunciator at the principal’s desk was trilling in IV. English, as it was in all the other recitation rooms. IV. English rose, the boys waiting until the girls had passed from the room. A study-hour in the big assembly room followed for Dick & Co. Yet, had anyone watched Dan Dalzell, it would have been found that young man was in the reference room, and reading, or thumbing——of all volumes in the English language——the city directory!

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When recess broke, Dick & Co. quickly got together. By twos, Dick and Dave Darrin leading, they marched down through one of the side streets, it being permitted to High School pupils to go outside the yard in the near neighborhood.

Presently Dick halted before a stone wall. He eyed Dan keenly, who had been walking just behind with Harry Hazelton.

“Dan,” demanded the leader, “you gave us to understand that your mind is seething again. Is that true?”

“Quite true,” Dan averred, solemnly.

“What particular kind of cerebration is oscillating inside of your intelligence?” Dick queried.

“Which?” demanded Dan, suspiciously. “No, I never! I’m not that kind of fellow.”

“In plain, freshman English, then, what’s your scheme?”

“We’ll have to get statistics,” announced Dalzell, “before I can come right down to bare facts. When does the Board of Education, otherwise known as the Grannies’ Club, meet?”

“Tonight, in the Board Room in the High School building,” Dick answered.

“How many members are there?”

“Seven,” Dick affirmed.

“That’s not too many, then,” continued Dan, thoughtfully.

“Not too many?” repeated Dick Prescott. “What do you mean?”

“Why, I’ve been refreshing my general information about this town by consulting the city directory. From that valuable tome I discovered that there are just nine undertakers in town.”

“Now, what on earth are you driving at——or driveling at?” asked Dick Prescott, suspiciously, while the other partners remained wonderingly, eagerly silent.

“Why,” pursued Dan, “we can summon seven of the undertakers for our job, and still leave two available for the public service.”

Dick sprang up from the stone wall, tightly gripping Dan Dalzell by the coat collar.

“Help me watch this lunatic, fellows,” urged Dick, quietly. “He’s dangerous. You’ve heard him! He’s plotting assassination!”

“Undertakers don’t assassinate anyone, do they?” queried Dan, with an air of mock innocence.

“What *are* you plotting, then?” insisted Dick.

Dan’s face broadened into a very pronounced grin.

“Why, see here, fellows, there seems to be some fire behind Dr. Thornton’s smoke that the Board of Education may get excited over low recitation marks, and actually—–*stop football*!” finished Dalzell, in a gasp.

The other five chums snorted. Dan Dalzell was presently able to control his feelings sufficiently to proceed:

“No one but actually dead ones would expect an American institution of the higher learning to exist in these days without football. Hence, if the Grannies’ Club—–I mean the School Board—–are planning to stop football, or even believe that it is possible, then they’re sure enough dead ones. Am I right?”

“Right and sane, after all,” nodded Dick.

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“Therefore,” pursued Dan, “if the board members are dead ones, why not go ahead and bury them? Or, at the least, show our kindly interest in that direction. See here, fellows”——here Dan lowered his voice to the faintest sort of whisper, while the other partners gathered close about him——“tonight we fellows can scatter over the town, and drop into different telephone booths where we’re not known. We can call up seven different undertakers, convey to them a hint that there’s a dead one at the Board Room, and state that the victim of our call is wanted there at once.

“What good would that do?” demanded Dick, after a thoughtful pause.

“Why,” proposed Dan Dalzell, “if seven undertakers call, all within five minutes, won’t it be a delicate way of conveying the hint that a Board of Education that thinks it can stop football is composed of dead ones? You see, there’ll be an undertaker for each member of the Board. Don’t you think the idea——the hint——would soak through even those seven dull old heads?”

Tom, Harry and Dave began to chuckle, though they looked puzzled.

“Well, if you ask *me*,” decided Dick, after more thought, “I have just one answer. The scheme is too grisly. Besides, we’ve nothing against the undertakers that should make us willing to waste their time. Moreover, Dan we’re in the High School, and we’re expected to be gentlemen. Now, does your scheme strike you as just the prank for a lot of gentlemen.”

“Say, don’t look the thing over too closely,” protested Dan, more soberly, “or you’ll find lots of bad holes in the scheme. Yet, somehow, we’ve got to bring it to the attention of the Board that, if they go against High School football, they’re real dead ones.”

“I’ve just an idea we can do that,” spoke Dick Prescott, reflectively. “We can rig the scheme over, so as to save seven estimable business men from starting out on fools’ errands. And we can drive the lesson home to the Board just as hard——perhaps harder.”

At these hopeful words from the chief the partners pricked up their ears, then crowded closer.

“In the first place,” began Dick, “Dan’s scheme——beg your pardon, old fellow——is clumsy, grisly and likely to come back as a club to hit us over the head. Now, you all know Len Spencer, the ‘Morning Blade’ reporter. He’s a regular ‘fan’ over the football and baseball teams, and follows them everywhere in the seasons. You also know that Len is a pretty good friend of mine. If I put Len up to a scheme that will furnish him with good ‘copy’ for two mornings, he’ll put it through for me, and be as mum as an oyster.”

“How can Len help us in anything?” demanded Dave Darrin, wonderingly.

“Listen!” ordered Dick Prescott, with a twinkle in his eyes.

When Dick & Co. hurried back at the close of recess they felt serene and content. All the partners felt that Dick Prescott, the most fertile boy in ideas at the Central Grammar School, was going to be able to save the day for football. For Dick had propounded a scheme that was sure to work——barring accidents!

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That evening the Board of Education met in dull and stately session. These meetings were generally so dull and devoid of real news that the local press was content to get its account from the secretary's minutes. Tonight was no exception in this respect. No reporter was present when Chairman Stone rapped for order. Seven excellent men were these who sat around the long table. Most of them had made their mark in local business, or in the professions. Yet, as it happened, none of these excellent men had ever made a mark in athletics in earlier years. As they appeared to have succeeded excellently in life without football the members of the Board were inclined to reason that football must be a bad thing.

After the session had droned along for three-quarters of an hour, and all routine business had been transacted, Chairman Stone looked about at his fellow Board members.

"Gentlemen," he began, "we have noticed that, during October and November, the High School percentages, especially those of the young men, are prone to fall a bit. There can be but one cause for this——the football craze. There are signs that this stupid athletic folly will take a greater hold than ever, this year, on our High School students. I thought it best to ask Dr. Thornton to caution the students that any such falling-off of percentages this year might make it necessary for us to forbid High School football."

"It was an excellent idea to give such a warning, Mr. Chairman," nodded Mr. Hegler.

"So I thought," replied Chairman Stone, complacently. "Yet, while we have been in session this evening, I have been wondering why it would not be a good plan to promote scholarship at once by summarily forbidding football."

"Even for the balance of this present season?" asked Mr. Chesbritt, ponderously.

"Even for the balance of this season," confirmed Mr. Stone.

There were murmurs of approval. Just at that moment, however, the door opened suddenly, and Reporter Len Spencer, a bright-faced young man of twenty-two, hurried in on tip-toe. Then, suddenly, he halted, looking unutterably astonished.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen," murmured the reporter. "But I did not expect to find you in session."

"And why not, Mr. Spencer?" demanded the chairman, crisply.

"Why, I——er——I——well, to be candid, gentlemen, 'The Blade' had information that some one had died here."

“Died here?” gasped Chairman Stone. “Upon my word that would be a most extraordinary thing to do in the presence of this Board. Where did you get such very remarkable information, young man?”

“It was telephoned to ‘The Blade’ office,” Len Spencer replied.

“By whom?”

“I—–I really don’t know,” replied the young reporter, looking much embarrassed. “I don’t believe our editor, Mr. Pollock, does, either. The news came in over the ’phone. Mr. Pollock told me to rush up here and get all the facts.”

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“The facts,” retorted Mr. Stone, dryly, “would be most difficult for the members of this Board to furnish. Indeed, the only fact in which we are interested would be the name of the person who-----”

Ting-a-ling-ling! As the telephone bell jangled Chairman Stone drew the desk instrument toward him, holding the receiver to his ear.

“Hullo!” hailed a voice. “Is that the Board of Education’s office?”

“It is,” confessed Chairman Stone.

“Is our reporter, Spencer, there? If so, I would like to talk with him.”

“Yes, he’s right here, Mr. Pollock. And from the extraordinary information he has brought us, I think he needs a talking-to. Wait a moment.”

Chairman Stone passed the instrument to Len Spencer. The members of the Board felt curiosity enough to leave their seats and gather at the head of the table. They could hear Editor Pollock’s voice as it ran on:

“Hullo, Spencer. Say, I’ve just had another ’phone from that same party. He says that he sent in his information a bit twisted. What he meant to tell us was that there are *seven dead ones* in the Board of Education who know so little about public spirit and pride in our boys that they are even considering the idea of forbidding High School football.”

“Oh, that’s it, eh?” asked Spencer, solemnly. “Seven dead ones?”

“Yes; of course you’ve already discovered that there’s no real tragedy up at the Board, unless they’re actually planning some move against football.”

The seven members of the School Board looked at one another blankly, wonderingly.

“Who sent you that message over the ’phone?” questioned the reporter.

The seven Board members pricked up their ears still more keenly.

“I don’t know,” came Editor Pollock’s voice. “But I suspect it came from the Business Men’s Club. That’s a wide-awake and progressive crowd, you know, and full of local pride, even in our High School boys. But, Spencer, I’m in just a bit of a fix. I had already run out six lines on the bulletin board announcing that a sudden death had taken place in the School Board meeting. Now, I’ve got to run out another bulletin and explain. Spencer, you’d better come back here on the jump. Good-bye!”

As the bell rang off, and the reporter laid the instrument back on the table, he said:

“Gentlemen, I am ordered back to my office in haste. Yet, before I go, as a matter of news interest, I think I’d better ask you whether any action is going to be taken forbidding football in the High School?”

“N-n-not to the best of our knowledge,” stammered Chairman Stone. “We have——-taken no action along that line.”

“Are you likely to take any such action tonight?”

“I——I——think not.”

“Thank you, and goodnight, gentlemen. I offer you my apology and ‘The Blade’s’ for having intruded on you in this fashion.”

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As soon as the members of the Board were alone Chairman Stone glanced about him, and remarked:

“So, it appears, gentlemen, that, if we do not favor High School football, we shall be regarded as what are termed ’dead ones’!”

CHAPTER III

NOT SO MUCH OF A FRESHMAN

The next morning’s “Blade” contained a column and a half, written in Reporter Spencer’s most picturesque vein. The headlines ran: “School Board Hoaxed. Gentle Jokers Convey a Needed Hint. Football Not to Be Barred in High School. ‘Blade’ Reporter a First-off Victim in the Service of Public Spirit.”

It was a fine article, from a High School boy’s point of view. It was an article, too, which, in a city ruled by a lively public spirit, was likely to tie the hands of a Board of Education that did not care to fly in the face of public opinion.

Dick Prescott, before he went in to breakfast, read the article in secret, with many a chuckle.

“You seem much interested in the newspaper, Richard,” said his father, when the young freshman came to table, still holding ‘The Blade.’”

“Yes, sir. You know I have set my heart on making the H.S. eleven just as soon as I strike a higher class. I was afraid the School Board would abolish the game from our school. Now, I know they won’t.”

“Hm! Let me see ‘The Blade.’”

Mr. Prescott glanced through the article, a faint twinkle showing in his eyes.

“The School Board may stop High School football,” commented Mr. Prescott, laying aside the paper. “They *may*, but it would take a good deal of courage, for that article will start Gridley on a furor of enthusiasm for the game. I wonder who got up that hoax.”

“Why, Dad, ‘The Blade,’ hints at some one down at the Business Men’s Club.”

“Hm! I wonder who wrote the article.”

“Perhaps Len Spencer,” replied Dick. “You know, Dad, he’s a great fan for all our H.S. sports.”

“I can just see Jason Stone reading that article at *his* breakfast table this morning,” smiled Mr. Prescott. “Stone is a great sail-trimmer, always afraid of the man who casts a vote.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Mrs. Prescott, coming in breezily from the kitchen.

Dick explained the news to his mother.

“Abolish football at the High School!” echoed Mrs. Prescott, indignantly. “And I’ve been sharing your great wish Dick, to make the team when you’re old enough. They shan’t do it, anyway, Dick, until you’ve had your chance on the eleven!”

“No, mother,” replied the boy, very quietly; “I don’t believe they will.”

With a sudden rush of recollection of other pranks in which she had known her son to be engaged in the grammar school days, Mrs. Prescott shot a sudden, wondering glance at him. But Dick, looking utterly innocent, was chewing his food.

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Frank Thompson, Ben Badger and Ted Butler, all seniors, and stars on the H.S. football team, had risen early that morning, every one of them feeling glum over the dread that the great sport might be “killed” for them. They were the only members of the eleven who happened to see “The Blade” early. In consequence, these three husky young Americans were on the street early. Just as naturally they ran into each other.

“Whoop!” yelled Thompson, when he came in sight of his pals.

“Wow!” observed Ben.

“And some more!” glowed Butler.

“Will they stop football *now*?” demanded Thompson.

“Not while anyone is looking,” averred Butler.

“But say, it was great of the Business Men’s Club to make such a stroke for us,” went on Badger, enthusiastically.

“Yes,” admitted Frank Thompson, “if that was where it came from. I guess it was, all right.”

Arm in arm the three went off down the street, feeling as though the world had turned right side up once more.

Dick met his partners on the way to the High School. All were grinning quietly.

“You’re the genius, Dick,” admitted Dan Dalzell, cordially. “My undertaker scheme would have been ghastly. It would have taken all the edge off the joke——would have spoiled it, and the joke would have been a club that would have hit us over the head. But, say! I wonder if the Grannies’ Club will dare to touch our sacred football now!”

“Don’t waste any time wondering,” chuckled Tom Reade. “They wont.”

It was a happy day in the famous old Gridley High School. Actually, the recitations went off better than they had done on any day since term opening.

Dick Prescott was out on the street rather early that afternoon. He wanted to run across Len Spencer, and chose Main Street as the most likely thoroughfare for the purpose. He met the reporter at the head of a little alleyway.

“Well, Dick, how did you like it?” was the reporter’s greeting.

“Say, it was great!” Dick bubbled over.

“What do they think down at H.S.?”

“Think?” repeated young Prescott. “Why, everybody is in ecstasies. The gloom of yesterday has vanished like the mist from a cheap cigar. You’re suspected of writing the article, too, Len. If the High School students can find any proof that you did you’ll get a rouser in the way of handsome treatment.”

The two had stepped down just off the street into the alleyway.

“Does everyone seem to believe that the job was put up at the Business Men’s Club?” Dick asked.

“Sure thing,” nodded Len Spencer. “And no member of the Club will deny it, either, for the thing has struck the popular side of the town. Why, by tonight, there’ll be at least a dozen of the members, each confidentially telling his friends that *he* conceived the whole trick.”

“That’ll make it all the stronger,” nodded Dick. “Good thing.”

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“Glee!” chuckled Len. “Wouldn’t the whole town——including the Board members——-wake up, if they only knew that the whole thing was planned out by a fourteen-year-old freshie, by name Dick Prescott!”

“You won’t let it out, Len, that I had any hand in it?” asked Dick, quickly.

“Oh, not I,” promised Len, quickly. “I gave you my word on that, son, didn’t I?”

“Now, see here,” Dick went on, “why can’t you push this thing along one day further? Why don’t you interview a lot of the prominent business men on the absolute necessity of football for keeping up the H.S. spirit and traditions?”

“Good idea as far as it goes,” assented Len, dubiously. “But a lot of the business men might prove to be fossilized, and be against the grand old game.”

“Leave that sort out,” hinted Dick, sagely, “and go after the right kind.”

“How’ll I know the right kind?” asked reporter Spencer, thoughtfully.

“Why, use your head a bit. There’s Beck. He’s a millionaire, and one of the big men of the town, isn’t he?”

“Yes; but he may not believe in football.”

“Shucks! Of course Beck believes in football,” retorted Dick. “Doesn’t his lumber yard furnish all the wooden goods that are needed for fences, seats, and all that sort of thing up at the athletic grounds? Doesn’t Beck know that, if he said a word against football, he never get another order for lumber from the H.S. Alumni association. Then there’s Carleson. He’s one of the directors of the railroad, therefore a big enough man to interview.”

“Where does Carleson come in on hot interest in football?”

“Use your head,” jibed Dick. “Doesn’t his railroad have lots of jobs transporting the football teams to other games, and bringing other teams here? Don’t mobs of fans follow the teams and pay fare? Why, H.S. football is a dividend-payer to Carleson. Your own editor, Pollock, will come out for us. Besides the news football makes for ‘The Blade,’ just think of the profit from doing all the poster and ticket printing for us. Then there’s Henley, who sells the team uniforms and other athletic goods *and he’s one of the aldermen*! Why, man alive, there are a score of big men in town who can’t afford to see H.S. football stopped. Here are some of their names-----”

Dick rattled it along, giving a long list to Len Spencer, who jotted down the names.

“Thank you; old man,” said the reporter, cordially. “I’ll get these interviews, and it’ll make a corking good second-day story. Pollock says I can push this as far as I like, for it has struck a popular vein. But Pollock says he wouldn’t have thought of it, Dick, if you hadn’t set the ball rolling.”

“Then he knows the big part that my chums and I took in the game?” asked Dick, his face showing his concern.

“Yes; but don’t worry. Old Pollock is as mum as the grave about such things. Now, so long, Dick, old fellow. I’ve got to run down to the end of this alley to call on a sick friend. Then I’ll hustle out and get a barrelful of interviews that will cinch and rivet football on Gridley H.S. for a century to come!”

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As Len Spencer vanished through one of the doorways Dick Prescott turned toward the street. As he did so, he jumped back.

“We want you, freshie!” declared Frank Thompson, grimly. “And we want you badly.”

Badger and Butler, who were just behind the speaker, closed in firmly around the freshman.

“We heard, and we didn’t feel ashamed to listen,” declared Thompson. “So you’re the genius that has been doing giant’s work for football? You are under arrest, freshie——-and I hope you’ll come along without making any row.”

Despite the severity of the looks in the faces of these three seniors, Dick Prescott did not feel very uneasy. He submitted to walking between Thompson and Butler, while Ben Badger brought up the rear. The unafraid prisoner was marched along and into another street, to where the football eleven had its “club room.” This was an unoccupied store, the agent of which allowed the boys the use of the place, rent free, as long as it remained idle.

When near this headquarters Ben Badger darted ahead, throwing open the door, while Frank and Ted marched in with their prisoner.

“Attention!” roared Ben.

Nearly all the members and substitutes of the eleven were present. They were sorting over various bits of football paraphernalia. Several of them stopped work to look up as Ben Badger slammed the door shut again.

“Well, what are you making so much noise about?” demanded one of the second classmen. “You come in with a roar, and all you bring with you is——just a poor, insignificant little freshie.”

“Oh, but what a freshman!” thundered Frank Thompson. “Listen, fellows, what do you suppose this freshman has done?”

“Lynch him for it, anyway, whatever it is,” retorted another.

“Wait!” commanded Thompson. “And listen.”

There upon Frank detailed what he and his two comrades had overheard at the head of the alleyway. Instantly the complexion of things changed. There were cheers and hoarse yells, as the football men rushed forward, crowding about Dick Prescott.

“Now I’ve told all that I heard,” wound up Thompson. “We’ll have to ask Mr. Prescott to favor us with the further details, which I trust he will be inclined to do.”

“Mr. Prescott!” That, instead of “cub,” “kid” or “freshie.” Had the enthusiasm been less intense Dick would have been sure that they were having fun with him.

“Go on,” ordered Ben Badger briefly. “Talk up!”

To have refused plain orders from a first classman might have been serious. Dick knew better. Clearing his throat he related all he could recall of how the plot came to be hatched. Nor was Dick glory-hunter enough to give himself any more credit than he did his partners. In his brief account the freshman spread all the credit for the invention equally over the six members of Dick & Co.

“’Twas a great thought, and carried out like a campaign,” declared Ben Badger. There was more cheering. Then Frank Thompson dragged Dick forward once more before the lined-up team.

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“Fellows,” proposed Thompson, “we owe this freshie-----”

“Stop that!” roared one of the fellows. “Prescott may be young——painfully young——but he’s no freshie.”

“Then,” amended Thompson, with grave dignity, “we owe a handsome reward to this ——upper classman. May I tell him what the reward is to be?”

“Go ahead, Thomp!” came an answering roar.

“Then, listen, Prescott. For the great deed you have done for Gridley H.S. football every member of Dick & Co. deserves undying fame. As I can’t be sure of our ability to confer that, we’ll do the next best thing. In years and class you’re all six of you freshmen. Now, what is expected of a freshman?”

“Why,” laughed Dick, “as I understand it, a freshman is a fellow who doesn’t dare to be fresh.”

“Hear! hear!” yelled a dozen voices.

“In that respect,” proclaimed Thompson, solemnly, “Dick & Co. shall no longer be freshman at Gridley H.S.! If the spirit seizes any of you, then go ahead and be fresh ——of course, not *too* fresh! Mix in with the upper classmen, all of you, if you want to. Have your opinions, and don’t be afraid to let ’em out——if you can’t hold in any longer. To the upper class dances this winter Dick & Co. shall have a bid——if you’ll all learn how to walk and glide across a waxed floor. Remember, when you’re among the fellows, you don’t have to keep in the back freshmen row——but see to it that you don’t encourage general mutiny in your class against the superior upper classes. Finally, you can get sassy with all upper classman whenever any of you six want to——all you’ll have to do, further, will be to fight.”

Another round of cheers confirmed Thompson’s declaration.

“Now, fellows, get a move on!” bawled Sam Edgeworth, captain of the football eleven. “We’ve barely time to get to the field and meet Coach Morton punctually.”

“Will you let me make one request?” shouted Dick, over the hubbub.

“Yes. Go ahead! Get it out quick!”

“Then please don’t let out a word,” begged young Prescott, “about Dick & Co., as we fellows are called, being at the bottom of the plot against the Board of Education.”

“Not a word!” promised Captain Edgeworth, gravely.

Then Dick was hustled good-naturedly to the door, Ben Badger once more springing forward to hold it open. As Dick hurried out onto the sidewalk a hurricane of cheers followed him. Then, as the door was closing, came a fierce burst of the High School yell.

Just as it happened, this parting salute couldn't have been worse timed. Within four doors Dr. Thornton, the principal, was sauntering slowly along. He heard tine hubbub, of course, and looked up, to see Dick Prescott coming out alone, a pleased look on his flushed face.

Across the street, just coming out of a store, was Chairman Jason Stone of the Gridley Board of Education.

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“Young Prescott! Bless my soul!” murmured Dr. Thornton. “Why are the football team making such a row over that young freshman?”

In another instant the principal’s question all but answered itself.

“Why, I wonder,” muttered the good doctor, “if the enthusiasm in any way relates to the hoax on the Board. Was Prescott at the bottom of it? I’ll keep it in mind and try to find out!”

“If the football crew are making all that row over a mere freshman,” thought Chairman Stone, “then young Prescott must be the inventor of the yarn that has made Gridley wonder whether we of the Board are so many ‘dead ones.’ Hm! hm! I’ll find out if that’s the case. Such a trick is clearly one that would call for expelling the young man from the High School!”

CHAPTER IV

CAPTION OF THE HOUNDS

“Is that mucker going to run today?”

The questioner was Fred Ripley, and his voice was full of disgust. He glared at Dick Prescott, who was seated unconcernedly on a stone wall, awaiting the arrival of Tom Reade and Dan Dalzell, the only other members of Dick & Co. who were to figure in today’s event.

“Is who going to run?” asked Ben Badger.

“That little mucker, Prescott?” insisted Fred.

“Yes,” returned Badger, shortly.

“Gridley H.S. is getting worse and worse,” growled Ripley. “Athletics ought to be confined to the best sort of fellows in the school. These little muckers, these nobodies, ought to be kept out of everything in which the real fellows take part.”

“Don’t be a cad, Ripley,” retorted Badger, half angrily.

“Oh, I’m no great stickler for caste, and that sort of thing,” Fred grumbled on. “I’m democratic enough, when it comes to that, and I associate with a good many fellows whose fathers don’t stand as high in the community as mine does.”

“That’s really kind of you,” mimicked Ben Badger, with another look of disgust at the rich lawyer’s son. “Of course, you feel just as though anything that your father may have accomplished puts you in a rather more elect lot.”

“Of course, it does,” retorted Fred, drawing himself up stiffly. “Still, you know as well as anyone does, Badger, that I’m not stuck up just on account of family or position. I’m ready to give the friend’s hand to any of the right sort of fellows. But what is that little mucker, Prescott? His parents peddle books and newspapers.”

“They run a book and periodical shop, if that is what you mean,” rejoined Ben, disgustedly, as he looked the young snob over for the third time. “Some mighty big people have done that in times past. As to position, Prescott’s father isn’t a rich man, nor a very successful one, but I wish I could look forward, some day, to being half as well educated as Dick’s father is.”

“A dreamer, a fool, a man who couldn’t and didn’t succeed,” sneered Fred. “And his son will be a bigger mistake in life. I don’t have anything to do with that kind of people and their friends.”

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“I’ll wish you good-day, then,” broke in Badger, crisply, and moved away. “I want to be reckoned as one of Dick Prescott’s friends. He’s one of the most promising young fellows in Gridley H.S.”

Ripley let loose an astounded gasp. He stood still where Badger had left him, boiling over with rage. Had Ripley been wise, he would have chosen another time for anger. Any trainer or physician could have told this young snob that just before going off on a long race is the worst possible time for letting anger get the best of one. Anger excites the action of the heart to a degree that makes subsequent running performance a thing of difficulty.

Gridley H.S. was out for the October paper chase. This was an annual event, in which the sophomores, or third classmen, acted as the hares, while the freshmen played the part of the hounds. The course was six miles across country. Three courses, of equal length, were laid down, each with a different terminal. It was known, in advance, only to the hares, which course would be run over. But, which ever course was taken, it must be followed to the end. Five minutes’ start was allowed to the hares. Then the hounds were sent after them in full yelp. By starting time for the hounds the hares were sure to be out of sight. An official of the first class, who followed the hares at the outset, gave the call when the five minutes were up. Beginning with that call the hares were obliged to scatter bits of paper, as they ran, all the way to the finish of the run.

All three of the courses were somewhat parallel during the first five minutes of the run, but, as the hounds had no means of knowing which course was the right one, the hounds had to divide their forces until the first of the paper trails was struck. Then the “baying” of the hounds who found the trail brought the other two parties of freshmen to them. Usually, four or five upper classmen ran with the hounds to decide upon “captures” in case of dispute. A hound overhauling a hare had to throw his arms around the prize, stopping him fairly for at least fifteen seconds. Then the hare was sent back, out of the race. Each hound was credited with the hare he captured.

Twelve hares ran, also twelve hounds. If the hounds captured seven or more of the hares ere the race was finished, then the hounds won. If they captured less than six, the hares won. If six hares were captured, then the race was a “tie.” But, as will be seen, with the five minutes’ start, and the hares averaging a year more of age, the sophomore class usually won this chase.

These rules had originated at Gridley, where the High School boys considered their form of the game superior to the rules usually followed.

This year, as in previous years, the sophomores felt confident of winning. The freshmen hounds averaged rather small in size, though little was known as to the freshmen running powers or wind. The sophomores were all good runners.

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The contestants for positions on both teams had been tried out three days before, by a committee of men from the first class. The sophomores had not been allowed to see the freshmen run at these trials.

The start was to be made at three o'clock on this Monday afternoon. All the runners were now here, Reade and Dalzell having been among the last of the freshmen to come up. It was ten minutes before three.

"Half of the freshmen are a pretty mucky looking lot, aren't they?" asked Ripley, as he and Purcell, of the hares, strolled by.

"I hadn't noticed it," replied Purcell pleasantly. "I thought them a clean and able looking lot of young fellows."

"Humph! A pretty cheap lot! I call 'em," rejoined Ripley.

Dick Prescott heard and flushed slightly. He understood the allusion, coming from the source that it did. But Dick was bent on making a good run this afternoon, and kept his temper.

"Hares on the line!" shouted Frank Thompson, finally. He was to fire the shots that started the two teams, then was to run with the hounds to act as one of the judges of possible captures.

Purcell, who was captain of the hares, led his men forward to the line laid across the grass. Just before they formed, the captain gave some whispered instructions. Ben Badger was already at the line. He was to run with the hares during the first five minutes, then give the final signal for beginning to scatter the paper trail.

"On the line there, quick!" called Thompson, watch in his left hand, pistol in his right. "Ready!"

The hares, each with a bag of torn paper hanging over one hip, bent forward.

Crack! At the report of the pistol the hares bounded forward. In barely more than a minute afterwards they were out of sight.

Then followed some minutes of tedious waiting for the Gridley freshmen.

"Hounds to the line!"

Dick, who had been elected captain of the freshmen team, led his men forward on all easy lope. Dick took his place at the extreme left of the pursuing line, with Tom Reade next to him; then Dan Dalzell.

“Ready!” A pause of a few seconds. Crack!

The pistol sent the hounds away. They did not attempt to run fast. Captain Dick Prescott’s orders were against that. The hounds moved away at an easy lope, for there were miles yet to be covered. Six miles, in fact, is more than average High School boys of the lower classes can make at a cross-country jog. A go-as-you-please gait was therefore allowed. Either hare or hound might walk when he preferred.

But for the first five minutes the hounds, who divided into three squads almost immediately, moved along at an easy jog. Every eye was alert for the first sign of a paper trail. There were six upper classmen running with the hounds. Ben Badger was somewhere ahead, hiding in order not to betray the trail. But, when he had been passed, Badger would jump up and run with the hounds, making the seventh judge.

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“I wonder if we’ve a ghost of a show to win,” muttered Tom Reade.

“Every show in the world——until we’re beaten!” replied Dick, doggedly. “It isn’t in the Gridley blood to wonder if we can win——we’ve got to win!”

After that Dick closed his lips firmly. He must save his wind for the long cross-country.

On the left the runners were now in a field. The center was moving along the highway, the right wing being in a field over beyond.

“Wow-oo! wow-oo! wow-oo!” sounded a deep, far-away chorus.

“There’s the trail, away over to the right!” shouted Captain Dick. “Come on, fellows!”

On an oblique line he led them, toward the road. They took a low stone wall on the leap, vaulting the fence at the other side of the road. The center squad had already overtaken the discoverers of the trail.

“Run easily. Don’t try to cover it all in a minute. Save your wind!” admonished Dick to his own squad.

The upper classmen judges ran well behind the hounds. It was needful only that they be near enough to see and decide any disputed point of capture.

It was all of twenty-five minutes over a course that led across fields and through woods, ere the hounds caught the first glimpse of their quarry. Yet, all along, the paper trail was in evidence. One of the hares was required to strew the small bits of paper. When his bag was empty another hare must begin dropping the white bits.

“I’ll bet Ripley dropped along here——the trail is so mean and difficult,” grunted Reade, disgustedly.

“There are the hares ahead——I see two of them!” bellowed Dan Dalzell, lustily.

A chorus from the hounds responded an instant later. Yes; they had come in sight of the chase. But the rearmost hares were still a good half mile away. Then the hares disappeared into a forest, leaving only the paper trail as evidence of their presence.

“Brook ahead!” sang out Captain Dick. “Go easily and save some of your wind for jumping.”

In a minute more they came to it. Most of the hounds knew when to start on the faster run that must precede the running jump.

Splash! splash.

Splash! spla-a-ash!

Four of the freshmen floundered in the knee-deep water. Well doused, they must none the less dash out of the cold water and continue on the chase.

“Keep a-moving, and you’ll soon be dry and warm,” Dick called backward over his shoulder. The four who had been badly wet ran heavily now, yet afraid of ridicule if they fell out. They were having their first taste of High School sports, which made no allowance for quitters.

Twenty minutes later a low hurrah went up from the freshmen hounds. Dawson, of the hares, found the pace too swift for him. With a slight pain in his side he lagged so that one of the hounds put on an extra spurt, then wound his arms around the sophomore.

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“Fair capture!” bawled one of the judges, and Dawson, dropping out, sat down until he could get his wind back.

Within the next twenty minutes four more of the hares fell into the maws of the hounds.

Five captures! That was fine. Only two more needed, and less than two miles to cover.

The hares were, at this time, again out of sight in the woods ahead. But Captain Dick, having saved his wind well, now put on a slightly better spurt and jogged ahead, full of the purpose of capturing his second hare. One of the “catches” was already recorded to his credit.

“There’s one of the hares,” Dick flashed to himself, as he caught an indistinct glimpse of a sweater and a moving pair of legs ahead. “He seems to be losing his wind, too——that fellow.”

In a minute more Dick gave another gasp of discovery.

“It’s Fred Ripley. I suppose it will be bitter medicine for him, if *I* make the catch,” thought the young captain of the hounds.

Though he was too manly, too good a sportsman to allow malice to creep in, Prescott certainly did do his best to overtake the lagging Fred.

Gradually, the young captain left the hares behind. But Badger, who was an easy runner, forged ahead so as to keep the leading hound in full sight.

Hearing some one running behind him, Fred Ripley glanced backward over his shoulder.

“The mucker!” gritted the lawyer’s son. “He mustn’t catch me——he shan’t!”

Yet vainly did Ripley try to put on more speed. He kept it up for a few yards, then knew that he was failing. That ill-advised anger before the start was surely telling on him now. Dick still kept forward, gaining a yard or so every few minutes.

“Keep back! Don’t you dare touch me, you mucker!” hissed Fred sharply over his shoulder.

“Mucker?” retorted Prescott. “I’ll pay you for that!”

At a bound he covered the distance, throwing first one arm, then the other, fairly around Ripley. Fred fought furiously to break the clasp, but was so winded that he couldn’t.

“Let go of me! Your touch soils!” he cried, hoarsely.

But Dick still kept his hold, counting: "—twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen!"

"Fair capture!" rumbled Ben Badger.

The other hounds, or their leaders, were stripping by now. Dick, at the judge's words, loosed his hold on Fred.

"You cur!" snarled Fred. Then, summoning all his remaining strength, Ripley hauled off and struck astounded Dick on the face, sending the captain of the hounds to the ground.

"Take that, mucker!" shouted the assailant.

Those of the hounds who had not shot by, halted in sheer amazement.

Like a flash Dick was on his feet, his eyes flashing, cheeks flushing crimson.

"Go on, hounds, go on!" he shouted. "I can take care of this one disgrace to Gridley H.S.!"

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CHAPTER V

THE “MUCKER” AND THE “GENTLEMAN”

Ben Badger gave Captain Dick a shove. “Go on, Prescott! Go on, hounds!” roared Badger. “You’ve only one more capture to make. Run along, Dick! I’ll take care of Ripley. He’ll stay right here until you come back, or else he’ll never have the nerve to show his face at Gridley H.S. again! Run, you hounds!”

Dick needed no farther urging.

Though he was naturally wild with anger, inside, he managed to keep that feeling down and back. He was captain of the hounds. He had his duty to his team and his class first of all to think about.

“Come on, hounds!” he shouted to those who had lagged at sight of the knock-down. “One more hare in our trap——then we’ll be back here!”

What he meant by being “back here” everyone present could guess. In fact, many wondered why there had not sooner been a fight between the freshman and his determined sophomore enemy.

Truth to tell, Dick, after that day in the school grounds, had been inclined to overlook the whole affair.

He was not afraid of Ripley. It was only that Dick’s ordinary good nature had triumphed. He was not a brawler, yet could stand out for his rights when a need came.

A third of a mile further on another yell of triumph floated back to young Prescott, who had not yet regained the lead.

In a few moments more the last of the hounds came upon a flushed, joyous group of freshmen runners. With them were two of the judges and a sheepish-looking hare.

The freshmen hounds had won, and had bagged all the hares for which the game called. Let the five remaining hares keep on running to the finish, if they would. For the first time in seven years the freshmen hounds, led by Captain Dick Prescott, had won.

“Ki-yi-yi-yi-yi!” howled the exultant fourth classmen. “And another for Dick Prescott.”

“Dick Prescott has other game on his hands now,” spoke up Dan Dalzell, one of the late arrivals.

“What’s the row?” demanded the freshman who had just bagged the seventh hare.

“Row? That’s just it,” nodded Dan. “Prescott caught Ripley——”

“We saw that.”

“But you didn’t see the finish. Ripley, as soon as he was released, knocked Dick down.”

“And *you* came on with the hounds, Dick!” demanded Tom Reade, incredulously.

“Badger is keeping Ripley on ice until we get back,” Dan supplied, hastily.

“Then let us get back quick!” begged Reade.

“Not too fast, though,” objected Dan. “Remember, Ripley has been getting his wind back since he stopped. Give our Dick the same show.”

No one thought of asking why Dick would need his wind now. To those who had heard the brief recital of facts it was plain that there could be but one finish to the afternoon’s sport. Prescott’s hand was sound, at last, and he could give an account of himself.

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“Walk slowly, all hands,” insisted Dan. “Dick, old fellow, on the way back, amuse yourself by getting in all the full, deep breaths that you can.”

“I’ll be all right,” spoke Dick confidently.

It did not look that way to many of them. Dick was shorter, and weighed much less than did the sophomore who was waiting back there under the trees. Ripley had had a good deal of training in boxing, and was not a coward when he thought the odds on his own side. What none of the fellows knew, though, was that the lawyer’s son, ever since that scene in the school yard, had been at his boxing lessons again with renewed energy.

“Play him for delay, at first, Dick,” whispered Dan. “If Ripley can rush you, and get you excited, he’ll have a better chance to win out. If you hold him off, hinder him and delay him, before long he’ll lose some of his nerve. A fellow like Ripley will begin to go all to pieces, once he gets it into his head that he has a long and hard job before him.”

“I’ll do my best,” Dick promised. “Hang it, if he hadn’t knocked me down so treacherously, I wouldn’t care about fighting. I don’t care so much what he *says*. Fred Ripley’s mouth is the weakest part of him.”

The sophomore was waiting, a sulky frown on his face. A few feet away Ben Badger, a grim look on his usually good-humored face, leaned against a tree, his arms folded.

Even had he wanted to get away from this, Ripley couldn’t have done it. For a sophomore to find any excuse for getting out of a fight with a freshman would bring down upon the soph all the wrath and disgust of the disgraced third class.

“Come on, mucker! Take off your sweater and get ready to take your real medicine!” snarled Fred, harshly.

But Dick Prescott, young as he was, was much too wise to allow himself to be betrayed into anger. Instead, he halted a few feet away, looking with a significant smile at his enemy.

“As I understand it,” replied Prescott, “the festivities that are soon to commence are to decide which is the mucker——which will go down to the ground to eat his fill of dirt.”

Badger, Thompson and Butler took upon themselves the direction of the coming “affair.”

“See here, Ted, you look after Ripley’s interests,” proposed Badger.

“It’s a mean job. I’d sooner have the other side of the bet,” grumbled Ted Butler, in an undertone.

“I’ll look after young Prescott,” continued Ben Badger. “Thomp will do all the honors as referee.”

Ripley was already peeling off his sweater.

“Get down to your fighting rig, Prescott,” urged Badger, leading his principal to one side. “How are you, boy?” he whispered, anxiously. “Feeling right up to the fighting pitch?”

“I hate fighting,” Dick answered, simply, speaking so that only his second could hear him.

“Of course it’s necessary sometimes, but I can never quite help feeling that, at best, it’s low-down business.”

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“So it is,” assented Bed Badger, heartily enough. “But what about it in the case of a sneak like Ripley? If he didn’t have other fellows’ fists to fear he’d be unbearable.”

“He is, anyway,” muttered Dick, just before his head was covered by the sweater that Badger was helping him remove.

“You’ve been doing a lot of running this afternoon, gentlemen,” declared Thompson, as the two combatants came toward him. “Do you each feel as though you had fighting wind left?”

“I’ve got as much as the other fellow,” replied Dick.

“Don’t you dare refer to me as a ’fellow’!” ordered Ripley, scowling.

“I’ll call you a girl, then, if you prefer,” proposed Dick, with a tantalizing grin.

“You don’t know how to talk to gentlemen,” retorted Fred, harshly.

“Be silent, both of you,” ordered Thompson, sternly. “You can do your talking in another way.

“Can’t begin too soon for me,” uttered Ripley.

“One minute rounds for you, gentlemen,” continued Thompson, then turned to another upper classman, requesting him to hold the watch. “Now are you ready?”

Ripley grunted, Dick nodded.

“Ready, then! Shake hands!”

“I won’t,” replied Dick, sturdily, ere Fred could speak. The latter, though he, too, would have refused, went white with rage.

“Take your places, then,” directed Thompson, briskly. “Ready! Time!”

Fred Ripley put up a really splendid guard as he advanced warily upon the freshman. Dick’s guard, at the outset, was not as good. They feinted for two or three passes, then Ripley let out a short-arm jab that caught Dick Prescott on the end of the nose. Blood began to drip.

Ripley’s eyes danced. “I’ll black both eyes, too, before I put you out,” he threatened, in a low tone, as he fought in for another opening.

“Brag’s a good dog,” retorted Dick, quietly. The blow, though it had stung, had served to make him only the more cool. He was watching, cat-like, for Ripley’s style of attack.

That style was a good one, from the “scientific” view-point, if Ripley could maintain it without excitement and all the while keep his wind.

But would he? The freshman, though not much of a lover of fighting, had made some study of the art. Moreover, Dick had a dogged coolness that went far in the arena.

Suddenly, Dick let go such a seemingly careless shoulder blow with his left, straight for Ripley’s face, that Fred almost lazily threw up his right arm to stop it. But to have that right out of the way was just what Prescott was playing for. Quick as thought Dick’s right flew out, colliding with Ripley’s mid-wind with a force that brought a groan from the taller fighter. Dick might have followed it up, but he chivalrously sprang back, waiting for Fred to make the first sign of renewal of combat.

“Time!” came from the boy with the watch.

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“Kid, you’re going to be all right; you’ve got your horse-sense with you,” glowed Ben Badger, as he hurried Dick back under a tree. “Let me see what I can do to stop your nose running quite so red.”

Soon the summons came that took the combatants back to the imaginary ring. Again they went at it, both sides cautious, for Ripley was puzzled and a bit afraid. He had not expected this little freshman to last for a second round. Before the second call of “time” came Ripley had managed to land two stinging ones on Dick’s left cheek, but the freshman did not go down, nor even wilt under this treatment. He was proving the fact that he could “take punishment.” Yet Dick did not land anything that hurt his opponent.

“You didn’t half try this time,” whispered Ben, as he attended his man in the “corner” under the tree.

“Come on, mucker!” yelled Ripley, derisively, when the two were summoned for the third round.

“Speak for yourself, fellow,” Dick answered, coolly.

“I’m a gentleman, and a gentleman’s son,” proclaimed Fred, haughtily. “You’re a mucker, and the son of a mucker!”

“Time!”

Dick could stand an ordinary insult with a fair amount of good nature, when he despised the source of the insult. But now there was a quiet flash in his eyes that Badger was glad to see.

Ripley started in to rush things. In quick succession he delivered half a dozen stout blows. Only one of then landed, and that glancingly. Ripley was puzzled, but he had no time to guess. For Dick was not exactly rushing, now. He was merely fighting in close, remembering that he had two striking hands, and that feinting was sometimes useful.

“A-a-a-h!” The murmur went up, eagerly, as the onlookers saw Prescott land his right fist in solid impact against Ripley’s right eye. Bump! Before Ripley could get back out of such grueling quarters Dick had landed a second blow over the other eye. Ripley staggered. A body blow sent him to his knees. Dick backed off but a few inches.

“One, two, three, four, five, six-----” droned off the timekeeper.

Fred Ripley tried to leap up, but, as he did so, Dick’s waiting left caught him a staggering one on the nose that toppled him over backwards to the ground.

“One, two, three-----” began the timekeeper, but suddenly broke off, to call time.

“Prescott, you’re a bird!” declared Ben Badger, exultantly, as he led his man away.

“I wouldn’t have gone for him so hard,” muttered Dick. “But the fellow started to get nasty with his mouth. Then it was time to let him have it.”

Frank Thompson went over to Ripley, to see whether the latter wanted to continue the fight.

“That mucker took an unfair advantage of me, hitting me when I was getting up,” grumbled Fred, who now looked a good deal battered.

“Prescott was right within the rules,” declared Thompson. “You would have done the same thing if you had had the chance.”

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Fred growled something under his breath.

“Are you coming back to the ring?” demanded the referee.

Ripley hesitated. The yellow streak was strong in him, but he dreaded letting the others see it.

“I’d rather finish this up some other day,” he proposed.

“You know you can’t do that,” retorted Thompson, disgustedly. “You either have to come up to the scratch, or admit yourself beaten.”

“Admit myself beaten——by that mucker?” gasped Ripley, turning livid.

“Then come up at the call of time,” directed Thompson, and strode back to the battle ground.

The timekeeper called. Dick Prescott returned to his ground. Ripley stood back, leaning against a tree. He tried hard to look dignified, but one glance at his nose and eyes was enough to spoil the effect.

“Coming, Ripley?” demanded Thompson.

“Brace up, man, unless you want to admit your thrashing,” urged Ted Butler.

“I’ll attend to that mucker when I feel like it,” growled Fred Ripley.

The form of the remark was unfortunate for the one who made it, for it caused one of the freshman class to call out exultantly:

“He sure doesn’t feel like it just now. Look at him!”

“Come, if you don’t hurry in you’ve get to admit the beating,” muttered Ted Butler.

Ripley’s reply being only a snort, Butler suddenly drew forth his handkerchief, rolling it rapidly into a ball.

“In default of a sponge,” called Butler, “I throw this up for my man——I mean principal.”

“Ripley being unable to come to the scratch, the fight is awarded to Prescott,” announced Frank Thompson.

“Whoop! Hoo-oo-ray!” The freshmen clustered about were wild with excitement.

“You’ll have a fine time squaring this with the sophomore class,” uttered Ted Butler, disgustedly. “Your class, Ripley, will be sore enough, anyway, over losing the paper

chase for the first time that any of us can remember. Now, for a soph to be thrashed, in three rounds, by a little freshman-----"

Butler didn't finish, but, turning on his heel, walked over to join the rest.

There were two sophomores there who had come over at the end of the paper chase, but neither went to the assistance of his defeated classman. Ripley, alone, got his sweater back over his head. The crowd was around Dick Prescott, who felt almost ashamed of the fight, unavoidable as he knew it to have been.

When he had finished getting his clothes on, Ripley stalked moodily past the main group.

"You mucker," he hissed, "I suppose you feel swelled up over having had a chance to fight gentleman. You-----"

"Oh, Ripley, dry up——do!" interjected Ted Butler. "You call yourself a gentleman, but you talk and act more like well, more like a pup with the mange!"

"A pup with the mange! Great!" came the gleeful chorus from a half score of freshmen.

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“I’m not through with you, yet, Prescott!” Fred Ripley called back over his shoulder. “I’ll settle my score with you at my convenience!”

Then, as he put more distance between himself and the other Gridley High School boys, Ripley added to himself:

“That settlement shall stop at nothing to put Dick Prescott in the dust——where he belongs.”

“Oh, freshie, but you’ve coolness and judgment,” cried Thompson, approvingly. “And you’ve broken one cad’s heart today.”

“I’m sorry if I have,” declared Dick, frankly, generously. “I wouldn’t have had any heart in the fight if he hadn’t started in to humiliate me. I wouldn’t have cared so much for that, either. But he started to say something nasty about my parents, and I have as good parents as ever a boy had. Then I felt I simply *had* to fit a plug between Ripley’s teeth.”

Fred Ripley had pain in his eyes to help keep him awake that night. Yet he would have been awake, anyway, for his wicked brain was seething with plans for the way to “get even” with Dick Prescott.

CHAPTER VI

FRED OFFERS TO SOLVE THE LOCKER MYSTERY

For a week Gridley High School managed to get along without the presence of Fred Ripley. That haughty young man was at home, nursing a pair of black eyes and his wrath.

Yet, in a whole week, a mean fellow who is rather clever can hatch a whole lot of mischief. This Dick & Co., and some others, were presently to discover.

All outer wraps were left in the basement in locker rooms on which barred iron doors were locked. In the boys’ basement were lockers A and B. Each locker was in charge of a monitor who carried the key to his own particular locker room.

As it happened Dick Prescott was at present monitor of Locker A.

If during school hours, one of the boys wanted to get his hat out of a locker the monitor of that locker went to the basement with him, unlocking the door, and locking it again after the desired article of apparel had been obtained.

Thus, in a general way, each monitor was responsible for the safety of hats, coats, umbrellas, overshoes, *etc*., that might have been left in the locker that was in his charge.

Wednesday, just after one o'clock one of the sophomore boys went hurriedly up the stairs, a worried look on his face. He went straight to the principal's office, and was fortunate enough to find that gentleman still at his desk.

"What is it, Edwards?" asked the principal, looking up.

"Dr. Thornton, I've had something strange happen to me, or to my overcoat, if you prefer to put it that way," replied Edwards.

"What has gone wrong?"

"Why, sir, relying on the safety of the looker, I left, at recess in one of my overcoat pockets, a package containing a jeweled pin that had been repaired for my mother. Now, sir, on going down to my coat, I found the pin missing from the pocket."

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“Did you look thoroughly on the floor, Edwards?”

“Yes, sir; hunted thoroughly.”

“Wait; I’ll go down with you,” proposed the principal.

Both principal and student searched thoroughly in the locker. Dick, as in duty bound, was still there, on guard at the door.

“Mr. Prescott,” asked puzzled Dr. Thornton, did any student have admittance to the locker after recess today?”

“None, sir,” answered Dick promptly.

“Hm! And you’re absolutely sure, Mr. Edwards, that you left the little package in your overcoat pocket?”

“Positive of it, Dr. Thornton.”

“It’s so strange that it startles me,” admitted the good principal.

“It startles me a good deal,” confessed Edwards, grimly, “to think what explanation I am to offer my mother.”

“Oh, well, it *must* turn up,” replied Dr. Thornton, though vaguely. “Anyway, Edwards, there has been no theft. The door is locked, and the only two keys to it are the one carried by the monitor and a duplicate which is kept locked in my own desk. You’ll probably find it in one of your pockets.”

“I have been through every pocket in my clothes at least seven times, sir,” insisted the dismayed Edwards. “And that is a rather valuable pin,” he added; “worth, I believe, something, like fifty dollars.”

“Rest assured that we’ll have some good explanation of the mystery before long,” replied the principal as soothingly as he could.

Edwards went away, sore and disheartened, but there was nothing more to be said or done.

Thursday morning Dr. Thornton carried the investigation further, but absolutely no light could be shed on the missing pin.

But at recess it was Frank Thompson who came upstairs breathless.

“Dr. Thornton,” he cried, excitedly, “it’s my own fault, of course, but I’m afraid I’ve seen the last of my watch. It’s one that father carried for a good many years, and at last gave me. The works are not very expensive, but the case was a gold one.”

“How did you lose it?” inquired the principal, looking up over the gold rims of his spectacles.

“Why, I had to hurry to make school this morning, sir, and, as you know, it’s a rather long walk. So I carried my watch in the little change pocket in my reefer in order to be able to look at it frequently. I reached the locker just in time not to be late, and forgot and left my watch in the reefer. When I went down just now I found the watch gone.”

“Oh, but this is serious!” gasped Dr. Thornton, in dismay. “It begins to look like an assured fact that there is some thief at work. Yet Prescott alone has a key to that locker.”

“Prescott is all right. He’s no thief,” put in Thompson, quickly.

“I agree with you, Mr. Thompson. I consider Mr. Prescott too manly a fellow to be mixed up in anything dishonest. Yet something is wrong—–very wrong. For the safety and good name of us all we must go to the bottom of this mystery.”

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That, of course, was all the satisfaction Thompson could expect at the moment. He went out to the remainder of his recess, feeling decidedly blue. Nor was Dr. Thornton any less disturbed.

When recess was over, the entire body of students was questioned in the general assembly room, but no light was forthcoming.

“Of course, in view of what has happened,” counseled Dr. Thornton, “the young gentlemen will do well to leave nothing of value in their coats in the locker rooms. And while nothing distressing, has yet happened in the young ladies basement, I trust they will govern themselves by what has happened on the young men’s side.”

Dick Prescott felt much concerned over it all, though he did not imagine that anyone suspected *him* of any share in the disappearance of articles of value.

Friday there were no mishaps, for the very simple reason that no one left anything of value in the locker rooms.

On Monday Fred Ripley was back again. With the aid of a little help from the druggist the haughty young man presented two eyes that did not show any signs of having been damaged. Fred himself offered no comment on his absence. He seemed anxious to be on especially good terms with all of the upper classmen with whom he usually associated.

During the first period of the morning Ripley had no recitation on. He sat at his desk studying. Presently as permitted under the rules, he whispered softly with the boy seated behind him.

Then, suddenly, Ripley rose and tip-toed down the aisle to the desk. The principal himself sat there in charge.

“Dr. Thornton,” began Ripley, in a low voice, “I was away last week, and so didn’t hear all the school news. I have just learned about the locker room thefts, and so I’m uneasy. Just as the bell rang I was having trouble with the pearl and diamond scarf-pin that I often wear. There wasn’t time to adjust it, so I dropped it in my overcoat pocket. I would like to go down to my coat, now, and get it.”

“Prescott is reciting in IV. Physics,” replied Dr. Thornton, rising. “However, in view of all that has happened, I think we shall do well to go down and call him out of class. I don’t want any more valuable articles to be missing.”

Principal and student went quietly to the floor below. Dr. Thornton thrust his head into the physics laboratory and quietly called Dick out, explaining what was wanted.

“You’ll come, too, won’t you, doctor?” asked Ripley.

The principal nodded without speaking. As the three reached the barred door, Dick inserted the key, then threw open the door. Fred marched over to his coat, thrusting his hand into a pocket.

“By thunder, it’s gone!” gasped Fred.

In an instant Dr. Thornton bounded into the locker room. He himself explored every pocket in the boy’s coat.

“Strange! strange!” muttered the bewildered principal.

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“All the other thefts happened in this locker, didn’t they?” inquired Ripley, suspiciously.

“Yes——if thefts they were,” admitted Dr. Thornton.

“Nothing missing from the other locker room?”

“Nothing.”

“Doctor,” went on Ripley, as though loath to utter the words, I hate to suggest anything of the sort. But——er——but——has the monitor of this locker been searched after any of the——er——disappearances?”

“Ripley, you forget yourself!” cried the principal.

“What do you mean!” flared Dick, in the same breath, turning crimson, next going very white.

“Doctor, I’m sorry,” spoke Ripley, with great seeming reluctance, “but that pin is a costly one. I ask that the monitor be searched!”

CHAPTER VII

DICK’S TURN TO GET A JOLT

“Ripley, you don’t realize what you are saying!” cried Dr. Thornton, gazing at the sophomore in very evident distress.

“I only know that I’m all broken up, sir, over losing my costly pin,” persisted Fred. “And I know my father will be angry, and will raise a row at the School Board’s meeting.”

Dick Prescott, standing by, had turned from scarlet to white, and back again.

“But Ripley,” explained the principal, almost pleadingly, “the act would be illegal. No one has a lawful right to search the person of anyone except a properly qualified police officer. And even the police officer can do so only after he has arrested a suspected person.”

“Oh, then I suppose, sir, there’s no show for me to get any real justice done in this matter,” muttered Fred, with an air of feigned resignation.

But by now Dick Prescott felt that he must speak——or explode.

“Dr. Thornton,” he cried, chokingly, “the charge made against me, or, at least, implied, is an outrageous one. But, as a matter of justice to me, now that the hint has been cast, I ask that *you*, sir, search me right here and now.”

“Then you’ve had time to hide the pin!” muttered Fred, in a very low voice.

Dick Prescott heard, but he paid no heed to the fellow.

“Dr. Thornton, will you search me——*now*?” insisted the young freshman.

“But I don’t want to, Prescott,” appealed the principal. “I haven’t the remotest suspicion of you, anyway, my dear boy.”

“I ask the search, sir, just as a matter of justice,” Dick insisted. “If it were not too strong a word, then I would say that I *demand* to be searched here and now.”

Suiting the action to the word, Dick Prescott, standing proudly erect, raised both arms over his head.

“Now, please, doctor, just as a matter of simple justice,” begged the young freshman.

“Oh, very well, then, Mr. Prescott,” sighed the principal. “But I never had a more distasteful task.”

Into one of the side pockets Dr. Thornton projected a shaking hand. He drew out only some scraps of paper, which he promptly thrust back. Then he inserted a hand in the jacket pocket on the other side.

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“Ouch!” suddenly exclaimed the principal, in very real pain.

He drew the hand out, quickly. A drop of blood oozed up at the tip of his forefinger.

“Mr. Prescott,” demanded Dr. Thornton, “what is that pointed object in your pocket?”

“*What*?” demanded Fred Ripley, tensely.

Dick himself thrust a hand into that pocket, and drew forth——Fred Ripley’s missing pin.

“What---why---who-----” gasped the freshman, suffocatingly.

“Oh, yes, of course,” jeered Fred Ripley. “Astonished, aren’t you——you mucker?”

The last two words Ripley uttered in so low a tone that the principal, gazing in horrified fascination at the pin that he now held in his own hands, did not hear.

“You coward!” cried Dick, hotly, and clenched his fist, intent on driving it against the sophomore’s face.

But Dr. Thornton knew enough about High School boys’ fights, to galvanize himself into action. Like a flash he bounded between the two boys.

“Here, here, Prescott, none of that!” he admonished.

“I——I beg *your* pardon, sir,” gasped Dick, in a tone which made it very plain that he did not include his enemy in that apology.

“May I trouble you for my pin, sir, now that it has been recovered?” asked Fred, coolly.

“Why——um!——that depends,” replied Dr. Thornton, slowly, speaking with a painful effort. “If you, or your father, have or would have any idea of a criminal prosecution, Ripley, then it would be improper to return your pin. It would have to be turned over to the police as an exhibit in evidence. *But* do you intend anything of that sort, Mr. Ripley?”

“Why, that’s as *you* say, doctor,” replied the sophomore, quickly. “It’s a matter of school discipline, and belongs to your province. Personally, I know that I would rather not have this matter go any further.”

“I——I don’t know what to do,” confessed Dr. Thornton, in anxious perplexity. “In any event, before doing anything, I think I had better consult the superintendent and the Board of Education. Mr. Prescott, I will say, freely, that I am most loath to believe anything of this sort against you can be possible. There must be——must be——some ——er explanation. I——I——don’t want you to feel that I believe your guilt as yet assured. I---I-----”

Here Dr. Thornton broke down, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief. Almost unconsciously he passed the pin, which he was yet holding, to Fred Ripley.

“Lock the locker door, Mr. Prescott——and give me the key,” requested the principal.

Dick passed over the key, then spoke, with more composure than might have been expected under the circumstances:

“Dr. Thornton, I am as innocent of any thieving as you yourself can be. Sooner or later the right of this will come out. Then you will realize that I didn’t steal anything. I’ll prove myself innocent yet, sir.”

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“I hope so, my boy, I——I——hope so,” replied the principal.

As they ascended, Fred Ripley stepped aside to let the other two go first. He was afraid to have Dick Prescott behind him just then.

No sooner had the trio entered the general assembly room than it quickly dawned on all the students of both sexes that something was unusually wrong.

Dick’s face was red as fire. Had he been guilty of the thefts, he might have been cooler about it all. Conscious innocence often puts on the appearance of guilt.

Somehow, Dick got to his seat. He picked up a book, mechanically, and pretended to be deeply absorbed in study.

“What’s up?” whispered the fellow seated behind Fred.

Ripley turned enough to raise his eyebrows significantly and let his questioner see him do it. Instantly all seated near the lawyer’s son became intensely curious.

Wondering glances strayed from over book-tops, even from the far corners of the big assembly room.

Then the curious glanced at Dr. Thornton so often that the much disturbed principal soon called another teacher to the desk and left the room.

At recess, Purcell, of the sophomore class, was found in charge at the door of Dick’s old locker room. Ripley held his tongue until he was out in the school yard. Then he broke loose before those who would listen to him——and the number was large.

Dick & Co. had gathered by themselves in another corner of the yard. Here, however, they were soon joined by a small mob of the fellows, especially of the freshman class. Dick had his say. He didn’t want to say much, but he related, in a straightforward way, what had happened.

“It’s one of Fred Ripley’s mean tricks,” declared one of the freshmen. “Fred Ripley can’t fool anyone. He put that pin in Dick’s pocket himself.”

“But two thefts——two things were missed last week, when Ripley wasn’t at school at all,” spoke one boy, in an undertone.

“Yes; that’s the queer part of it,” agreed another boy. “Ripley couldn’t have had anything to do with those other cases.”

This latter was the view that was occurring to Mr. Thornton, as he sat in the principal’s room, poring and pondering over the whole distressing matter.

Thompson and the other football leaders came trooping over to Dick & Co. as soon as they heard the noise. Prescott was a hero with the football crowd. There was no use in telling them anything against their little freshie hero.

“Prescott, it would look foolish to talk much,” declared Thompson, in a voice that was husky from real emotion. “Just give me your hand, old man!”

Dick took the proffered hand, pressing it hard and gratefully. Then the rest of the football squad pressed forward, each insisting on a hearty handshake.

“Nobody except those who want to, will stomach this silly charge against Dick,” grunted Tom Reade to Dan Dalzell. “See how it’s turning out? Our old pal and leader is holding a regular reception.”

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"'Scuse me," begged Dan, hastily. "There's Laura Bentley beckoning to me."

He hastened over to the girl's side. There were tiny drops in the corners of Laura's eyes that looked like suppressed tears.

"Dan," she said, coming straight to the point, "we have heard, of course. What a silly charge! See here, you pals of Dick's are going to walk home with him from school this noon?"

"Surest thing that ever happened in the world," declared Dalzell, fervently.

"Just so," nodded Laura. "Well, if you won't think it strange or forward, six of us girls want to walk along with you boys. That will be a hint that the freshman class, if not the whole H.S., passes a vote of confidence in Dick Prescott, the most straightforward fellow in the class or the school."

"Bully for you, Miss Bentley!" glowed Dan. "We shall be looking for you young ladies when school lets out."

When the outside bell rang for reassembling, such a guard of honor had chosen to gather around Dick, and march in with him, that it looked more like a triumphal procession.

"I feel better," sighed the boy, contentedly to himself, as he dropped into his seat. "What a bully thing a little confidence is!"

When school let out, Dick & Co., each partner escorting one of the freshman girls, strolled down the street. A good many more of the students chose to drop in behind them. Dick could say nothing, but his heart swelled with pride.

"The way to get famous and respected, nowadays, is to steal something, and to get found out," sneered Fred Ripley, bitterly, to Clara Deane.

Straight to his own door did some two score in all of the Gridley H.S. students escort Dick Prescott.

"Three cheers for Dick!" proposed some one.

"And for Dick and Co.!" shouted another voice.

The cheers were given with gusto. So much noise was made, in fact, that Mrs. Prescott came to open the door.

Something in his mother's face——a look of dread and alarm——spoiled the cheering for Dick. As soon as he could he got inside the house.

Little did the young freshman suspect the ordeal that awaited him here.

CHAPTER VIII

ONLY A "SUSPENDED" FRESHMAN NOW

"What's wrong mother? Have you heard-----" the boy began, as soon as the door was closed.

"Yes, Richard."

"But, mother, I am inno-----"

"Oh, Dick, of course you are! But this fearful suspicion is enough to kill one who loves you. Come! Your father is in the store. Dr. Thornton is upstairs. He and——and——a policeman.

"Policeman!" gasped Dick, paling instantly. "Do they mean to-----"

"I don't know just what they mean, Dick I'm too dazed to guess," replied his mother. "But come upstairs."

As Dick entered their little parlor he was dimly aware that the High School principal was in the room. But the boy's whole gaze was centered on a quiet little man——-Hemingway, the plain clothes man from the police station.

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“Don’t look scared to death, Prescott,” urged Dr. Thornton, with a faint attempt at a smile. “We want to go through with a little formality—–that is all. This matter at the High School has puzzled me to such a degree that I left early today and went to consult with Mr. Hemingway. Now, he thought it best that we come around here and have a talk with you.”

“I can begin that talk best,” pursued Hemingway, “by asking you, Prescott, whether you have anything that you want to say first-off?”

“I can’t say anything,” replied Dick, slowly, “except that I know nothing as to how any of the articles missed at school came to vanish. Ripley’s pin was found in my pocket today, and I can only guess that some one—–Ripley, perhaps dropped it in my pocket. Ripley has some feelings of enmity for me, anyway. We had a fight last week, and—–” Dick could not repress a smile—–“I thrashed him so that he was out of school for several days.”

“But Ripley was not at school for the last few days, until today,” broke in Dr. Thornton. “Now, a pin and a watch were missed while Ripley was not attending school.”

“I know it, sir,” Dick nodded. “As to those two articles I cannot offer even the ghost of an explanation.”

“I don’t like to accuse you of taking Ripley’s scarf-pin, nor do I like to suspect him of putting up such a contemptible trick,” explained Dr. Thornton, thoughtfully. “As far as the incident of the scarf-pin goes I am willing to admit that your explanation is just as likely to be good as is any other.”

“Prescott, what did you do with the other pin and the watch?” shot in Policeman Hemingway, suddenly and compellingly.

It was well done. Had Dick been actually guilty, he might either have betrayed himself, or gone to stammering. But, as it was, he smiled, wanly, as he replied:

“I didn’t do anything with them, Mr. Hemingway. I have just been explaining that.”

“How much money have you about you at this moment?” demanded Hemingway.

“Two cents, I believe,” laughed Dick, beginning to turn out his pockets. He produced the two copper coins, and held them out to the special officer.

“You may have more about you, then, somewhere,” hinted the officer.

“Find it, then,” begged Dick, frankly, as he stepped forward. “Search me. I’ll allow it, and shall be glad to have you do it.”

So Policeman Hemingway made the search, with the speed and skill of an expert.

“No; you’ve no more money about you,” admitted the policeman. “You may have some put away, though.”

“Where would it be likely to be?” Dick inquired.

“In your room, perhaps; in your baggage, or hidden behind books; oh, there’s a lot of places where a boy can hide money in his own room.”

“Come along and show me a few of them, then, won’t you please?” challenged the young freshman.

Mrs. Prescott, who had been hovering near the doorway, gave a gasp of dismay. To her tortured soul this police investigation seemed to be the acme of disgrace. It all pointed to the arrest of her boy——to a long term in some jail or reformatory, most likely.

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“Madame,” asked the plain clothes man, stepping to the door, “will you give your full consent to my searching your son’s room——in the presence of yourself and of Dr. Thornton, of course? I am obliged to ask your permission, for, without a search warrant I have no other legal right than that which you may give me.”

“Of course you may search Richard’s room,” replied his mother, quickly. “But you’ll be wasting your time, for you’ll find nothing incriminating in my boy’s room.”

“Of course not, of course not,” replied Hemingway, soothingly. “That is what we most want——*not* to find anything there. Will you lead the way, please? Prescott, you may come and see the search also.”

So the four filed into the little room that served Dick as sleeping apartment, study-room, den, library and all. Hemingway moved quickly about, exploring the pockets of Dick’s other clothing hanging there. He delved into, under and behind all of the few books there. This plain clothes man moved from place to place with a speed and certainty that spoke of his long years of practice in this sort of work.

“There’s nothing left but the trunk, now,” declared the policeman, bending over and trying the lock. “The key to this, Prescott!”

Dick produced the key. Hemingway fitted it in the lock, throwing up the lid. The trunk was but half filled, mostly with odds and ends, for Dick was not a boy of many possessions. After a few moments the policeman deftly produced, from the bottom, a gold watch. This he laid on the floor without a word, and continued the search. In another moment he had produced the jeweled pin that exactly answered the description of the one belonging to Mrs. Edwards.

Dick gave a gasp, then a low groan. A heart-broken sob welled up in Mrs. Prescott’s throat. Dr. Thornton turned as white as chalk. Hemingway, an old actor in such things, did not show what he felt——if he really felt it at all.

“These are the missing articles, aren’t they?” asked the policeman, straightening up and passing watch and pin to the High School principal.

“I believe them to be,” nodded Dr. Thornton, brokenly.

Mrs. Prescott had staggered forward, weeping and throwing her arms around her son.

“O, Richard! Richard, my boy!” was all she could say.

“Mother, I know nothing about how those things came to be in my trunk,” protested the boy, sturdily. After his first groan the young freshman, being all grit by nature, straightened up, feeling that he could look all the world in the eye. Only his mother’s

grief, and the knowledge that his father was soon to be hurt, appealed to the softer side of young Prescott's nature.

"Mother, I have not stolen anything," the boy said, more solemnly, after a pause. "I am your son. You believe me, don't you?"

"I'd stake my life on your innocence when you've given me your word!" declared that loyal woman.

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“The chief said I was to take your instructions, Dr. Thornton,” hinted Hemingway.

“Yes; I heard the order given,” nodded the now gloomy High School principal.

“Shall I arrest young Prescott?”

At that paralyzing question Dick’s mother did not cry out. She kissed her son, then went just past the open doorway, where she halted again.

“I hesitate about seeing any boy start from his first offense with a criminal record,” replied the principal, slowly. “If I were convinced that this would be the last offense I certainly would not favor any prosecution. Prescott, could you promise-----”

“Then you believe, sir, that I stole the things that you hold in your hand?” demanded the young freshman, steadily.

“I don’t want to believe it,” protested Dr. Thornton. “It seems wicked—–monstrous—–to believe that any fine, bright, capable boy like you can be-----”

Dr. Thornton all but broke down. Then he added, in a hoarse whisper:

“—–a thief.”

“I’m not one,” rejoined Dick. “And, not very far into the future lies the day when I’m going to prove it to you.”

“If you can,” replied Dr. Thornton, “you’ll make me as happy as you do yourself and your parents.”

“Let me have the watch and pin to turn over to the chief, doctor,” requested Hemingway, and took the articles. “Now, for the boy-----?”

“I’m not going to have him arrested,” replied the principal, “unless the superintendent or the Board of Education so direct me.”

From the other side of the doorway could be heard a stifled cry of delight.

“Then we may as well be going, doctor. You’ll come to the station with me, won’t you?”

“In one moment,” replied the principal. He turned to Dick, sorrowfully holding out his hand.

“Prescott, whatever I may do will be the result of long and careful thought, or at the order of the superintendent or of the Board of Education. If you really are guilty, I hope you will pause, think and resolve, ere it is too late, to make a man of yourself hereafter.

If you are innocent, I hope, with all my heart, that you will succeed in proving it. And to that end you may have any possible aid that I can give you. Goodbye, Prescott. Goodbye, madam! May peace be with you."

Half way down the stairs Dr. Thornton turned around to say:

"Of course, you quite comprehend, Prescott, that, pending official action by the school authorities, you must be suspended from the Gridley High School!"

As soon as the door had closed Dick half-tottered back into his room. He did not close the door, but crossed to the window, where he stood looking out upon a world that had darkened fearfully.

Then, without having heard a step, Dick Prescott felt his mother's arms enfold him.

CHAPTER IX

LAURA BENTLEY IS WIDE AWAKE

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Suspended!

That did not mean expulsion, but it did mean that, until the school authorities had taken definite action on the case, young Prescott could not again attend H.S., or any other school under the control of the Board of Education.

The five other partners of Dick & Co. had faced the school defiantly when taking Dick's books from his desk and strapping them to bring home.

Dan Dalzell thrashed a sophomore for daring to make some allusion to Prescott's "thefts." Tom Reade tried to thrash another sophomore for a very similar offense, but Reade got whipped by a very small margin. That fact, however, did not discourage Reade. He had entered his protest, anyway.

Dave Darrin extracted apologies for remarks made, from three different sophomores. All of the partners were diligent in protecting and defending the reputation of their chief.

Every day the "Co." came to see Dick. They made it a point, too, to appear on the street with him. Not one member of the football team "went back on" the suspended freshman. All treated him with the utmost cordiality and faith wherever they met him. Laura Bentley and some of the other girls of Dick's class stood by him unwaveringly by chatting with the suspended freshman whenever and wherever they met him on the street.

"Pooh, old man, a fellow who has all the brains you displayed in making that football stroke doesn't need larceny as an aid to getting ahead in the world," was the way Frank Thompson put it.

"Thank you, Thompson. It's always good to have friends," smiled Dick, wistfully. "But, just now, I appreciate them more than ever."

"The football team and its best friends are giving Fred Ripley the dead cut," pursued Thompson. "And say, you know the junior class's dance comes off the night after tomorrow night. Juniors are always invited, but members of other classes have to depend on favor for invitations. We've fixed it so that Ripley couldn't get an invite. He tried, though. Now, Prescott, you'll receive an invitation in tomorrow morning's mail. Fix it to be there, old man. Do! You'll find yourself flanked by friends. If any fellow looks at you cross-eyed at the junior dance, the eleven will throw him out through a window!"

Dick looked more wistful than ever. He had never had many lessons in dancing, but he took to the art naturally. Had life been happier for him just then he would have been glad to take up the invitation. Besides, Dave Darrin had told him that Laura Bentley was invited and meant to go.

"Now, you'll come along, of course," asked Thompson, coaxingly.

“No-o-o,” hesitated Dick, “I don’t believe I shall.”

“Oh, nonsense, old man!”

“I believe I’d rather not,” replied Prescott, sadly; “though I’m tremendously grateful to those who want me to come and who would try to make it pleasant for me.”

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Thompson argued, but it was no use.

“Why, every one of your partners is going,” said Frank. “Here comes Dave Darrin now. He’ll tell you so.”

“Nope,” said Dave, with all the energy at his command. “We understand we’re to be invited, and we’d give almost anything to go, but Dick & Co. don’t go unless the Dick part of the firm is with us.”

The junior dance came off, and was a good deal of a success in many ways. Only one of the ten boys of the freshman class who were invited attended. Eight girls of the same class were invited, but only two of them accepted. Laura Bentley decided, at the last moment, against attending.

Within ten days two important games came off between the Gridley H.S. and other crack high school teams. Gridley won both.

“It would be cheeky in me to go to the game, when I’m suspended—hardly a H.S. boy, in fact,” Dick explained to his partners. “But you go.

“No, sir!” muttered Greg Holmes.

“Not if you feel that you can’t go,” protested Harry Hazelton. “Dick & Co. go together, or not at all.”

Gridley H.S. won both games by the skin of their teeth.

“We can’t succeed much longer without our mascots,” Thompson declared impressively before all the members of Dick & Co. The six freshmen, walking along the street together had been rounded up and haled into the store where the football squad held its “club” meetings.

“Humph! I’d be a poor mascot for any body,” muttered Dick. “I haven’t been able to bring even myself good luck.”

“You just come to a game once, all six of you,” begged Ben Badger. “Then you’ll see how we can pile up the score over the enemy! Don’t let it get out of your heads that you’re our real, sure-thing mascots. Why, if it hadn’t been for you six youngsters we probably wouldn’t be playing football any more this season.”

Other members of the squad tried to ply their persuasive powers, but all in vain. Dick Prescott, though not breaking down or wilting under the suspicion that lay against him, felt convinced that it would be out of place for him to attend High School affairs while on the suspended list.

“Humph!” grunted Thomp. “The only thing I can see for us to do is to spend a lot of the Athletic Association’s money in hiring a swell detective to come to town and find out who really did take the things at the old H.S. Then we’d have you with us again, Dick Prescott.”

Though under such long suspension Dick was not going backward much in his studies. He had his books at home, and every forenoon he put in the time faithfully over them.

One of these November evenings Dick had the good fortune to have Dave Darrin and Greg Holmes up in his room with him. The other partners were at home studying.

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Dick and his friends were talking rather dispiritedly, for the long suspension, without action, was beginning to wear on them all. Dick's case was now quietly before the Board of Education, but a result had not yet been reached by that slow-moving body. Of course, the members of the Board had now more than a good idea that Dick & Co. had been behind that "dead ones" hoax; but the members of the Board were trying to do their duty in the suspension case, and tried not to let any other considerations weigh with them.

"We've all heard that old chestnut about the silver lining to the cloud," observed Dave, dejectedly. "If it's true, then silver seems to be mighty scarce these days."

"Richard! Ri-i-ichard!" called the elder Prescott, loudly, from the foot of the stairs that led up from the store.

"Yes, sir," cried Dick, bounding to the door and throwing it open.

"Laura Bentley has called us up on the 'phone. She says she wants to talk to you quicker'n lightning, whatever speed that may indicate. She adds, mysteriously, that 'it's the biggest thing that ever happened!'"

"Coming, sir!" cried Dick, bounding down the stairs, snatching at his cap and reefer as he started, though he could not have told why he picked up these garments. Dave and Greg, acting on some mysterious impulse, grabbed up their reefers and hats, and went down the stairs hot-foot after their chum and leader.

"Hullo!" called Dick, reaching the telephone instrument in the back room of the store. "Yes, Miss Bentley, this is Prescott."

"Then listen!" came the swiftly uttered words. Dick discovered that the girl was breathless with excitement and the largeness of her news. "Are you listening?"

"I'll catch every word," Dick replied.

"Well, I'm at Belle Meade's house. Belle and her mother are here. Mr. Meade is out. You know where the house is——corner of Clark Street and Stetson's Alley?"

"Yes; I know."

"Well, the room between the dining-room and the parlor is in darkness, and has been all evening. There's a window in that room that opens over the alley. The Meade apartment is on the second floor, you know. Well, Belle was passing that window——in the dark——and she heard voices down below in the alley. She wouldn't have thought anything of it, but she heard one of the speakers raise his voice and say, excitedly: 'See here, I did the trick, didn't I? Ain't Dick Prescott bounced out of school! Ain't he in disgrace! And he'll never get out of it!'"

“Then another voice broke in, in a lower tone, but Belle couldn’t hear what was said. She’s back in the dark by that open window now,” Laura Bentley hurried on, breathlessly. “The two parties are still there, talking. It’s hardly a minute’s run from where you are. Can’t you get some one in a hurry, run up here and jump on the parties? *Please* do, Dick! It’ll be the means of clearing up this whole awful business!”

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“Won’t I, though?” answered Dick, breathlessly, into the ’phone. “I have two chums here now. We’ll be there like greased lightning——and, oh, Miss Bentley, *thank* you!”

Neither Dave nor Greg needed to ask any questions, for both had stood close to the receiver, drinking in every word. Now they shot out through the front of the store with a speed and turbulence that made studious Mr. Prescott gasp with amazement.

“Careful, now, fellows!” warned Dick a few moments later. “We want to *hear*, as well as *catch*! Softly does it.”

Well practiced in running, not one of the three freshmen was out of breath by the time that they reached the head of Stetson’s Alley.

Just before turning the corner at the head of the alley, Dick and his freshmen chums halted to listen and reconnoiter.

Peeping cautiously around the corner, Dick, Greg and Dave made out dimly one figure well down the alley. There was not light enough there to recognize the fellow. And the three boys could make out some one past this first fellow, but the second individual stood well in the dark shadow of the delivery doorway of a store.

“Let’s see if we can’t creep up a little nearer,” whispered Dick Prescott, softly.

“They may see us coming,” warned Dave.

“If they do, we’ll just make a jump in and nab them anyway,” Dick rejoined. “Remember the main game——capture!”

Cautiously, a foot at a time, and in Indian file, the three freshmen stole down the dark alleyway. Then Dick halted, passing back a nudge that Dave Darrin passed on to Greg Holmes.

“Now, ye needn’t think ye’re goin’ to renig,” warned the fellow who was nearer to the boys. “I done the whole job against Prescott, and I done it as neat as the next one. Why, *you* never even thought of the trick of slipping that watch and pin into Prescott’s trunk, did ye? That was *my* brains. I supplied the brains, an’ you’ve got to raise the cash to pay for ’em! How did I do that trick of slippin’ the watch an’ pin into Prescott’s trunk! Oh, yes! Of course, ye wanter know. Well, I’ll tell ye when ye hand me the rest o’ the money for doin’ the whole trick——then I’ll tell ye.”

Something in a very low whisper came, in response, from the second party who was invisible to the prowling freshmen.

Dick Prescott felt that there was no need of prolonging this scene. He had heard enough.

“Now, rush ’em! Grab ’em——and hold ’em!” shouted Dick, suddenly.

As the three freshmen shot forward into the darkness something that sounded like an almost hysterical cheer in girls’ voices came from the open, dark window overhead.

But neither Dick nor his chums paused to give thought to that at this important moment.

The unknown who had been doing most of the talking wheeled with an oath, making a frantic dash to get out of the alley and onto the street.

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But Dick shot fairly past him, dodging slightly, and made a bound for the second party to this wicked conference.

Just beyond the doorway in which this second party had keen standing was a yard that furnished a second means of exit from the alley.

It was this second party to the talk that Dick was after. He left the other fugitive to his two active, quick-witted chums. They were swift to understand, and grappled, together, with the rascal fleeing for the street.

The three went down in a scuffling, fighting heap.

Like a flash the fellow that Dick was after seemed to melt into the adjoining back yard. Prescott, in trying to get in after him in record time, fell flat to the ground just inside the yard.

Yet, as he went down Prescott grabbed one of his fugitive's trouser legs near the ankle.

"Let go!" hissed the other, in too low a voice to be recognized.

Before Dick, holding on grimly, had time to look upward, the wretch lifted a cane, bringing it down on Dick's head with ugly force.

CHAPTER X

TIP SCAMMON TALKS—–BUT NOT ENOUGH

If that ugly blow hadn't proved a glancing one, Dick Prescott might have been for a long siege of brain fever.

As it was, he was slightly stunned for the moment.

By the time he could leap up and look about him, rather dizzily, his late assailant had made a clean escape.

"No time to waste on a fellow who's got away," quoth Dick.

He staggered slightly, at first, as he hurried from the yard back into the alleyway.

"Now, you quiet down!" commanded Dave Darrin hoarsely. "No more from you, Mr. Thug!"

"Lemme go, or it'll be worse for ye!" threatened a harsh voice that, nevertheless, had a whine in it.

“What use to let you go, Tip Scammon?” demanded Darrin. “We know you, and the police would pick you up again in an hour.”

“Lemme go, and keep yer mouth shut,” whined the fellow. “If ye don’t, ye’ll be sorry. If ye *do* lemme go, I’ll pay ye for the accommodation.”

“Yes,” retorted Dave, scornfully. “You’d pay us, I suppose, with money you picked up in some way resembling the trick you played on Dick Prescott.”

“Well, money’s money, ain’t it?” demanded Tip, skeptically.

“Some kinds of money are worse that dirt,” growled Greg Holmes.

This was the conversation, swiftly carried on, that Dick heard as he stepped back to his friends.

Scammon was lying on his back on the ground, with Dave seated across his chest. Greg bent back the wretch’s head, holding a short club that the two freshmen had taken away from Tip in the scuffle.

“Where’s the other one, Dick?” gasped Dave, as he saw young Prescott coming back alone.

“He got away,” muttered Dick. “He hit me over the head, and stunned me for a moment, or I’d be holding onto him yet.”

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“Who was he?” demanded Greg, breathlessly.

“I don’t know,” Dick admitted. “I’d give a small part of the earth to know and be sure about it.”

That admission of ignorance was a most unfortunate one. Tip Scammon heard it, and the fellow grinned inwardly over knowing that his late companion had not been recognized.

“What are we going to do with this fellow, Dick?” asked Dave.

“I’m wondering whether he ought to be arrested or not,” Dick replied. “Fellows, I feel mighty sorry for Tip’s father.”

And well might all three feel sorry. So, far as was known, this crime against Dick was the first offense Tip had committed against the law. He was a tough character, and regarded as one of the worse than worthless young men of Gridley. Tip was a handy fellow, a jack-of-all-trades, with several at which he might have made an honest living ——but he wouldn’t. Yet Tip’s father was old John Scammon, the highly respected janitor at the High School, where he had served for some forty years.

“I say, fellows, I wonder if we can let Tip go——now that we know the whole story?” breathed Dick.

“Say, I’ll make it worth yer while,” proposed Tip, eagerly.

“How about the law?” asked Dave Darrin, seriously. “Have we any right to let the fellow go, when we know he has committed a serious crime?”

“I don’t know,” replied Prescott. “All I’m thinking of is good, honest old John Scammon.”

“It’d break me old man’s heart——sure it would,” put in Tip, cunningly.

At the first cry from Belle and Laura Bentley, however Mrs. Meade, who was also in the secret, had hurried down into Clark Street. Just as it happened she had espied a policeman less than a block away. That officer, posted by Mrs. Meade, now came hurrying down the alleyway.

“Oho! Tip, is it?” demanded the policeman. “Let him up, Darrin. I can handle him. Now, then, what’s the row about?”

Thereupon Dick and his chums had to tell the story. There was no way out of it. Officer Connors heard a little of it, then decided:

“The station house is the place to tell the rest of this. Come along, Tip. And you youngsters trail along behind.”

Though the station house was not far away, a good-sized crowd was trailing along by the time they reached the business stand of the police. Tip was hustled in through the doorway, the three young freshmen following. Leaning over the railing, smoking and chatting with the sergeant at the desk, was plain clothes man Hemingway.

“Hullo,” muttered that latter officer, “what’s this?”

“A slice out of one of your cases, I guess, Hemingway, from what I’ve heard,” laughed Connors. “According to these boys, Tip is the fellow who knows the inside game of the High School thefts.”

“Let’s have Scammon in the back room, then,” urged Hemingway, leading the way to the guard room. The sergeant, also, followed, after summoning a reserve policeman to the desk.

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Then followed a sharp grilling by the keen, astute Hemingway. Dick and his chums told what they had heard Tip say before they pounced upon him. Tip, who was a round-headed, short, square-shouldered fellow of twenty-four, possessed more of the cunning of the prize ring than the cleverness of the keen thief.

“I’ve been caught with the packages on me,” he admitted, bluntly, and with some show of bravado. “I guess I can’t get outer delivering ’em.”

“Then you stole that pin and the gold watch from the locker at the High School?” demanded Hemingway, swiftly.

“Yep.”

“How did you get into the locker room?” shot out Hemingway.

“Guess!” leered Tip, exhibiting some cheap bravado.

“Maybe I can find the answer in your clothes,” retorted the plain clothes man. “Stand still.”

The search resulted in the finding of about ten dollars, a knife, and three queer-looking implements that Hemingway instantly declared to be pick-locks.

“You used these tools, and slipped the lock, did you?” asked Hemingway.

“Didn’t have to,” grinned Tip.

“Took an impression of the lock, then, and made a key, did you?”

“Right-o,” drawled Tip.

“I’ll look into your lodgings,” muttered Hemingway. “Probably I’ll find you’ve got a good outfit for that kind of work. I remember you used to work for a locksmith.”

Tip, however, was not scared. He knew that there was nothing at his lodgings to betray him.

“Then you used these picklocks to open Prescott’s locked trunk with?” was Hemingway’s next question.

“’Fraid I did,” leered Tip.

“What time of the day did you get into the Prescott flat?”

“’Bout ten o’clock, morning of the same day ye went through Prescott’s trunk an’ found the goods there.”

“The same goods that you placed in the trunk, Tip, after breaking into the Prescott flat while Mr. and Mrs. Prescott were down in their store and young Prescott was at the High School?”

“That’s right,” Tip grinned.

“You picked the lock of young Prescott’s trunk, stowed the watch and pin away in there, and then sprung the lock again?”

“Why, say, ye muster seen me,” declared Scammon, admiringly.

“The week before that day you must have been at the High School, helping your father, especially in the basement during session hours.”

“I sure was,” Tip admitted. “I had ter, didn’t I, to have a chance ter get inter the locker room?”

“What did you say the name of the fellow was who hired you to do the trick?” swiftly demanded Hemingway, changing the tack.

“I b’lieve I *didn’t* say,” responded Tip, giving a wink that included all present.

“Tell me now, then.”

“Not if ye was to hang me for refusing,” declared Scammon, with sudden obstinacy.

“Yet you’ve told us everything else,” argued the plain clothes man.

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“Might jest as well tell ye everything else,” retorted Tip. “Didn’t these High School kids find the packages on me?”

“Then tell us who the chap was that you were talking with tonight.”

“Not fer anything ye could give me,” asserted Tip Scammon, with great promptness.

“Oh, well, then,” returned Hemingway, with affected carelessness, “Prescott can tell us the name of the chap he grappled with in that back yard.”

“Yep! Let young Prescott tell,” agreed Tip with great cheerfulness. That was as far as the police could get with the prisoner. He readily admitted all that was known, and he had even gone so far as to tell how he had stolen the watch and the pin, and how he had secreted them in Dick’s trunk, but beyond that the fellow would not go further.

“Did you have anything to do with placing Ripley’s pin in Prescott’s pocket?” questioned Hemingway.

“Nope,” declared Tip, in all apparent candor.

“Know anything about that?”

“Nope.”

“Then how did you know that that particular morning was the right morning to hide the other two stolen articles in Prescott’s trunk?”

“I heard, on the street, what was happenin’,” declared Tip, confidently. “So I knew ’twas the right time ter do the rest of the trick.”

At last Hemingway gave up the attempt to learn the name of the party with whom Tip had been talking in Stetson’s Alley on this night. Then Tip was led away to a cell.

“Come on, fellows,” muttered Dick to his chums. “Since Tip is under arrest, anyway, and has confessed, and since the whole thing is bound to become public, I want to run down to ‘The Blade’ office, find Len Spencer, and send him up here to get the whole, straight story. *With this yarn printed I can go back to school in the morning*!”

“Now, see here, Dick,” expostulated Dave Darrin, as the three chums hurried along the street, “in the station house you told the police you didn’t get a look at the other fellow’s face.”

“Well, that was straight,” Prescott asserted.

“Do you mean to say you don’t know who the fellow was——you really don’t?” persisted Dave Darrin.

“I don’t know,” Dick declared flatly.

“You’ve a suspicion, just the same,” asserted Greg Holmes, dryly.

“Possibly.”

“Who was it, then?” coaxed Greg Holmes.

“Was it Fred Ripley?” shot out Dave Darrin.

“Will you fellows keep a secret, on your solemn honor, if I tell you one?” Dick questioned.

Dave and Greg both promised.

“Well, then,” Prescott admitted, “I’m convinced in my own mind that it was Fred Ripley that I had hold of for an instant tonight. But I didn’t see his face, and I can’t prove it. That’s why I’m not going to tell about it. But this fellow wore lavender striped trousers, just like a pair of Fred’s. There is just a chance or two in a thousand that it wasn’t Ripley——and I’m not going to throw it all over on him when I can’t prove it. Fellows, I know just what it feels like to be under suspicion when you really didn’t do a thing. *It hurts——awfully*!”

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CHAPTER XI

THE WELCOME WITH A BIG “W”

Ben Badger sat perched aloft among the bare, spreading branches of a giant maple near one corner of the school grounds. The maple stood at the curbing of the sidewalk.

Down below stood nearly a hundred High School boys of Gridley.

That Ben was on sentry duty was apparent from the eager looks that those below frequently cast up at him. At times, too, the general impatience sought relief in questions hurled at Ben.

Finally, from the lookout aloft came down the rousing hail:

“Here he comes! fellows! Here he comes! No——here *they* come! The whole crowd ——Dick & Co.!”

A flutter passed through the crowd below, vet not one of the Gridley H.S. boys stirred from the ranks just within the school yard gate.

Back on the main steps of the High School building nearly three score of the young ladies were irregularly grouped. They were silent, but expectant.

For “The Blade” had been read in many a Gridley home that morning. The news had traveled fast over Gridley. Though the paper had contained no announcement that Prescott would return to school, every High School boy and girl had felt sure of that.

Down the street, three abreast, came Dick & Co., with proud, firm stride. Very likely the partners were even more exultant than was Prescott himself.

Then the freshman sextette came in full sight from the gateway.

“Who’s this?” yelled Ben Badger in his loudest voice.

From the crowded tanks below welled up the chorus:

“Dick & Co.! Dick & Co.! Good old Dick! Bully old Co.!”

Prescott and his chums halted, thunderstruck by the volume and force of that unexpected chorus.

Immediately on top of it rolled out lustily the complicated High School yell, given with a vim never before heard off the football field.

And then:

“What’s the matter with Dick Prescott?” demanded Ben Badger, in stentorian tones.

From one half of the H.S. boys came the roaring response:

“He’s the whole cheese.”

Then, from the other half:

“-----for a *freshman*!”

Dick & Co. recovering from their amazement, were coming on again now. Young Prescott’s heart thumped hard. He was no popularity-chaser, but only the fellow who has been down hard, for a while, knows how good it is to be *up* once more.

As Dick neared the gate Ben Badger dropped down out of the bare maple tree, for Ben had yet other duties on the reception committee.

He and Frank Thompson suddenly snatched Dick Prescott out of the ranks of his chums, and hoisted him aloft. This these two husky first classmen were well able to do.

Across the school yard they started with him, while the rest of the fellows followed, giving voice to the High School yell:

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“T-E-R-R-O-R-S! Wa-ar! Fam-ine! Pes-ti-lence! That’s us! That’s us! G-R-I-D-L-E-Y H.S.! Rah! rah! rah! rah! Gri-i-id-ley!”

The girls grouped on the steps parted, letting the leaders and followers through.

With the rush as of an army the excited youngsters bore Dick Prescott up a flight of stairs. Half a dozen of the fellows sprang ahead of Badger and Thompson, throwing open one of the doors of the general assembly room.

Again the High School yell broke loose, sounding, in that confined space, as though it must jar the rafters loose.

Dr. Thornton had risen from his chair behind the desk. It was before coming-in-hour, and there was no rule that commanded quietude before the bell rang. Yet such a din had never before been heard in the room.

But just then Dr. Thornton caught sight of red-faced, happy-looking Dick Prescott on the shoulders of Badger and Thompson. Then the principal laughed in sheer good humor.

Wheeling, Badger and Thompson carried Dick straight up to the platform, where they deposited their human burden at the edge.

“Welcome to our city!” yelled Badger, sonorously.

“Mr. Prescott,” greeted Dr. Thornton, holding out his hand, “I am heartily glad to see you back here.”

“No more pleased, sir, than I am to be here,” returned the young freshman. “And I must thank you, doctor, for the promptness with which you sent the note around to me informing me that the suspension had automatically ended.”

While the cheering was going on out in the yard, and while Dick was being carried in triumph into the building, Fred Ripley and Clara Deane had just turned in out of a side street and come within view of the demonstration.

“They’re shouting out something about Prescott,” murmured Clara.

“Oh, I suppose the mucker has been allowed to sneak back into school,” returned Ripley, in disgust.

“It’s a shame to allow that class of young fellows in a high school,” declared Miss Deane. “If a higher education is necessary for such people, they ought to be sent to a special school of their own.”

“If Gridley H.S. goes on being cheapened I shall go to some good private prep. school somewhere,” hinted Fred.

“That *would* be a splendid idea,” glowed Clara. “I wouldn’t mind going to some good seminary myself.”

“If we do, let us hope we can find a town that will contain both schools,” suggested Fred, with an attempt at gallantry. “For that matter, Clara, there are co-ed private schools, you know.”

“I don’t want to go to one,” retorted Miss Deane, promptly. “Co-ed schools are just like co-ed colleges. The boys may have a good enough time, but the co-ed girls are shoved into the background. Co-ed boys pretend they don’t know that the co-ed girls are alive. The High School is better, for a girl, than any co-ed private school, for in the High School girls are treated on an even footing with boys.”

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“We’ll both of us keep that prep. school idea in mind, though,” proposed Ripley, just before the pair entered the school building.

By the time that this exclusive pair entered the general assembly room the scene before them was none too pleasing. The congratulatory crowd being too large for Dick alone, his five partners were holding separate little receptions for groups, relating how Dick, Dave and Greg had captured Tip Scammon. Such speculation there was as to who Tip’s unrecognized companion could have been the night before. As Fred stepped into the big room he was conscious of many unfriendly glances that were sent in his direction.

As early as possible Dick Prescott sought out Laura Bentley and Bell Meade, and to them he expressed his heartiest thanks for the splendid aid they had given him toward this present happy moment.

So great was the clamor, in fact, that, when the gong outside struck the “minute-call” at 7.59, no one in the assembly room seemed to hear it. Then came the jingling of the assembly bell in the big room. A murmur of surprise ran around, for time had passed rapidly since Dick’s appearance. In another moment the only sound was that of quiet footfalls as the young ladies and gentlemen of the Gridley H.S. moved to their seats. In a few seconds more only the ticking of the big clock was heard.

CHAPTER XII

DICK & CO. GIVE FOOTBALL A NEW BOOST

By recess the feeling had quieted down. Dick Prescott was only a freshman, but it is safe to say that he was the most popular freshman who had ever “happened” at Gridley H.S.

However, the noisy spirit of welcome had spent itself Dick & Co. were given a chance to go away quietly by themselves and talk over their own affairs.

Fred Ripley appeared to be the only unhappy boy in the lot. He kept to himself a good deal, and the scowl on his face threatened to become chronic.

Recess was nearly up when Thomp and Captain Sam Edgeworth, of the eleven, approached Dick & Co. A nod from Edgeworth drew Prescott away from his chums.

“Prescott, as you know, we don’t usually allow freshmen to mix much with us in the athletic line. But the fellows feel that you are a big exception. You couldn’t possibly make the team this year, of course, but we well, we thought you might like a bit of the social end of the squad. We thought you might like to come around to our headquarters and see us drill and hear our talk of the game. Would it interest you any?”

“Would it?” glowed Dick. “Why, as much as it would please a ragpicker to be carried off to a palace to live!”

“Do you care to come around and see us this afternoon?” pursued Captain Sam. “Say three o’clock.”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Then come around and see us, Prescott. Maybe you’ll be interested in something that you see and hear.”

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“I wonder-----” began Dick, wistfully.

“Well, what?” asked Thomp.

“Could you possibly include my chums in that invitation? They’re all mightily interested.”

“Yes,” nodded Thompson, “they’re interested, and they all helped you to spring that trick on the Board of Education. It’s more than half likely that we owe the continuance of football this season to Dick & Co.”

“Bring your friends along, then,” agreed Captain Sam Edgeworth, though he solemnly hoped, under his breath, that he wasn’t establishing a fearful precedent by showing such wholesale cordiality to the usually despised freshmen.

“We’ll use all six of you as our mascots,” laughed Thomp.

“And er——er——” began Dick, a bit diffidently, “we have something that we’ve been talking over, and we want to suggest to you——if you won’t think us all too eternally fresh.”

“Anyway, the idea’ll have to keep,” muttered Edgeworth, as the gong clanged out. “There goes the end of recess.”

The long lines were quickly filing in at two entrances? and the work of the school day was on again.

It was barely a quarter of three when Dick & Co. walking two-and-two, came in sight of the otherwise unoccupied store that formed the football headquarters.

“We’re too early,” muttered Prescott, consulting his watch. “We’ll have to take a walk around a few blocks yet, fellows.”

“Why?” Dan Dalzell wanted to know. “What difference does a matter of a few minutes make?”

“Haven’t you had it rubbed into you enough that you’re only a measly freshman?” laughed Dick. “And don’t you know a freshman is called a freshman only because he can’t dare to do anything that looks the least little bit fresh? From an upper classman’s point of view we’ve had a thumping big privilege accorded us, and we don’t want to spoil it by running it into the ground. So I vote for a walk that will make us at least two minutes late going into the football headquarters.”

“My vote goes with yours,” nodded Dave Darrin.

The good sense of it appealed to all the chums, so they strolled away again, and came back three minutes late, Outside the door they halted. Some of the awe of the conscious freshman came upon two or three of the chums.

“You go in first, Dick,” urged Tom Reade.

“It was you who got the invite, anyway,” hinted Greg Holmes.

Laughing quietly Dick turned the knob of the door. He went in bravely enough, but some of his chums followed rather sheepishly.

Fred Ripley, who had dropped in five minutes before, saw them at once, and scowled.

“’Ware freshmen!” he called, rather loudly.

Nearly all the members of the regular and sub teams were present. Most of them were going through an Indian club drill at the further end of the room. At Fred’s cry several of them turned around sharply.

“Oh, that’s all right,” called out Edgeworth. “These particular freshmen are privileged. Welcome, Dick & Co.!”

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“Privileged? Welcome?” gasped Ripley, in a tone of huge disgust. “What on earth is the High School coming to these days?”

“If you don’t like to see them here, Ripley,” broke in Thompson, “you know-----”

“Oh, well!” growled Fred, with a shrug of his shoulders. Then, disdaining to look at Dick & Co., this stickler for upper class exclusiveness turned and stalked out of the store, closing the door after him with a bang.

For some minutes Dick and his chums stood quietly against the wall at one side of the big, almost bare room. Then Edgeworth called out:

“Now, fellows, we’ve had enough of indoor work. We’ll take a brief rest. After that we’ll go over to the field and practice tackles and formations until dark.”

Released from the drills Thomp came over to shake hands with the freshmen visitors. Edgeworth presently strolled over, and a few others.

“By the way, captain,” spoke up Thompson, finally, “I think Prescott told us that the mighty freshmen intellects of Dick & Co. had been trying out their brains in the effort to get up some new football stunts.”

“That’s so,” nodded Sam.

“Have we time to listen to them?”

“Yes,” decided the football captain; “if it doesn’t take them too long to explain.”

Ben Badger kicked forward an empty packing case.

“Here’s a platform, Prescott. Get up and orate!” he called.

Dick laughingly held back from the packing case until Badger and Thomp lifted him bodily and stood him on top of the box.

“And cut it short, and make it practical,” admonished Ted Butler, “or take the dire consequences!”

“Why, I don’t know, gentlemen of the football team, that it’s much of an idea,” Dick began, “but my chums and I have been thinking over the complaint of the Athletics Committee that you haven’t as much money, this season, as you’d like.”

“Money?” echoed one. “Now, you’re whispering. Whoop!”

“Money—–the root of all evil!” shouted another.

“Get wicked!” adjured a third.

“What my friends and I had to suggest,” Dick went on, “was that, as we understand it, the folks of the town don’t contribute much cash for upholding the fame of High School athletics.”

“The School Alumni Association does pretty well in that line,” replied Edgeworth. “The public in general do pretty well by buying tickets rather liberally to our games. It’s the expenses that are the great trouble. You see, Prescott, instead of maintaining one team, we really have to support two, for the subs are necessary in order to give us practice. Then the coach’s expenses are heavy. Now, the Alumni Association owns our athletic field, but a lot of lumber and carpenter work is needed there every year, making repairs and putting in improvements. Then, when we play high school teams at a distance from here the railroad expenses eat up enormously.”

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“And we have to play mostly teams at a good distance from here,” laughed Ben Badger, “for we’ve played the nearby elevens time and again, and Gridley has eaten up the other fellows in such big gulps that we have to get on dates, these days, with teams so far away that they don’t know much about us.”

“But there’s plenty of money in the town,” replied Dick. “The business men have some of it. The wealthy people have a lot of it, too. It is a Gridley brag that the people of this city are public spirited to the last gasp. Now, if you can get public spirit and money on good speaking terms there wouldn’t need to be any lack of funds for High School athletics.”

“All right,” nodded Edgeworth, trying to conceal a slight impatience “But how are you going to introduce public spirit effectively to money?”

“That’s what we freshmen have been wondering,” Dick replied. “Now, every student in the Gridley H.S.—boy students and girl students—gets a share of the reflected glory that comes from the work of one of the best high school elevens in the United States. So, as we see it, the whole student body should get together in the raising of funds. And when I say ‘funds,’ I don’t mean pennies or dimes.”

“This is becoming interesting,” called out Ben Badger.

“That my chums and I would suggest,” Dick continued, “is that the whole student body of Gridley H.S. be enlisted, and sent out to scour the town, holding, out a subscription paper that is properly worded at the top.”

“How worded?” demanded Ted Butler.

“My freshmen chums and I have prepared a draft of the paper. May I read what we suggest as a heading for the paper?”

“Hear! Hear!” cried a dozen.

“Thank you,” Prescott acknowledged, gratefully. Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he read as follows:

“’Gridley is justly proud of its public spirit, and rejoices in having the best in several lines. Few if any cities in the United States possess a High School football team that can down the eleven from Gridley H.S. We are proud of our High School, and as proud of its reputation in athletics. We believe that Gridley prominence in athletics should be fostered in every way, and we know that real athletics cost money—a lot of it! We, The Undersigned, therefore subscribe to the Athletic Committee of Gridley H.S. the amounts of public spirit set down opposite our names in dollars.’”

After Dick Prescott had ceased reading it took nearly a full minute for the cleverness of this direct appeal to local pride to strike home in the minds of the football squad. Then loud applause broke loose.

“Freshie!” roared Sam Edgeworth, over the din, “that’s genius, compressed into a hundred words!”

“It’s O.K.!” declared Thompson, with heavy emphasis.

“Bully!” roared Ben Badger.

Then one pessimist was heard from:

“It’s good, but it takes something mighty good to force people to part with their own cash.”

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“Don’t you think that, with every H.S. boy and girl going around with the paper, it will force subscriptions?” Dick inquired.

“Oh, well,” granted the pessimist, “I believe it will cost enough money out of the public to pay all the cost of printing the subscription papers anyway.”

“If we didn’t need that kicker on the team, we’d throw him out of here,” laughed Sam Edgeworth, good-naturedly.

Then the matter was put to informal vote, and it was decided to ask the permission of the Athletic Committee to put through the scheme presented by Dick & Co.

“And now it’s time to be off for the field,” proclaimed Sam Edgeworth, with emphasis. Coach Morton will be waiting for us, and he isn’t the man who enjoys being kept waiting.”

“Come along with us, Dick & Co.,” called Thompson. “You’ll have a chance to see whether you approve of our way of handling the game.”

So Dick and his partners went along. Though they could only stand at the edge of the field and look on, yet that was rare fun, for no other freshmen were on the same side of the fence.

As all six of the boys knew considerable about the theories and rules of football, and as all of them watched closely the plays between Gridley H.S. and the subs, they soon saw the reason why Gridley had one of the most formidable High School teams in the country.

“Oh, for the day when *we* can try to make the team!” uttered Dick Prescott, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

The fund-raising scheme offered by Dick & Co. went before the Athletic Committee that same evening. It was accepted, as Prescott and Darrin, hanging about outside the H.S. building, learned an hour later.

In three days more the subscription papers had been printed and were distributed. Every boy and girl in the school received one, with instructions to bring it back, “filled out”——or take the consequences.

Then the canvassing began.

Would it work? Dick & Co. felt that their own reputations hung in the balance. And it was bound to be the case that some of the students, though they took the papers, did a lot of prompt “kicking” about it.

Would it “work"?

CHAPTER XIII

“THE OATH OF THE DUB”

For a full week the boys and girls of Gridley H.S. scoured the town, trying their fortune everywhere that money was supposed to lurk.

The great Thanksgiving game was coming on. Gridley was to play the second team of Cobber University. This second team from Cobber had beaten every high school team it had tackled for the two preceding years.

Gridley, in this present year, had not met with a single defeat in a total of nine games thus far played. In six of the games the opponents had not scored at all.

But could Cobber Second be beaten?

The Cobber eleven was one of the finest in the country. Even the second team was considered a “terror,” as its record of unbroken victories for two years testified.

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So much awe, in fact, did Cobber Second inspire among the high school teams that Gridley was the only outfit to be found that dared take up the proposition of a Thanksgiving Day game with the college men.

“Gridley can’t win!” the pessimists predicted.

Even the heartiest well-wishers of Gridley H.S. felt, mournfully, that too big a contract had been undertaken.

Dick & Co., however, under the inspiring influence of their leader, were all to the hopeful.

“We’ll win,” Dick proclaimed, “because Gridley needs the game. When Gridley folks go after anything they won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. That’s the spirit of the town, and the High School is worthy of all the traditions of the town.”

“Talk’s cheap, and brag’s a good dog!” sneered Ripley.

Three sophomores who overheard the remark promptly “bagged” Fred and threw him over the school yard fence.

“Come back with any more of that,” warned one of the hazers, “and we’ll scour your intellect at the town pump.”

Being a freshman, Prescott didn’t say too much. Neither did his chums. Yet what they did say was bright and hopeful. Their spirit began to soak through the student body.

“You see, gentlemen,” Coach Morton warned the football squad one morning at recess, “you’ve *got* to win. The school believes you can do it, and the town is beginning to believe it. If you lose to Cobber Second you’ll forfeit the respect of all the thousands of Gridley folks who are now saying nice things about you.”

“Write it down,” begged Thompson. “We’re going to beat Cobber Second off the gridiron.”

“Good!” cheered Mr. Morton. “That’s the talk. And be sure you live up to it!”

“We’ve got to live up to it,” asserted Thomp, solemnly.

“Right-o!” came the enthusiastic approval from as many members of the student body as could crowd within easy hearing. The girls were all there, too, for in these days the girls were as much excited as others over the prospects of winning.

“Shall I tell coach and students, Cap?” called Thomp to Edgeworth.

“It won’t do any harm,” nodded Sam. “Confession will make our deed more binding.”

“What deed?” demanded Coach Morton, scenting some mystery that he was not yet in on.

“Why, you see, sir,” proclaimed Thomp, “every member of the team, and every sub who stands any show to get into the game, has taken the oath of the dub.”

“’The oath of the dub’?” repeated Sub-master Morton. “That’s a new one on me.

“It’s a new one on us all,” admitted Thompson, gravely. “We’ve taken the oath, but it’s so dreadful that most of us shivered when it came our turn to recite the patter—–the ritual, I mean.”

“What is this ’oath of the dub’?” asked the coach.

“It’s fearful,” shivered Thomp. “Any of you fellows feel better able to explain?”

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He glanced around him at the other visible members and subs of the school eleven, but they shook their heads and shrank back.

“Well, then, I’ll have to tell you myself,” conceded Thomp, with an air of gloom. “It’s a fearful thing. Yet, as I’ve been through with it once, one more time can’t hurt me——-much.”

Thomp made an eloquent pause. Then, reaching his right hand aloft, his eyes turned toward the sky, he recited, in a deep bass voice:

“I have pledged my honor, as a gridiron specialist, that Gridley H.S. shall lug away all the points of the game from Cobber Second. If we fail, then may everyone who espies me mutter: ’There goes a dub!’ May the word ‘dub’ haunt me in my waking hours, and pursue me, mounted on the nightmares of slumber! May my best friends ever afterward refer to me only as a ‘dub.’ For if I fail the school, then am I truly a ‘dub,’ and there is no help for me. If I fail, then may I never, so long as life lasts, be permitted to lose sight of the patent fact that I *am* a ‘dub’! So help me *Bob*!”

A roar of laughter and approval went up from all who heard. Coach Morton tried hard to preserve his gravity, but his sides shook, and his face reddened from the effort. At last he broke loose. When he could control his voice Mr. Morton demanded:

“What genius of the first class invented the ’oath of the dub’?”

“It wasn’t a senior, sir,” Thomp confessed.

“What junior, then?”

“Not a junior, either.”

“*Who*, then?” insisted the submaster.

“Tell him, Sam.”

“That oath, Mr. Morton, required and received the concerted brainpower of-----”

“Dick & Co.!” shouted the football squad in chorus.

A good-natured riot followed.

“Dick & Co. will soon get the notion that they’re the whole High School,” growled Fred Ripley to Purcell.

“They are a big feature of the school,” laughed Purcell. “You’re about the only one, Fred, who hasn’t discovered it. Rub your eyes, man, and take another look.”

“Bah!” muttered Ripley, turning away. Just then the gong clanged the end of recess.

“Now, that ‘the oath of the dub’ has been given out,” suggested Dick Prescott to his chums, after school, “we ought to find Len Spencer and give it to him. He’ll print it in tomorrow’s ‘Blade’ and that will send local pride soaring. That’ll help a whole lot to success with the subscription papers.”

After the papers had been in circulation a week the Athletics Committee held an evening session, in the room of the Superintendent of Schools, in the H.S. building.

By eight o’clock nearly a hundred and fifty of the boys and girls had assembled. More came in later.

The subscription papers, and the amounts for which they called, were turned in to Coach Morton. It was soon noticed that many of the subscriptions had been paid by check.

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Laura Bentley was the first to turn in a paper.

“Twenty dollars,” she announced, quietly, though with evident pride.

“Eleven dollars,” announced Belle Meade.

After a good many of the girls had made accounting they boys had a brief chance.

When it came Dick Prescott’s turn he spoke so quietly that those nearest him thought he said six dollars.

"Sixty dollars?" repeated Mr. Morton, more distinctly. “The best offering yet.”

“I’ve one more,” added Prescott, in the same low voice.

“Then speak up more loudly,” directed the submaster. “There are a lot of young people here who want to hear.”

“Here,” continued Dick, handing in another paper, “is a communication signed by the members of the city’s Common Council. They signed as individuals. They agree to hire the Gridley Military Band, of twenty-eight pieces, to be on hand at the Thanksgiving game and to play for our High School eleven.”

None of Dick’s partners had secured less than twenty-five dollars.

When all the subscriptions had been turned in, and the amount footed up by Coach Morton, that gentleman announced, in tones that betrayed excitement:

“The total subscriptions amount to nineteen hundred and sixty-eight dollars. That will put us on a fine footing for this year, and leave a good balance over for next year!”

Then the enthusiasm broke loose in earnest. Two score of fans turned, at once, to find Dick & Co., who had started the scheme. But Dick & Co. had quietly vanished.

Before it adjourned that night, the Athletics Committee, with the help of Captain Sam Edgeworth, found one effective way of rewarding those who had conceived this highly successful subscription campaign.

Dick Prescott was appointed cheer-master for the great Thanksgiving Day game. More, Dick was to name any one of his chums as assistant cheer-master.

As the cheer-master bosses the noise that is so indispensable a part of the game, the honor that had come to young Prescott was no mean one. No Gridley freshman had ever before achieved it.

Dick left to his partners the selection of assistant cheer-master. *They* settled on Dave Darrin.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE GRIDIRON WITH COBBER SECOND

Once upon a time Thanksgiving Day was an orgie conducted in honor of that national bird, the turkey.

In these happier days, in every live community, the turkey must wait until the football game has been fought out. Then the adherents of one eleven eat crow.

Gridley's great game of the year was scheduled to begin at three o'clock.

However, a large part of the fun, at a really "big" game consists in being on hand an hour ahead of time and hearing and seeing all the fun that goes on.

Promptly at the tick of two o'clock the Gridley Band blew its first blast, to the tune of "Hail, Columbia!"

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The band was stationed close to the ground, in the center of the stand reserved for the High School student body. Off the right of the band rose four tiers of bright-faced, wholesome-looking High School girls. To the left of the band sat the boys.

Across the field, on a much smaller stand, sat the hundred or so followers of the team from Cobber. The Cobbers had no band. Few feminine faces appeared on the Cobber stand. The Cobber colors, brown and gray, floated here and there on the breeze in the form of small banners.

Gridley's stand was brilliant with the crimson and gold banners of Gridley H.S. These bright-hued bits of bunting waved deliriously as the band's strains floated forth.

But as "Hail Columbia" belongs to all Americans, the Cobbers elected to flash their bunting, too.

Suddenly the music paused. Then came pressing contempt for the hostile eleven: "All coons look alike to me!"

Cobber's friends took the hint in an instant. To a man the visiting delegation arose, hurling out the Cobber yell in round, deep-chested notes.

Just outside the lines, behind a huge megaphone mounted on a tripod, stood Dick Prescott, cheer-master. At his side was Dave Darrin, whose duties were likely to prove mainly nominal.

Dick swung the megaphone from left to right, as he called out through it:

"Now, then——number seven!"

From the boy's side came the prompt response, in slow, measured cadence, every word of it distinct:

"C-O-B-B-E-R! Born in misfortune! Reared on trouble. Grew to be a disgrace——and died in tears!"

Cobber's friends had to "chew" over that. They had nothing in their repertory of "sass" that seemed to fill this bill.

To return an inapt yell would be worse than silence. So the visitors sat scowling at the field.

"Score one on Cobber's goat," grinned Dave Darrin.

Presently, after some whispering on the visitors' stand, this rather lame one came from the college crowd:

“C-O-B-B-E-R! C-O-B-W-E-B! Our trap for the foolish little fly!”

One of the few girls on the visitors’ stand rose to wave her brown and gray banner. She slipped and fell through between the seats.

Quick as a flash Dave Darrin sprang to the megaphone, swinging it around at the enemy, and bawling this atrocious pun:

“Now you spider! But now you can’t!”

That brought a laugh, even from the visitors. The hapless girl, with the help of some of her male friends, was hoisted up once more to a seat and safety.

“Look at the poor girl,” laughed Dick to Darrin. “She’s wearing our colors now——-crimson face and a gold locket under it.”

“If she wasn’t a girl, I’d yell that over to ’em,” laughed Dave.

The band was playing again, in its most rollicking rhythm, the old air from “Olivette,” “Then bob up serenely!”

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The laughter started on the Gridley side, but it spread all the way around to the Cobber seats.

As the minutes flew by it became apparent, from a survey of the filled seats, that at least two thousand, outside of the Cobber and the Gridley H.S. delegations, were present at the game. This meant a healthful addition to the athletics fund.

By and by Cobber recovered its nerve on the seats. Cobber yells floated forth on the air. Yet, for every sing-song taunt the visitors found that the home fans had an apt retort. This was where Dick Prescott's ready wit came in, for it was his task to call for all the cheers, yells, songs or taunts.

Two-thirty came. Dick called for the High School song. The band accompanied, while the entire student body sang.

At its completion Cobber answered, as might have been expected, with cat calls.

Within the next few minutes Dick ran the H.S. boosters through nearly the whole repertory of cheers and songs.

Then, just after quarter of three, Dave made an important discovery.

"Here come the teams," he whispered.

Dick, without turning to look, swung the megaphone so that its wide mouth aimed straight at the band leader.

"You know what now, leader!"

In a twinkling the musicians rose. A cornetist flared forth with a bugle call. Down came the leader's baton. The bugle call shaded off into a single strain from the band. Then out crashed: "See, the conquering hero comes!"

With both teams marching onto the field the call was for courtesy. Gridley H.S. and Cobber rose in their seats. The other spectators, mostly, also stood up. Cobber Second came marching around in review before Gridley H.S. seats, and received a rattling volley of good, staunch old American cheers.

Gridley H.S. eleven took the other side of the field. With Sam Edgeworth at their head they went past the visitors' seats, and received the most thundering welcome that Cobber knew how to give.

Passing the two grand stands the captains wheeled their men marching them out into the field. Two footballs bounded from the side lines, and both teams began preliminary practice plays.

After that the band played a couple of lively airs. The people on the grand stands did not pay much heed to the practice work. They knew that the players were merely warming up.

Coach Morton came down along the side lines, halting close to the cheer-master and his assistant. After the first greeting Mr. Morton turned his eyes anxiously toward the field.

The day was ideal——not too cold. Though the sun was out, there was some cloudiness, yet without a sign of rain or snow. The field was in excellent shape for a fast game.

“Why, Dick, you’re *trembling*!” grunted Dave Darrin, in amazement.

“I know it,” Prescott confessed, half guiltily.

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“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing; only I’m so excited I can’t quite keep still.”

“Afraid for *our* side?”

“We’re going to win!” asserted Dick, stubbornly.

“Yet you’re shaking!”

“It is buck fever, I guess. O Dave, I *do* love this grand old game!”

Coach Morton half turned, sending a comprehending smile at the earnest young freshman.

“I wonder if you’d feel like that,” ventured Dave, “if you were one of our fellows out there on the gridiron.”

“Not for a second,” spoke up Prescott, promptly. “I know what I would be doing though.”

“What?”

“I’d he Singing inside——singing songs of triumph over the game we were going to win ——the game we just *had* to win!”

“You’d be pretty confident,” smiled Darrin.

“Yes, I would,” Dick asserted. “I believe it’s the only spirit worth having——the firm conviction that you’re going to win, and that nothing can stop you.”

Coach Morton turned long enough to say:

“Prescott, I wish you were old enough and big enough to be out there on our team now. When your time comes I certainly hope you’ll make the eleven. Your spirit is what every high school needs.”

Blushing a bit, Dick drew the score card out of his pocket. He knew the Gridley side of it by heart, already, but he wanted to read it over again. This was the line-up that he saw:

Gridley H.S. Positions Cobber Second
Evans .....left end.....Paisley
Butler.....left tackle.....Jordrey
Beck.....left guard.....Smith
Badger.....center .....Halsey
Thompson...right guard.....Jennison

Edgeworth..right tackle.....Potter
Stearns....right end.....Adams
Winters....quarter-back.....Bentley
Jasper.....right half-back...Haddleston
Trent .....left half-back....Dill
Gleason....fullback.....Strope

“Why isn’t Edgeworth in center?” asked Dave, glancing down over Dick’s shoulder.

“Played down a bit too fine to hold center in a big game like this,” Dick answered. “Edgeworth is a corking center, and I wouldn’t be afraid to see him there today. But Ben Badger is every bit as good.”

Coach Morton drew in his breath sharply. Referee Henderson had just signaled to Badger, acting captain for the home team, and Halsey, captain of the Cobbers, to come in for the toss. The players halted in their work to await the result of that toss.

“You call, Halsey,” nodded Ben Badger.

“Up!” warned the referee, and flipped the coin.

“Tails!” sang Captain Halsey.

“Heads it is,” announced Referee Henderson.

Ben Badger grinned.

“It’s all starting *our* way,” clicked Dick Prescott, in an undertone.
He seemed lost in a transport of ecstasy.

CHAPTER XV

GRIDLEY FACES DISASTER

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“We’ll kick from the north end,” announced Captain Badger, promptly.

With a grunt of satisfaction, Gridley loped off for its positions.

The band broke loose in a wild hurrah of a tune. Spectators belonging to both sides took up a wild cheer until the referee raised his right hand for silence. The opposing teams were lined up.

Darting forward to center field the referee placed the ball, then ran backwards off the gridiron.

His whistle went to his lips. It was an instant of strained attention.

Trill-ll! It was not a cheer, but a subdued, breathless gasp that rose from the two camps of fans as the opposing lines rushed at each other. Dick could not help a slight groan, for Adams, of Cobber, reached the pigskin first. But Adams kicked it off over the line. Here was Gridley’s prompt chance.

Evans kicked the ball from the twenty-five-yard line. It was stopped by Huddleston, who started to run with it. Luckless plan! Gridley’s line came thundering down upon him almost ere Huddleston had stepped off! Bump! The combatants piled into and over each other. Huddleston was downed on his fifty-yard line. At this instant Dick bethought himself. Placing his mouth to the megaphone, he roared:

“H.S. cheer!”

It rolled out with full volume while the referee was placing the ball. By the time it died out Cobber’s captain could be heard calling:

“Four——nine——thirty-three——eight!”

Trill-ll!

Here, the heavier boys from Cobber began to do their fine work, and Gridley hearts sank.

Cobber made a first down on three plays. It ended in a bad fumble, however, for steady Thompson went down over the ball on the Gridley forty-five-yard line.

“H.S. cheer once more!” bellowed Dick.

The High School boys and girls answered with a will, drawing it out so long as to cause the referee to frown. When it ended Badger’s signals ripped out fast and clear.

The ball came back to Quarter-back Winters. He started Gridley faces to glowing again, for Winters did one of the things that had made the team famous. This was the Gridley fake kick. With any lesser team it would have been good for twenty-five yards. Even against the big, alert fellows from Cobber that fake kick was good for eight yards. But not yet did the full effect of the move come. For Cobber was off-side and Trent burst through the line on a spurt that was good for thirty-three yards.

Two snappy line plays followed that made the Cobber boys feel the cold sweat ooze. It would have been Gridley's first down, but a little slip penalized the home players for fifteen yards.

Most of the people of Gridley back in the seats wore now standing up in their excitement. They had dreaded much from the bigger college boys, but now the spectators saw that Gridley could hold its own for strategy, ruse and speed.

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Cobber lost its temper just a bit, now, before the smiling faces of these High School boys. Some rough playing followed, but the home boys kept their tempers.

Soon Ben Badger signaled another fake kick formation. That was Gridley's specialty for this game, one long planned and worked for. Quarter-back Winters again got the ball. With a handsome forward pass he made it Thompson's, and it went to the enemy's seven-yard line.

"Question——four!" appealed Cheer-Master Prescott, through the megaphone.

Back from twenty boys on the home stand came the heavy query:

"Where's Cobber? Where's Cobber?"

From all the rest of the H.S. fans came the roaring answer:

"Lost! Suitable reward and no questions asked!"

Then the Cobber fans hurled back this hint:

"Brag's a great dog,
Brag's a smart dog,
Brag's a good dog, but-----
Look out for the cat!"

Cobber now developed their own famous bulldog tactics. From the seven-yard line Gridley moved the ball less than two yards in three plays. Cobber got the ball, and then other things began to happen. Cobber's big fellows worried the ball back for eleven yards. Then the visitors, who carried thirty per cent. more weight, began with heavy mass plays. Gridley began to go down, to double up and collapse before that heavy, rough play, in which fatigue, not speed was the object of the opponents.

It was not scientific play, but it was grueling on the High School boys. Even confident Dick Prescott's heart began to sink. Coach Morton was breathing hard.

Unless Gridley could hold the enemy's rush back effectively enough to get the ball once more on downs, the college boys seemed likely to rush it right over the High School goal line.

Had Cobber tried any kicks, Gridley would have had the ball, and would have known what to do with it. But Captain Halsey knew that. He depended, now, wholly on heavy mass rushes and plays.

Yet the Gridley boys were by no means asleep——or lazy.

“I won’t tire our men all out in the first half,” muttered Badger to himself. “But I won’t let them stroll through our line.”

Even the heavy Cobber men, though they advanced doggedly, did not make any too great progress.

Down at the Gridley fifteen-yard line the High School boys developed their greatest stubbornness and strength. So well did they oppose the college boys that, by preventing progress in three successive plays, the home boys again got the ball. They could not move it sufficiently far forward, however. Cobber took the ball again.

“Better let up on the cheers, don’t you think, sir?” Dick inquired.

“Yes,” nodded Coach Morton. “It would only worry our boys now, and they’ve got enough on their minds as it is.”

Again Cobber took the offensive. At the next down a man had to be sent from the field, and a substitute sent out. But the casualty went to Cobber, not to the High School team. That fact gave the major part of the audience grim satisfaction.

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“There they go, now!” muttered Dave Darrin, in disgust. “Nothing is going to stop the big fellows!”

“They’re getting nearer our goal line,” Dick admitted. “But a game is never won until it’s finished. Cobber, as yet, hasn’t even gotten the touchdown!”

A minute later Cobber *had*. To the Gridley onlookers it sent a shock of dismay. The college men certainly had scored.

“It’s Cobber’s beef, not science,” Dick stoutly asserted. “Our fellows play with more speed and real skill. *Say*——look at that!”

For Bentley, of the college eleven, had just missed the kick from field.

Five points for the visitors! The teams swiftly changed ends and lined up. The whistle’s call sent them off to the fray, for there were but three minutes left of the first half.

Cobber won the kick but didn’t carry it far. Gridley got down as far as the enemy’s twenty-yard line. Then the smaller High School boys were fairly pushed back into their own territory, losing twelve yards of their own side of the field.

Trill-ll! The first half was over.

“Sam, can you do better? Do you want to go back on the job?” asked Ben Badger.

“No,” replied the Gridley captain. “It’s been tough on us, but you’ve done everything that I could have done. I’m satisfied, and I believe the coach is.”

“We’ll ask him,” proposed Badger.

Morton was hurrying toward his boys. The coach’s face was impassive. For all his looks showed he might have been congratulating himself on a winning.

“No; there’s no need to change captains,” decided the coach. “It’s like changing a horse in mid-stream. I don’t see, Badger, that you’re lost any tricks that Edgeworth could have made.

“What’s our weak point?” asked Ben.

“There isn’t much of a weak point, anywhere, as far as your play goes,” Mr. Morton responded. “In many respects your play has been better than Cobber’s. Weight is your poor point.”

Nevertheless the coach made several suggestions in the time that was allowed him.

“Whenever you get a proper chance, Captain, and have the ball, open up the play as much as you can. Don’t give Cobber a chance to bump you any when it can be avoided.”

In the meantime the Cobber fans, as was their right, were hurling the most abusive cheers and taunts. Dick, as cheer-master, allowed this to pass until nearly the end of the intermission. At last he gave the sudden call through the megaphone:

“Twenty-three!”

The number sounded ominous; so did the cheer that was designated by it. The Gridley H.S. boys on the grand stand responded hardly more than half-heartedly:

"Com-pan-nee served first!
That’s our steady rule!
Manners the best are taught
In Gridley school!

“But he who waits laughs best!
’Tis but a distance short
’Twixt laugh and weep—–
Your joy’ll be short!"_

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“H.S. cheer!” exhorted Prescott, at once.

It came, with a more thundering volley. Yet Gridley folks stirred uneasily.

“That’s what comes of putting a freshman, without judgment, on the calling job,” muttered Fred Ripley sarcastically.

The whistle blew. Cobber got the ball, and kept it moving. Once there was a brief setback when Gridley got the pigskin and sought to push it back. After four yards, however, Cobber took it and moved down the field with it.

It seemed impossible to offer effective resistance to the heavy college men now.

Gridley hearts sank from sheer weight. Gridley had met more than its match!

CHAPTER XVI

THE FAKE KICK, TWO WAYS

It was almost a touchdown for Cobber when Ben Badger rallied his men enough to fight the college men back some twenty-odd yards. But then the tide turned once more, and Cobber began to fight its way back to the High School goal line.

The spectators had given up hope, all save those who sat in the Cobber seats.

This was to be the first defeat of the season, and the whipping was to come from worthy foemen. Yet are home folks ever satisfied to see their own youngsters beaten?

Defeat was now conceded, however. Even Coach Morton, though his face did not betray him, had given up all hope.

Dick, however, kept calling for the cheers and yells. The student body did their best, but their spirits were low.

Once Morton turned and frowned, but Freshman Prescott did not see him. The coach feared that this jubilant racket would get on the nerves of the Gridley battlers.

“How many minutes will it take Cobber to cross our line?” murmured Dave in Dick’s ear.

“They won’t do it before next year,” Prescott staunchly retorted.

Just then Cobber lost fifteen yards on penalty, and Gridley H.S. had the ball at the moment when it was sadly needed.

“Band, four bars of ‘Hot Time in the Old Town!’” yelled Prescott through the big megaphone.

The leader’s baton fell like a flash. The band itself sharing in the excitement fairly ripped the air out in gallop time.

As Ben Badger heard he straightened up for a moment, shaking his long locks in the wind. A smile crossed his face. Then he bent over the ball for the pass.

“Nine——fourteen, eighteen——seven!” he called.

Evans darted quickly out on his end. Quarter-back Winters moved his feet somewhat to left. Trent, left half-back, shot swiftly away to an altered position.

Captain Halsey, of the college team, saw instantly that it looked like a long pass and a sprint around Gridley’s left end. A football general must change front swiftly. At the signal, Cobber disposed itself to bunch against the High School left.

The whistle blew. Winters got the ball, and made the movements for a kick. Cobber men, in the air on the jump, halted somewhat uncertainly, some of them.

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It was a fake kick, and a royally good one. The ball went to Stearns instead. Out around the right end dashed the little left, with Gridley support thumping over the ground to back him up. But Stearns was the best Gridley runner on the field today. Moreover, he had not been worked as hard as had Evans.

A nimble dodge, and Stearns was past the first Cobber interference.

A howl of delight went up from the home fans.

Then Cobber's secondary defense made a dash for Stearns. The latter found himself balked, so headed straight for them. Through the line he made a dash. It was too much for little Stearns. Down he went, and a groan of disappointment went up from the Gridley seats.

Yet only to one knee went the swift little end. He was up and off again like a shot. One Cobber man wheeled and would have grabbed the little right end, but there was where Frank Thompson played for all there was in him. He pitched forward, falling headlong, and Smith, of Cobber, fell over him.

It was a sprint, now! For an instant the field close to Stearns was clear of opposition.

Wild cheering broke loose. Dick Prescott fairly danced for joy.

Ah! Here came some of the belated Cobber men, supporting their fullback.

There was a heavy crash. Stearns, caught in the midst of the mixup, went down, but he covered the pigskin!

Then the linesman hurried up. The news was so good that it flew from mouth to mouth along the east side boards:

"Forty-two yards!"

Cobber's captain gasped. It had been close playing all afternoon. He had looked for nothing like this. Clearly, Gridley's fake kick tactics were all of the real thing.

For the first time Halsey and his best men felt much of their confidence ooze.

Down almost over the line, Gridley soon had the ball, while the home fans were again standing up and cheering. Then a penalty set the ball back. But Gridley soon had the ball again.

In two plays the doughty High School boys carried the pigskin eight yards. Only nine to go!

As Badger's signals rang out for the third pass, Badger's men were seen to spread. Another fake kick?

Then the ball went backward. Winters, of course, took it. Like magic, while watchful Cobber stood opened up, the Gridley line closed in again. Artful Dodger Winters still had the ball. Thompson, Edgeworth, Badger and Beck butted in solidly behind the lithe quarter-back. The rest of Gridley followed.

Cheek of cheek! The out-weighed High School boys were giving Cobber a dose of Cobber medicine. It was a mass-play——a battering-ram assault.

And Gridley got it over! An inch past the line Winters tripped and went down, covering the ball.

Touchdown!

Five to five a tie score!

"Kick the goal!" came the hoarse appeal from the east side seats.

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“Kick as you never kicked before!”

Gridley fans could fairly hear themselves shake now. Hats were off and waving. The High School girls stood up, frantically waving their crimson and gold banners.

Cool, steady, like one without nerves, Thompson went back into the field and poised himself for the kick.

At the whistle the dull thump of a boot against the pigskin was heard all over the field. The ball arched and soared. Even before it came toward earth a wild “hurrah!” went up from the east side. The ball went straight between the bars!

Score: “Six to five!”

Badger and his young reliables were quietly smiling, now. Captain Halsey began to look glum.

“Four bars of ‘Hot Time’ once more!” begged Dick Prescott, in a voice that sounded as if palsy-touched.

The band blared out while the teams were changing ends.

Once more Cobber got the ball on the kick-off. A massed rush was made for Gridley’s goal, but it didn’t get far. With eleven minutes left to play, and a lead on the score, Badger had resolved on using up all the reserve strength, if need be. Gridley had not yet called on any substitutes, and several capable young “subs” waited just outside the lines, frantic for a call. Let Cobber be rough, if that suited the college men.

Cobber lost the ball on downs.

Then Gridley took the pigskin.

“Play for time,” was Badger’s signaled order.

Not much in the delay line is possible under a vigilant referee, yet all the time that strategy *could* gain was taken advantage of.

Thrice the ball was fought over the center of the gridiron. Then it settled slowly toward the High School goal, making slow, stubbornly fought advances.

Three minutes left to play!

Gridley H.S. got the ball once more, under the distance rule.

Now Badger called out the same signal that had been used for that most effective fake kick.

Captain Halsey smiled as he saw the High School fighters spread out swiftly, just as they had done before.

Halsey thought he knew this time! That same old ruse of dashing around the left end; then a fake kick and a dashing race by Stearns. Halsey's swiftly telegraphed orders disposed his men to meet the former dodge more effectively.

The whistle sounded, and the ball was passed. But what Halsey didn't know was that, the second time this signal was called it meant the players were to do exactly what they seemed spreading out for.

So the ball actually went around the left end this time, Evans making the best sprint that was left in his stiffening muscles.

He covered twenty-four yards before he was brought to earth.

Here was where delay came in. While Cobber was fighting stubbornly to regain the pigskin, the whistle sounded the end of the second half.

Gridley had won from the big enemy!

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Now pandemonium broke loose. Two thousand people leaped up and down, yelling themselves hoarse.

So many hats went into the air that it was a miracle if every man recovered his own headgear.

The band didn't play; the student body didn't sound a yell. What would have been the use? There was too much noise.

Dick made a bound, landing beside the band leader.

"Hustle your men, please! Get out into the field and lead our men off."

It needed quick work, for the players were already leaving the grounds. The wildest fans were getting over the lines, mingling with the late players.

But the band got there on the run. Above all the din Ben Badger was quick to realize the meaning of the new move. He caught his men back, forming them just behind the forming band. Off marched the victorious team to the air of "Hot Time!" That brought down the cheering harder than ever.

While it lasted, Dick and Dave, by frantic movements, succeeded in holding a large proportion of the student body back in their seats.

As soon as the band had reached the far end of the field, and the human racket had died down somewhat, Freshman Prescott succeeded in making himself heard:

"Now! Our final yell of victory!"

This was the High School yell, followed, instantly, by the taunting query:

"Is there any game you *do* play, Cobber?"

But there came no answer from the depths of the gloomy Cobber fans.

CHAPTER XVII

DICK'S "FIND" MAKES GRIDLEY SHIVER

That closed the football season in a blaze of glory. Gridley H.S. had closed the year without a defeat.

The day after Thanksgiving football is deader than marbles. Gridley H.S. boys and girls settled down to study until the holidays came on.

The next thing of note that happened in the student world jarred the whole town. There might have been a much bigger jar, however.

Dave Darrin often worked, Saturday nights, in the express office.

One night in early December he was employed there as usual. At about nine o'clock Dick Prescott and Tom Reade dropped in.

"Pretty near through, old fellow?" Dick asked.

"I will be when the 8:50 gets in and the goods are checked up," replied Dave. "The train is a few minutes late tonight."

There being no one else at the office, except the night manager and two clerks, Dick and Reade felt that they would not be in the way if they waited for Dave.

Twenty minutes later the wagon drove up with the packages and cases that had arrived on the 8:50 train.

"You two can give a hand, if you like," invited Dave, as the packages were being passed up to the counter, checked and taken care of.

Prescott and Reade pitched in, working with a will.

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“Here, don’t shoot this box through as fast as you’ve done the others,” counseled Dick, as he picked up a small box, some eighteen inches long and about a foot square at the end. “The label says, ‘Extra fragile. Value two hundred and fifty dollars.’”

Dave reached out to receive it, as Dick laid it carefully on the counter.

“Packages of that value have to be handled with caution,” muttered Dave. “When a fellow puts on a valuation like that, it means that he intends to make claim for any damage whatever.”

“Hold on,” muttered Dick, eyeing the counter. “There’s something leaking from the box now.”

Dave took his hands away, then bent over to have a look with Dick.

A very tiny puddle of some very thick, syrupy stuff was slowly forming on the counter.

“I wonder if the contents *have* been damaged?” muttered Dave, uneasily. Then added, in a whisper:

“The night manager will blame us, and hold me responsible, if there *is* any damage.”

Both boys carefully inspected the tiny puddle for a few moments.

“Say, don’t touch the box again,” counseled Prescott, uneasily. “Do you know what that stuff looks to me like, Dave?”

“What?”

“Do you remember the thick stuff that Dr. Thornton showed us in IV. Chemistry the other day?”

“Great Scott!” breathed Dave Darrin, anxiously. “You don’t mean nitroglycerine?”

“But I *do*!” Dick nodded, energetically.

“Wow! Don’t stir from here. I’ll call the night manager.”

Night Manager Drowan came over at once, eyeing the box and the tiny pool of thick stuff.

“I never saw nitroglycerine but once,” remarked Mr. Drowan, nervously. “I should say this stuff looks just like it. We won’t take any chances, anyway. Dave, you go to the telephone, and notify the police. Your friends can stand guard over the box so that no one gets a chance to go near it.”

But, while Dave was at the ’phone, Mr. Drowan hung over the box as though fascinated.

“It takes fire to set this stuff off, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“No,” Dick replied. “If it’s nitroglycerine in that box, a light, sharp blow might be enough to do the trick. At least, that was about what Dr. Thornton said.”

Dave came back with word that the police would send some one at once.

“They asked me whom the stuff was addressed to,” Dave continued, “and I had to admit that I didn’t know.”

“It’s addressed to Simon Tripps, to be called for. Identification by letter herewith,” read Dick Prescott, from the label.

“Yes; I have the letter,” nodded Mr. Drowan. “It contains the signature of the party who’s to call for the box. That’s all the identification that’s asked.”

At this moment Officer Hemingway, in plain clothes, came in, followed by a policeman in uniform.

Hemingway took a look at the stuff slowly oozing out of a corner of the box.

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“My bet is nitroglycerine——what the bank robbers call ‘soup,’” declared Hemingway, almost in a whisper. “All right; we’ll take it up to the station house. Then we’ll send for Dr. Thornton, who is the best chemist hereabouts. As soon as we get this stuff to the station house I’ll hustle back and hide against the coming of Mr. Tripps. If he comes before I get back, jump on the fellow and hold him for me, no matter what kind of a fight he puts up.”

Dave gazed after the retreating figures of the policemen.

“Bright man, that Hemingway,” he remarked. “If Tripps shows up, we are to jump on him and nail him——no matter if he hauls out two six-shooter and turns ’em on us”

“We can grab any one man, and hold him,” returned Dick, confidently. “All we’ve got to do is to get at him from all sides. See here, Dave, if a fellow comes in and tells you he’s Tripps, you repeat the name as though you weren’t sure. As soon as we hear the name, Tom and I can jump on him from behind, and you can sail in in front. Eh, Reade?”

“It sounds good,” nodded Tom. “I’ll take a chance on it, Dick, with you to engineer the job.”

In ten minutes Officer Hemingway was back. He stepped into a cupboard close to the counter, prepared for the coming of Tripps.

Half an hour later the police station’s officer in charge telephoned that Dr. Thornton had carefully opened the box, and had declared that it contained four pounds of nitroglycerine. Nor had Dr. Thornton taken any chances of mistake. He had taken a minute quantity of the suspected stuff out in the yard back of the station house, and had exploded it.

At a moment when the office was empty of patrons Mr. Drowan stepped into the cupboard for a moment, as though searching for something.

“How late do you stay open?” whispered Hemingway.

“Ten o’clock, usually, on Saturday nights, but we’ll keep open as late as you want, officer.”

“Better keep open until midnight, then.”

So they did, Dick telephoning his parents at the store to explain that he was at the express office helping Dave.

Midnight came and went. A few minutes after the new day had begun Hemingway came out of the cupboard.

“You may as well close up, Drowan,” the plain clothes man decided. “The fellow who calls himself Tripps isn’t going to show up. If he had been going to claim his box he’d have been here before this.”

“You think he got scared away?” asked the night manager.

“The fellow was probably keeping watch on this office. He saw what happened, and decided not to run his neck into a noose. You’ll never have any word from Tripps.”

“Isn’t it just barely possible,” hinted one of the clerks, “that the man wanted the stuff for some legitimate purpose?”

“A man who knows how to use nitroglycerine,” retorted Hemingway, gruffly, “also knows that it’s against the law to ship nitroglycerine unlabeled. He also knows that it’s against the law for an express company to transport the stuff on a car that is part of a passenger train. So this fellow who calls himself Tripps is a crook. We haven’t caught him, but we’ve stopped him from using his ‘soup’ the way he had intended to use it.”

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“Wonder what he did want to do with it?” mused Dick Prescott.

“There are any one of twenty ways in which the fellow might have used the stuff criminally,” replied the plain clothes man. “Of course, for one thing, it could be used to blow open a safe with. But safecracking, nowadays, is done by ordinary robbers, and they’re able to carry in a pocket or a satchel the small quantity of ‘soup’ that it takes to blow the lock of a safe door, or the door off the safe.”

After thinking a few minutes, Hemingway went to the telephone, calling up the chief of police at the latter’s home. The plain clothes man stated the case, and suggested that the story be told to “The Blade” editor for publication in the morning issue. Then, if anyone in town had any definite suspicion why so much nitroglycerine should be needed in that little city, he could communicate his suspicions or his facts to the police.

“The chief agrees to my plan,” nodded Hemingway, leaving the ’phone. “Me for ‘The Blade’ office.”

“See here,” begged Dick, earnestly, “if there’s to be a good newspaper story in this, please let me turn it over to Len Spencer. He’s one of our best newspaper men. He’ll write a corking good story about this business—and, besides, I’m under some personal obligations to him.”

“So I’ve heard,” replied the plain clothes man, with a twinkle in his eyes. Hemingway heard a good deal in his saunterings about Gridley. He had picked up the yarn about Dick & Co., Len Spencer and the “dead ones.”

“So that ‘The Blade’ gets it, I don’t care who writes the story,” replied the policeman, good-humoredly.

Dick swiftly called up “The Morning Blade’ office. Spencer was there, and came to the telephone.

“How’s news tonight?” asked Prescott, after naming himself.

“Duller than a lecture,” rejoined Len.

“Would you like a hot one for the first page?” pursued Dick.

“Would I? Would a cat lap milk, or a dog run when he had a can tied to his tail? But don’t string me, Dick. There’s an absolute zero on news tonight.”

“Then you stay right where you are for two or three minutes,” Dick begged his reporter friend. “Officer Hemingway and some others are coming down to see you. You’ll want to save three or four columns, I guess.”

“Oh, now, see here, Dick-----” came Reporter Spencer’s voice, in expostulation.

“Straight goods,” Dick assured him. “When I say that I mean it. And, this time, I not only mean it, but *know* it. Wait! We’ll be right down to your office.”

Nor did it take Len Spencer long to realize that he had in hand the big news sensation of the hour for the people of Gridley.

Everyone in Gridley either wondered or shivered the next morning at breakfast table.

Four pounds of nitroglycerine are enough to work fearful havoc and mischief.

CHAPTER XVIII

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FRED SLIDES INTO THE FREEZE

Monday's "Blade" contained additional light on the nitroglycerine affair——or what passed as "light."

Len Spencer and the local police had discovered that at least three of the wealthiest men in town had received, during the last few weeks, threatening letters from cranks.

These cranks had all demanded money, under pain of severe harm if they failed to turn over the money.

It now developed that the police chief and Officer Hemingway had, some time before, arrested a nearly harmless lunatic, who, it was believed had written the letters. The man with the unbalanced mind did not appear dangerous, yet, in view of his threats, he had been quietly "railroaded" off to all asylum for the insane.

Now, the arrival of four pounds of nitroglycerine at the local express office was believed to show that the lunatic had had comrades, or else that the crazy man had been used merely as a tool.

Hemingway hurried off to the asylum, to interview the unfortunate one. All the plain clothes man succeeded in getting, however, was a rambling talk that didn't make sense.

Monday's "Blade" announced that the chief of police had been authorized to offer a reward of five hundred dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the party or parties behind the criminal shipment of the giant explosive to Gridley.

Everyone believed that the frightened rich men had combined to offer the reward. Many wondered that the offered reward was not larger.

All of the student body at the High School were busy talking about the affair in the big assembly room before the session opened.

"I see where my parents have made a great mistake," sighed Frank Thompson.

"How?" demanded Ben Badger.

"Instead of wasting my time at the High School they should have apprenticed me to a good journeyman detective," grumbled Thomp.

"Oh, but couldn't I use that five hundred, if only my training had fitted me for such deeds as running down a nitroglycerine peddler!"

"It isn't anything to joke about," shuddered one of the girls. "It's awful! Would four pounds of the dreadful stuff destroy the town of Gridley?"

“No,” Badger informed her; “but it would be enough to blow up several wood-piles and destroy a lot of clean Monday wash.”

“There you go joking again,” protested the girl, and turned away.

“Oh, well,” declared Fred Ripley, “we must possess ourselves with patience. We shall soon know the whole truth.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Purcell.

“It’s one of the surest things conceivable,” railed Ripley. “That bright constellation of freshmen known under the musical title of Dick & Co. will solve the whole affair wit, in forty-eight hours. Indeed, I’m not sure but Dick & Co., even at this moment, carry the secret looked in their breasts.”

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Fred glanced quickly around him to see how much of a laugh this had started. To his chagrin he found his bantering had fallen flat.

“Oh, well,” gaped Dowdell, gazing out of the window near which he stood, “I know one important fact about the mystery.”

“What’s that?” asked half a dozen quickly.

“None of the five hundred is destined to come my way.

“That jest saddens a lot of us with the same conviction,” muttered Ted Butler, shaking his head.

“But this I *do* know,” continued Dowdell, “if the weather continues cold there’ll be some elegant skating before the week is out.”

Gridley did not slumber over the nitroglycerine mystery. Len Spencer, though he could gain no actual information, managed to have something interesting on the subject in each morning’s “Blade.” The people of Gridley talked of the mystery everywhere.

There was one other mild sensation this week that lasted for a part of a day. Tip Scammon came up for his trial. He pleaded guilty to the thefts from the High School locker room, and also guilty to the charge of entering the Prescott rooms in order to hide his loot in Dick’s trunk. By way of leniency toward a first offender the court let Tip off with a sentence of fourteen months in the penitentiary. This sentence, by good behavior on the part of Tip, would shrink to ten months of actual imprisonment.

In every way the police and the prosecuting attorney tried to make Tip reveal the name of his confederate. But Tip, for reasons of his own, maintained absolute, dogged silence on this head, and went to the penitentiary without having named the person who met him in the alleyway that evening when Tip himself was caught.

The promise of skating was made good. Wednesday afternoon it was discovered that the ice in Gaylor’s Cove was in splendid condition, and strong enough to bear.

Thursday a series of High School racing contests were planned for Saturday afternoon. There was so much money left over in the Athletics Committee’s treasury that it was voted to offer a series of individual trophies for boy and girl skaters in different events.

Moreover, in these skating events members of the freshman class were to be allowed to compete.

“Now, see here, fellows,” urged Dick, when he had gotten his partners aside, “some of the freshman class ought to be winners of some of the events. We want to give our class a good name. And, out of the six of us, there ought to be one winner for

something. I wish you'd all do your best to get in shape. You'll all go over to the cove with me this afternoon, of course."

They did. More than a hundred of the student body, most of them boys, were on the ice that afternoon.

Some went scurrying by for all they were worth. These were training for the races.

Others gathered in the less traveled parts of the cove, which was a large one, and practiced the "fancy" feats. Tom Reade and Dan Dalzell put themselves in this class. Dick and his other partners went in for speed.

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Friday afternoon there was an even larger attendance.

Gaylor's Cove was about half a mile long, with an average width of a quarter of a mile. At the middle the cove was open for a long way upon the river.

At some points on the river proper the ice was strong enough to bear. Near Gaylor's Cove, however, the river current was so swift that the river ice at this point looked thin and treacherous. No one ventured out on the ice just beyond the cove.

Friday night many a High School boy and girl studied the sky. There was no sign of storm, nor did the conditions seem to threaten a thaw. Saturday morning was cold and clear. The temperature, at noon, was just above freezing point, though not enough so to bring about a "thaw" in the ice.

By one o'clock Saturday afternoon Gaylor's Cove was a scene of great activity. Two thirds of the High School students were there, most of them on skates. There were three or four hundred other youngsters, and more than a hundred grown-ups.

"All we need is the band," laughed Dick Prescott, as he skated slowly along with Laura Bentley.

"The click-clack of the skates is enough for me," Laura replied.

"You are not down in any of the girls' contests, are you?" he asked.

"No; does that disappoint you, Dick?"

"N-no," he said, slowly. "Still, it's fine to see every event all but crowded."

"In how many events are you entered?" asked the girl.

"Only one, the freshman's mile. That will be swift work, and there are two turns, the way the course is to be laid out."

"Why didn't you enter more of the freshman events?" Laura asked.

"Well, it will take a lot of good wind to keep going at a swift pace for a mile. I want to save all my strength and wind for that one event."

"What is the prize in the freshman's mile?" asked Laura, fumbling in her muff for the card of the day's events.

"You noticed that handsome Canadian toboggan, didn't you?"

“The one with the side hand-rails?” Laura asked, looking up brightly into his face. “Yes; that ought to have been one of the prizes in the girls’ events.”

“Why?” queried Dick, looking a bit disconcerted.

“Why, those hand-rails are meant for timid girls to take hold of. A boy would never want a toboggan with hand-rails.”

“Perhaps the fellow who’s going to win the freshman’s mile expects to invite some of the young ladies to go out tobogganing with him,” hinted young Prescott.

“Is it *fixed* who shall win that race?” demanded Laura, teasingly.

“Hardly that,” Dick rejoined, dryly.

“Then how do you know the coming owner’s intentions, if you don’t know who is going to win the race?” Miss Bentley insisted.

“Well, you see, it’s this way?” Dick admitted, “I’ve made up my mind to win that race.”

“So you regard the race as being as good as won by yourself?” smiled the physician’s daughter.

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“It’s one of the rules of Dick & Co.,” Prescott answered, as they turned and skated slowly back toward the center of the cove, “when we go into anything we consider it as good as won from the outset.”

“Well, I like that spirit,” Laura admitted. “Faint heart never yet won anything but a spill.”

Laura had her card out by this time, and was studying it leisurely, trusting to her companion to guide her.

“I see Fred Ripley is entered for the grand event in fancy skating,” she observed.

“Yes; are you interested in him?”

Something in the directness of the question caused the girl to bite her lips.

“Now, that’s hardly fair, Dick,” she cried, flushing with vexation. “No; the fact is, I’m hoping he’ll lose.”

“Why?”

“Because, Fred has never been very nice to you, Dick.”

That was direct enough, and Dick flushed with pleasure.

“Thank you, Laura; that’s more handsome than what I said to you.”

“I accept your apology,” she laughed. “Look! There goes Fred Ripley now! How foolish of him.”

Fred was heading straight out of the cove toward the river. He was a fine skater, and now he was showing off at his best. He had adapted a “turn promenade” step from roller skating, and was whirling along, turning and half dancing as he sped along. It was a graceful, rhythmical performance. Despite the fact that young Ripley was not widely liked, his present work drew considerable applause from the spectators.

That applause acted like incense under the young man’s nostrils. He determined to go farther out, maintaining his present step unbroken.

“Look out, Ripley!” warned Thomp. “The ice won’t bear out there.”

Fred didn’t reply by as much as a look. He kept on out toward the thin ice.

Cra-a-ack! Splash! The thin ice had broken. Ripley, moving backwards, did not realize his fix until his feet; shot into the water. Down he came on his back, breaking more of the ice.

A yell, and he was gone below the surface.

And now everybody seemed shouting at once. A hundred people ran to and fro, shouting out what ought to be done.

“Get a rope! Run for a doctor! Bring fence rails! Telephone for the police!”

That’s the usual way with a crowd, to think up things that others ought to do.

Dick Prescott espied Dave Darrin ahead. Dropping Laura’s arm without a word, Dick skated swiftly up to Dave, called Darrin, then lightning. As he worked young Prescott shot out a few hurried orders.

Then another great cry went up. Dick Prescott was sprinting fast toward the thin ice. Close to where Fred Ripley had gone down there was another great rent in the ice.

Dick Prescott was “in the freeze,” in quest of his enemy!

CHAPTER XIX

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DICK & CO. SHOW SOME TEAM WORK

So suddenly and heavily did he break through the thin ice that Dick went underneath the surface.

“Help!” roared Fred, in a frenzy, as he came to the surface.

The skates on his feet clogged all his movements, and acted like lead.

“There’s Ripley, but where’s Prescott?” shouted several.

“A-a-ah!”

That last cry went up as a sound of relief, when Prescott’s brown-haired pate, hatless, bobbed up close to where he had gone down.

“Good boy, Prescott!”

“Go in and get Ripley.”

“Save yourself, anyway! Don’t be over-foolish!”

A dozen more cries went up from cove and shore.

Yet it is doubtful if Prescott heard any of them.

In the first instant that his eyes came above the level of the water, Dick took in the details of Ripley’s whereabouts.

Dick had to calculate at lightning speed.

“O Prescott,” gasped Fred, when he saw his would-be rescuer, “can’t you break the ice between us? I can’t keep up much longer.”

“Get hold of the edge of the ice, Ripley,” called Dick. “Just rest lightly on it. Don’t try to make it bear your weight——it won’t! It’ll help hold you up, though, if you keep cool.”

“Cool?” groaned Fred. “I’m freezing. In pity’s name get to me quickly.”

Fred was so wholly self-centered that it didn’t occur to him that the freshman must be just as chilled as he himself was.

Dick’s legs ached with the cold chill of the icy water. He was free of the weight of skates, however, and he trod water during the few seconds that he needed for making up his mind what it was best to do.

Much depended upon the help that those on shore gave, but Dick had left his orders with Dave Darrin, and he trusted the shore end to his capable lieutenant.

Fred, though hardly more than able to keep himself afloat, managed to reach the nearest edge of ice.

He clutched at it eagerly, then, disregarding excellent advice, he tried to climb out upon it.

There was another crash. With another yell, Ripley sank again, to the horror of those on shore.

But Prescott did not see this. The freshman, after trying to calculate the exact distance across the intervening ice, dived below the glassy surface. He was swimming, now, under the ice. As he swam the freshman kept his eyes open, swimming close to the ice, yet not touching it.

So he came up, in the open. But where was Fred?

“Ripley just sank!” came the hoarse chorus from shore and cove.

This was serious enough. He who sinks for the second time in icy waters, especially when hampered by skates, may very likely not come up again.

“It must have been about here that he went down,” calculated Prescott, deliberately, as he swam through the open water. “Now, then!”

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Down went Dick. To those looking on, it was heroic——sublime? Yet it looked as though the rescuer must be dooming himself.

“One Prescott is worth a dozen Ripleys” murmured one man who, unable to swim, was obliged to stand looking uselessly on.

There were still many who were shouting confusing advice as to what others ought to do. A few were even running about trying to do something.

Dave Darrin was actually “on the job.”

He had pressed Dick’s other partners into service and as many of the High School boys as possible. They got off their skates in a rush.

“Tom,” shouted Dave, “you and Greg get some of the fellows and rush down as many ties as you can from that pile by the railroad tracks. Dalzell, you and Harry get down at the edge of send him your way. Make a raft by laying four ties side by side, and lash the ends. Do it as quick as a flash. I’ll be there by that time.”

Tom and Greg quickly had a dozen men running for railroad ties, a pile of which stood less than an eighth of a mile away.

By the time that the man with ropes arrived, and two more behind him, bringing more, there were a dozen railroad ties on the ice by the outer edge of the cove. Harry Hazelton and Dan snatched short lengths of rope and knotted them around either end of the raft.

“Some of you men make another raft, just like that one!” shouted Dave, who, at the time, was busily engaged in making a noose at one end of a long coil of half-inch rope.

“Here, you two men get hold of the other end of this,” ordered Dave, running up with the coil of rope.

Then, hardly waiting to make sure that they had the rope, Dave turned to Harry and Dan, calling to them to help him push the raft out beyond the cove. A dozen men and boys tried to help, all at once, but Dave and Harry saw to it that no speed was lost by blundering.

The raft was not difficult to push out over the ice.

“Now, let me have it alone,” shouted Dave. “The ice may break at any point beyond.”

So Dave tugged and pushed, guiding the small raft before him.

Cra-ack! Dave and the raft went through the ice, but Darrin quickly climbed up astride of the ties.

Out beyond, Dick was holding up Fred Ripley, whom he had found and brought to the surface. Fred's eyes were nearly closed. After his second drop below, the Ripley lad was nearly spent.

Glancing back, Dave saw that another raft was being pushed out by the two men who held the rope that was noosed under his shoulders.

"Now, halt where you are!" Dave Darrin shouted back. "Toss me a long rope that I can throw out to Prescott!"

The rope came swirling. Dave caught it easily enough. Then, still sitting on the raft, his legs, of course, in the water, Darrin recoiled the rope.

"Can you spare a hand to catch, Dick?" shouted Dave.

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“Surely!” came back the steady answer.

The coil flew out across the thin ice. One end splashed in the water. Guiding the all but helpless Fred, Dick swam to the rope’s end.

Further back the two men who held to the rope connecting with Dave had seated themselves across the second raft. If the ice broke at *that* point they would have little difficulty in making themselves safe.

“Ripley, stir yourself!” ordered Dick. “Can you take hold of this rope, and keep hold of it” Can you climb across the thin ice, holding onto the rope and being towed if the ice breaks?”

“I——I——I’m afraid,” chattered Ripley. “You come with me!”

“It’ll be a good deal easier if you can go first, and alone,” spoke the freshman, rather sternly. “I think I can keep myself afloat until you get over to solid ice. Then the rope can be thrown back to me.”

“I’m afraid, I tell you,” insisted Fred, his teeth clicking against each other. “Can’t you see that I’m all in?”

“You’ll have us both all in, if you don’t get some courage together,” young Prescott insisted. “Come, be a man, Ripley!”

“I’m freezing to death here,” moaned Ripley, closing his eyes.

Somehow——he could never tell just how, afterwards, Dick managed to slip the rope under Fred’s shoulders. With infinite effort——for he had to keep them both afloat, the freshman double-knotted the rope.

“Come, now, you’ve got to help yourself across the ice, while Dave hauls on the line,” urged Dick.

Fred made a motion as though to bestir himself but he did it so feebly that Prescott gave him a sharp pinch.

“Ouch!” flared Fred, now seeming to be wide awake. “Prescott, you have the upper hand here. Don’t be a bully!”

“I don’t want to,” spoke Dick, quietly, trying to keep his own teeth from rattling. “But you’ve got to stir yourself, or else I must do it for you. Now, get started over the thin ice. Dave will haul. Never mind if the ice breaks under you; the rope is tied around you. You’re sure to be hauled to safety if you help yourself. Now, then, Dave! Begin to haul in!”

It needed another pinch to make Fred Ripley bestir himself properly. He half whimpered in protest, but Prescott was past minding *that*.

Hardly had Ripley gotten his full weight upon the ice than it broke under him. He splashed into the water with a great howl, but alert Dave Darrin hauled in just enough of the rope. Ripley was safe, and could make the next attempt to get out on the ice.

Meanwhile, Prescott swam to another part of the ice edge. He rested his hands on that edge, not heavily, but just enough for some support. At the same time he kept his tired, aching, almost frozen legs in motion just to keep himself from growing any more numb.

Four times Fred Ripley broke through the thin ice, but each time Dave Darrin, astride the first raft, pulled in on the rope just in time.

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After getting himself out of the water for the fifth time, Ripley crawled over stronger ice, and went on past the hole in which Dave sat on the raft.

Then Ripley was able to get to his feet, tottering toward the shore, shaking as though with fever and chills.

A cheer went up from those who watched. The enthusiasm would have been vastly greater had not the crowd had its eyes on Dick Prescott, who must yet be saved if aid could reach him before his numbed limbs could sustain him no longer.

“Get that rope off, Ripley,” bawled Dave Darrin. “Hurry! I must throw it to Dick, or he’ll go down!”

“I can’t get it off,” mumbled Fred, tugging vainly, almost aimlessly, as he still moved coveward.

As he was on staunch ice, now, three or four men ran toward him. One, with a sharp knife, waved the others away and quickly slashed the noose away from Fred’s shoulders.

“Go on, you pup!” grumbled the man with the knife. “Now, we’ll try to get help to the *man*!”

Fred was not too far spent to flash angrily at that taunt.

“You’d better be careful whom you speak to like that!” snarled Ripley. “You’re a low-bred fellow, anyway!”

But the man who had slashed the rope free didn’t even hear. He had turned toward Darrin, to make sure that Dave could draw the rope toward him fast enough.

“One of you people get Ripley’s skates off for him, and help him ashore,” called Tom Reade.

“Why don’t *you*?” some one in the crowd answered.

“Because my job,” retorted Reade, “is keeping my eyes on my chum, ready to help if anything comes up that I can do.”

Four or five hurried to Fred’s aid. He had been walking on his skates, which, at best, is an awkward style of locomotion. Two men held him up, while two of the H.S. boys quickly took off his skates. After that Fred, leaning on one of the H.S. boys, made much quicker time to the shore.

Here a man with a sleigh waited.

“Pile him in here,” directed the driver. “Dr. Gilbert has gone up to the Avery House and is getting things ready. I’ll have Ripley back in a jiffy.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” sang out a boy in the freshman class. “But the main thing is to hustle back and be ready to take Dick Prescott.”

“And I’ll pray all through the round trip that you may get Prescott back to shore alive,” fervently replied the driver, as he brought the whip down across the horse’s back.

Dave Darrin, too, was chilled. That was why, when he had drawn all the rope in and had coiled it, he made a throw that fell short.

“Courage, Dick, old fellow,” he shouted. “I’ll get it to you, in a jiffy.”

Nervously, quickly, Dave hauled in the rope. He coiled rapidly, yet with care.

“Now, may Heaven give me the strength to throw this coil far enough to do the trick!” prayed Dave Darrin, as he made the second cast.

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There was frenzy behind that throw. Hurrah! There was four feet of rope to spare as it splashed into the open part where Dick still hung, though he was fast weakening.

“There’s a noose on the end——I fixed it, Dick! Get it over your head and under your shoulders!” bawled Dave Darrin.

It was only the coolness of a last desperate hope that enabled the freshman to adjust the noose sufficiently.

“All r-r-r-i-ight!” he called, unable to make any further effort to stop the rattling of his teeth.

“Come on, then!” cheered Dave.

It was team play between two freshmen, but it was worked out. Dick, after a while, reached solid ice. Tom Reade and Dan Dalzell risked themselves a good deal in going far out to meet him. But they got their leader and rushed him toward the cove.

Soon a dozen H.S. boys were running around Dick. Some of them had him upon their shoulders; others were trying to help.

As they rushed him across the cove to the sleigh that had just arrived, the cheering was deafening.

Others in the crowd had already run up along the road, which was lined as Dick and Darrin were driven along as fast as the horse could go. Tom Reade stood on the runners behind. As soon as the door of the hotel was reached, Reade aided the driver in rushing the boys inside.

Even here the cheering followed them in volleys.

“Come on——into a cold room with you, at first,” ordered Dr. Gilbert, appearing, while a dozen H.S. boys came in his wake. “You don’t want to get near a fire yet. Strip them, both, lads, and rub them down for all you’re worth. Don’t mind peeling a little skin off!”

Dick and Dave were rushed into a room. With so many hands to help, they were soon stripped. Then rough Turkish towels were plied upon them until even their skins began to show the red of blood and life.

“Now, wrap blankets about them, and bring them into a warm room,” ordered the doctor.

As they entered the other room they espied Fred Ripley, already seated in an arm-chair by the stove, a bowl of something hot in one hand.

The driver of the sleigh now came in.

“You lads will want something warm and dry to put on,” he declared. “Give me your orders. The distance isn’t far. I’ll drive to your homes and get the clothes and things that you want.”

“No, thank you,” returned Ripley, stiffly. “I’ve already had a telephone message sent, and my father’s auto will bring out what I need.”

“But you youngsters will want something?” asked the driver, turning to the plucky freshmen.

Dick and Dave stated their requests, Prescott adding:

“But please be sure to make our parents understand that we’re safe. We don’t want them seared to death.”

Fred Ripley took a long swallow of the steaming stuff in his bowl. As he did so he took a furtive glance in the direction of the freshmen.

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Was he going to attempt to thank them for having risked their own lives to help him back to safety?

CHAPTER XX

OUT FOR THAT TOBOGGAN!

Ben Badger came to the shore edge of the ice, megaphone in hand announcing in stentorian tones:

“Our friends are safe——even jolly. The sports will now go on!”

First on the card was a free-for-all dash of a half mile, standing start. The trophy was a regulation target revolver.

Badger, of the first class, and Purcell, of the sophomore, held the lead and all but tied each other at the outset. Third in order came Stearns, the agile little right end of the eleven. When half the distance had been traveled it was noticed that Stearns was creeping up on the leaders.

“Look out, Ben, or the little fellow will get you!” roared friends.

Stearns continued to gain, slowly. Purcell dropped back to third place. None of the other eight in the race seemed likely to do anything effective.

“A little more steam, Ben!”

“Stearns, you can get it!”

In the last eighth of the distance Stearns made good. Summoning all his football wind and speed the little right end closed and shot ahead. Not once in the remainder of the course did Ben Badger quite catch up with his smaller opponent. Stearns won by some fifteen yards.

The racers came slowly back, breathing harder than usual. As soon as jovial Ben felt equal to the task of further announcing, he picked up the megaphone, shouting:

“As I didn’t win, all the further events are postponed!”

There was stupefied silence for a few moments. Grown people and the students looked from one to another. Then a guffaw started that swelled to a chorus of laughter.

“The next event on the card,” called Ben, satisfied with the effect of his joke, “is the free-for-all fancy skating event. The contestants will come before the judges one at a time. Each entrant is limited to two minutes, actual time.”

There should have been some girls entered in this event, but there were none. Six H.S. boys from the different classes came forward.

“Fred Ripley loses his chance,” muttered some one.

“He *had* his chance. A fellow who prefers to skate into the freeze is counted out,” replied Thomp.

Just as the contestants were moving out Greg Holmes came hurrying down to the ice.

“Am I too late?” he called.

“Not if you think you’ve got anything good,” replied Badger.

Greg promptly proceeded to put on his skates, covertly watching the performance of the first fellow to show off. It was good work that Greg watched, but he thought he could beat it.

“You’ll have to go last on the list,” nodded Ben, as Greg came skating up.

Greg merely nodded, though inwardly he grinned. “That just suits me,” he told himself. “The fellow who skates last will be freshest in the minds of the judges.”

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When it came Greg's turn he avoided most of the fancy figures that the other fellows had shown off amid much applause. Still, Greg showed a bewildering assortment of "eights," "double-eights" and some magnificent work along the "turn promenade" order that Ripley had been doing before the accident.

Then Greg came in, promenading backward on his skates.

"I'm going to fall," he called to the judges, "but it will be intentional."

"Fall it is, then," nodded Sam Edgeworth, one of the judges.

Greg was moving jauntily along, still doing the backward promenade. Suddenly one of his skates appeared to catch against the other. Down went Greg, backwards. Despite his announcement the moment before, a sympathetic murmur went up from many of the onlookers.

But Greg, sitting down suddenly as he did, pivoted around like a streak. Throwing his hands back of his head, he sprang to his feet. At the first he was doing the forward promenade. The whole manoeuvre, including the fall, had occupied barely four seconds. Now, wheeling into the back promenade Greg glided before the judges.

"Time," called the holder of the watch.

"I'm willing," nodded Greg. "And I'm willing any contestant who wants should try my stunt before the verdict is given."

The conference between the judges did not last long and Greg got the decision.

"The freshman mile will come along later," announced Ben, through the megaphone. "The committee want to put in a freak race first."

The "freak" was a quarter mile, nearly go-as-you-please. In this race each contestant had on his left skate, but no skate on the right foot. The contestant who reached the finish line first won——"even if he slides on his back," Ben announced, sagely.

Tom Reade hurried onto the ice as one of the entrants in this race. He had practiced it well, and won it easily, securing a silver medal. Greg's prize had been a gold medal, but over this fact Tom allowed himself to feel no envy or disappointment.

Several other events came along in quick succession. Everyone seemed to forget that the freshman mile had not yet been skated.

It was called last on the list. Just as the skaters were moving forward some one detected a figure hurrying down the slope over the snow.

“Here comes Dick Prescott!”

“Is he going into the race after all?”

A lively burst of cheers greeted the freshman as he reached the edge of the ice.

Dick looked as cheery and as rosy as ever. No onlooker could see that Prescott’s late adventure had injured him in the least.

“Going to race, Dick?” called some one.

“Surest thing,” laughed the freshman, “if I can find my skates. If not, I’m going to try to borrow a pair of the right size.”

“Here are your skates,” called Laura Bentley, gliding forward over the ice. “I picked them up for you, and I’ve been holding ’em ever since.

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“That’s what I call mighty good of you,” glowed Dick. “Thank you a thousand times.”

Dick sat down on a wooden box. He could have had the services of half a dozen seniors to fasten on his skates, but he preferred to do it for himself.

Clamps adjusted, and skates tested, Dick struck off leisurely, going up before the starter and judges. These were grouped near the starting line.

“Standing start,” announced Ben. “Each man exactly to the line. Pistol signal. False starts barred, and the usual penalties for fouling. Get on line, all!”

Then the starter moved forward, pistol in hand.

“On your marks!”

“Get set!”

Bang!

Dick, at the left end of the line, crouched forward somewhat. Nearly the whole of his right runner rested on the ice. His left foot was well forward, the toe of the skate dug well into the ice. His right arm pointed ahead, his left behind.

Crack! At the sound of the shot Dick let his right foot spring into the air. As it came down, ahead, he gave a vigorous thrust with his left. The style of start was his own, but it worked to a charm. A hearty cheer went up when the spectators saw that Dick was leading by five yards.

At the first turn, however, Prescott’s adherents——and they were many this afternoon ——felt a thrill of disappointment. Walter Hewlett, whose skating had been strong and steady so far, passed Dick at the turn.

“Hardly fair, after all,” murmured several. “*Of course*, after what he’s been through, no matter how much nerve Prescott may have, he can’t be anything like up to his usual form.”

Had Dick heard them he would have smiled. He knew that the skating was warming him up and taking away whatever of the chill had been left.

As they neared the second turn the distance between Dick and Hewlett was about fifteen yards. The other freshmen were far enough behind both not to appear to count.

Now Prescott turned on steam. He reached the second turn only eight yards behind Hewlett, and that latter freshman made the poorer turn.

Down the home stretch now! Dick began to work deep breathing for all he was worth. Instead of taking slow, deep breaths, he breathed rapidly, pumping his lungs full of air.

That *rapid* deep breathing started his heart to working faster, sent the blood bounding through his arteries.

It would have been exhausting if carried out too long. But now, on what was left of the home stretch, it acted almost like pumping oxygen into his lungs.

Swiftly the distance melted.

“Hurrah!” rang the yell. “There goes Prescott ahead!”

Not only ahead, but gaining in the lead. Five yards to the good, then ten, twelve, fifteen. Dick Prescott shot over the finish line a good eighteen yards ahead. Then the victor came to a stop, panting but happy.

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Five minutes later, when all the congratulations were over, he skated up beside Laura Bentley.

“You saved my skates for me, Laura, and brought me luck all through. I want *you* to have the first ride on that toboggan.”

CHAPTER XXI

THANKS SERVED WITH HATE

It didn’t take long for the Gridley boys who were most interested in athletics to figure up that three out of the eight prizes offered had gone to the freshman class.

More than that, the three freshmen winners were all members of the firm of Dick & Co., Limited.

“Saturday’s work, and some other things, show us that Dick & Co. are going to be heard from a whole lot in the athletics of future years at this school,” Ben told Dick at recess Monday morning. “Whew! But I’m sorry I’m not going to be here to watch the progress of you freshmen!”

Monday afternoon, while he was eating the midday meal, just after school had been dismissed, Dick received, by messenger, a note from Lawyer Ripley, asking the young freshman to call at his office at three o’clock.

Though actually retired, the wealthy lawyer maintained an office in one of the big buildings on Main Street. To this office Mr. Ripley went once in a while, to transact business.

“As I haven’t a dollar in the world,” smiled young Prescott, “it is hardly likely that he has been engaged to bring a suit against me. Oh, hang it, I know! He means to thank me for hauling Fred out of the water. What an infernal nuisance!”

For a few minutes Dick was inclined to disregard the invitation. He spoke to his mother about it.

“Have you any good reason for not going?” asked Mrs. Prescott.

“No, mother; except that I don’t like the Ripley crowd particularly. Then, besides, I have no use for being thanked. I’d have done as much for a tramp that I had never seen before.”

“I am afraid you have reasons for disliking Fred Ripley,” admitted Mrs. Prescott. “But has the elder Mr. Ripley ever given you any cause for disliking him?”

“No; of course not.”

“Then wouldn’t it be the part of courtesy for you to go, since he requests it?”

“But, if he wants to thank me, why shouldn’t he come here?”

“My boy, it is one of the privileges of older persons to expect younger ones to come to them.”

“I guess that’s right,” nodded Dick. “Oh, well, I’ll go. But, if Mr. Ripley has anything to pass in the way of thanks, I hope he’ll cut it short.”

So, at three o’clock, Dick climbed the stairs and knocked at the office door.

The lawyer himself opened.

“Oh, how do you do, Prescott?” demanded Lawyer Ripley, holding out his hand. “I’m most heartily glad to see you. You didn’t see anything of my indolent son on the street, did you?”

“No, sir,” the freshman answered, adding, to himself:

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“I should hope not!”

“Come into my private office won’t you, Prescott?” asked the lawyer, leading the way through his outer office.

The elder Ripley placed a comfortable arm-chair for his freshman caller, asking him to be seated.

Though Lawyer Ripley was, ordinarily, a rather pompous and purseproud sort of man, it was plain that he realized a debt of gratitude, and meant to pay it as graciously as he knew how to do.

“You have performed a most valuable service for me, Prescott,” began the Sawyer again, in a heavy, solemn voice.

“You are quite welcome to the service, Mr. Ripley, and I hope you won’t think any more about it,” Dick replied.

“But it is impossible that I forget it,” replied the lawyer, raising his eyebrows in some astonishment. “You saved the life of my son, my only child.”

“At not very much risk to myself, sir,” smiled the freshman. “I was able, soon after, to go in and win a skating race.”

“At not much risk?” repeated the lawyer. “Why, your life was in very considerable danger. Do you call that little?”

“Almost any of the High School fellows would have done it, Mr. Ripley.”

“But none of them did.”

“Because I happened to be right at hand, and jumped in first—–that was all,” Dick insisted.

“Young man, I am not going to allow you to make little of the great service that you did me. I—–ah, here comes the young man we’ve been discussing.” The lawyer changed the subject as Fred entered. “Frederick, you are late, and, on an occasion of this kind, I could hope that you would be more prompt.”

“My watch was slow,” replied Fred Ripley, using one hand to cover a slight yawn.

“Don’t you see who is here?” demanded his father.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“How do you do?” nodded Dick, for Lawyer Ripley was looking curiously from one boy to the other.

“Don’t you——er——consider, Frederick, that it would be an excellent idea if you were to offer your hand to Mr. Prescott?” demanded the lawyer.

The ordeal was as distasteful to Dick as it could possibly have been to the Ripley heir. Yet Dick got quickly up out of his chair, accepting the slowly proffered hand of the sophomore.

“That’s better,” smiled the lawyer. “Now, I’ll leave you two together for the moment.”

The lawyer closed the door behind him as he stepped into the outer office.

Fred Ripley glanced covertly at Dick, who had remained standing. Even as big a sneak as young Ripley had shown himself at times to be, he knew perfectly well that he owed it, even to himself, to try to be gracious with the lad who had saved his life.

But Dick said nothing, nor did he glance particularly at the sophomore. That made it all the harder for Fred to find something to say. The clock in the room ticked. Dick, to relieve the awkwardness of the situation, strolled over to a window and stood looking out.

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That, therefore, was the situation when Lawyer Ripley came back into the room.

“What a jovial, friendly pair!” railed the lawyer, who held a slip of paper in his hand, as he advanced toward the freshman.

“Prescott,” declared the lawyer, “I can’t tell you what is in my heart. I can’t even pay you adequately for what you have done for me and for my boy. But I ask you to accept this as a slight indication, only, of what I feel.”

Dick took the paper, glancing at it curiously. It was the lawyer’s check for two hundred and fifty dollars.

“Accept it,” begged the lawyer, in a rather pompous voice. “Do whatever you please with it.”

Dick colored. “Whatever I please with it?” he asked, a bit unsteadily.

“Yes; certainly, of course,” murmured the lawyer. “I have no doubt whatever that a live? healthy boy can find something to do with a check like that.”

Flushing still more deeply, while Fred Ripley looked on, at first enviously, Dick Prescott tore the check into several pieces. The lawyer stared at him in amazement.

“I appreciate your intention, Mr. Ripley,” Dick went on, his voice a bit husky, “and I thank you, sir. But I can’t take any money.”

“Can’t take it?” repeated the astonished lawyer, while Fred Ripley fairly gasped.

“I can’t accept money, sir, for an act of humanity.”

“Oh! But I think I can convince you, my boy, that you *can*.”

“I’m equally sure that you can’t Mr. Ripley,” persisted the freshman, smiling. “But again I thank you for the intention.”

Lawyer Ripley was a good deal of a judge of human character.
He began to feel sure that the freshman was speaking the truth.

Just at that moment some one entered the outer office. Mr. Ripley glanced out, then said:

“I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a few moments. Fred, of course you have just thanked Mr. Prescott again for his heroic act?”

“N-n-no, sir,” stammered Fred.

“When I return I don’t want to have to hear another answer like that,” warned the lawyer, sternly. Then he closed the door behind him.

Dick turned, with a dry smile.

“Since you’re under orders to thank me, Fred, get it over with quickly,” laughed the freshman. “I’ll help you all I can.”

Young Ripley’s better nature really was stirred for a moment.

“Of course I thank you, Prescott,” he stammered. “It was a splendid thing for you to do. I——I don’t know as I had any right to expect it, either, for I’ve been pretty mean to you.”

“I know,” replied Dick, with the same dry smile. “You put Tip Scammon up to the High School locker thefts, to get me in disgrace, and unlucky Tip had to go to jail for it.”

Fred Ripley glared at the freshman with terror-stricken eyes.

Then, without warning, Fred made a leap for ward, to clutch Dick by the throat.

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CHAPTER XXII

THE ONLY FRESHMEN AT THE SENIOR BALL

Side-stepping, the freshman put up one arm to ward off further attack.

“Come, don’t start a fight here, Fred,” Dick cautioned the other, in a low tone. “For one thing, you couldn’t win anyway. Besides, your father would hear the racket and come in.”

“How do you know I put Tip up to that job?” demanded young Ripley, his face as white as chalk. “Did Tip tell you all about it?”

“Not a word.”

“Then you don’t know,” cried Fred, in sudden triumph.

“If I didn’t,” grinned Dick, “you’ve just confessed it.”

“You tricked me——I mean it’s a lie.”

“No; it isn’t, either,” asserted Dick, coolly. “Though the second chap, in that mix-up in Stetson’s alley one night, got away before I had time to recognize his face in the black darkness there, yet as I fell and grabbed for the chap’s ankle, I noticed his trousers with the lavender stripe. I had seen those trousers on you before, Fred, and you’re wearing them again at this minute.”

Fred glanced downward, starting.

“You see,” insisted the freshman, “there’s no sense in denying that you put Tip up to the game that got him into the penitentiary.”

“How many have you told this to?” demanded Fred, fright showing in his face.

“My chums suspect,” Dick answered, frankly. “I’m pretty sure I haven’t told anyone else.”

“Good thing you haven’t, then,” retorted Fred, recovering some of his usual impudence. “My father is a lawyer, and he’d know how to make you smart if you started libelous yarns about me.”

“Your father being a lawyer, I think he would also be likely to show an investigating turn of mind. You can put it up to your father if you want to, Fred.”

Young Ripley winced. Prescott laughed lightly.

“Now, see here, Fred, I don’t want to live on bad terms with anyone. You’ve got good points, I’m sure you have.”

“Oh, thank you,” rejoined the sophomore, with exaggerated sarcasm.

“And I’ll be glad to begin being on good terms with you at any time, if you should ever really want such a thing,” continued the freshman. “If you were a thoroughly good fellow, wholly on the level, like Badger, Thomp, Purcell, or any one of scores of fellows that we know, then I’d hate to know that you didn’t like me. But, as to the kind of fellow you’ve sometimes shown yourself to be, Fred, I’ve been really glad that I wasn’t your sort and didn’t appeal to you.”

At this style of talk the sophomore seemed all but crushed with mortification.

“Come, Fred,” pursued Dick, not waiting for the other to answer, “be a different sort of chap. Make up your mind to go through the High School, and through life afterwards, dealing with everybody on the square. Be pleasant and honest——be a high-class fellow——and everyone will like you and seek your friendship. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

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“It’s quite enough to say,” retorted Ripley, but he spoke in a low voice that had in it no trace of combative energy.

“Well, boys, how are matters going?” asked Lawyer Ripley, reentering. “Fred, have you remedied your boorishness by thanking Prescott?”

“Oh, yes, he has thanked me,” Dick replied, cheerily. “And we’ve been chatting about ——some other matters. And now, Mr. Ripley, if you will excuse me, I feel that I must run along.”

I have other things that I really must attend to.”

“Won’t you be more sensible, and let me make you a duplicate to the check you tore up?” asked the lawyer.

“Thank you, sir; but I don’t want to; couldn’t, in fact. My father and mother would be ashamed of me if I took home a check for such a service. Good afternoon, Mr. Ripley. So long, Fred.”

Dick went out of the lawyer’s offices almost breezily. Fred even found the nerve to respond to Dick’s parting salutation with something very close to an air of cordiality.

The instant he reached the street Dick took in several deep breaths.

“Whew! It seems mighty good to be in the fresh air once more, after being in the same room with Fred Ripley,” muttered the freshman.

“Hello, Dickens, kid,” called a voice from behind, and an arm rested on his shoulder.

“Hello, Ben,” replied Prescott, looking around.

“I just wanted to say that the senior ball comes off Saturday night of this week. You’re going to get one of the few freshman tickets. The ticket allows you to invite one of the girls. Now, remember, freshie, we depend upon you to be there.”

Dick started to object. Well enough he knew that there would be few freshmen at the senior dance, which was the most exclusive affair in the High School year.

“You can’t kick,” rattled on Badger. “You’ll get thrashed, if you do. Didn’t I tell you that there’ll be very few freshman tickets sent out? Only six, in fact. Dick & Co. are going to hog all the freshman tickets. That’s largely on account of what you youngsters have done for football and athletics in general. Lad, this is the last year that the seniors will have a chance to see anything of Dick & Co. So you simply can’t stay away from the senior ball. Not a single member of Dick & Co. can be excused from attending.”

“We’ll see about it,” replied Dick.

“No, you won’t! It has all been seen to. The six of you are going to be on hand——with six stunning girls, too!”

“I thank you, anyway; I thank you all heartily for this very unusual honor,” Dick protested.

“That’s all right, then; it’s settled,” proclaimed Ben Badger, with an air of finality. “The dance begins at nine. It’s all stated on the ticket.”

By the next day it *was* settled that Dick & Co. were going to attend. Besides the senior class, a good many of the juniors were also invited. There was to be a fair sprinkling of sophomores, but of the freshmen Dick & Co. were the only ones invited.

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Up to the middle of the week Fred Ripley felt rather certain that he was to be invited. Then, feeling less certain, he went to Thomp and Badger.

“Say, fellows,” began Fred, with a confident air, “I just want to mention the fact that I haven’t received a card to the senior ball yet.”

“Maybe you will, next year,” suggested Thomp coolly.

Fred flushed, then went white.

“Oh, very well, if you mean than I’m to be left out,” grunted Ripley.

“I’m afraid, Fred,” hinted Badger, “that you were overlooked until the full number of soph tickets had been issued. It was an oversight, of course, but I’m afraid it’s too late to remedy it.”

Fred Ripley went away, furious with anger, for he already knew, as did everyone else in Gridley H.S., that Dick & Co. were to be among the elect at the senior ball. And Fred had been so sure of a card to the ball that he had gone to the length of inviting Clara Deane to accompany him to the affair. That young lady had most joyously accepted.

Now, as he walked home with Miss Clara this afternoon, Fred suddenly broke out:

“I say, Clara, you don’t very much mind if we don’t go to the senior ball, do you?”

“Yes,” Miss Deane retorted. “Why, what’s the matter, Fred. Didn’t you receive an invitation?”

“Of course, I could get an invite,” lied young Ripley. “But the plain truth is, I want to keep out of the affair.”

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Clara, gazing at her escort in astonishment.

“Haven’t you heard the news?”

“What news?”

“That mucker crowd, who call themselves Dick &s Co., have been invited.”

“There’s no harm in that, is there?” asked Clara Deane, quietly. “Why, they’re quite popular young fellows; certainly the best-liked freshmen.”

“Well, *I* don’t like them,” retorted Fred, sullenly.

“And so, after inviting me to go to the ball with you, now you’re going to invite me to remain at home instead?”

“Oh, of course, if you really want to go, I’ll see about it,” muttered the sophomore.

But he didn’t see about it, nor did Clara Deane again refer to the matter. However, being an enterprising girl, Miss Deane was not long in discovering that Fred was not going to the senior affair for the very good reason that he *couldn’t possibly* get himself written down on the invitation list.

Apart from the moral side of the question it is rarely worth while to lie——to a girl, especially.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE NITROGLYCERINE MYSTERY SPEAKS UP

In one phase of its social life Gridley H.S. was especially sensible. Since only a few of the boys could be expected to be able to afford evening dress suits, it was a rule that none, even the seniors, should appear at any of the class functions in these fashionable garments.

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Hence, Dick & Co., when they arrived with their girl friends, did not feel out of place on the score of clothes.

Each of the freshmen wore his “Sunday” suit, and each wore a flower at his lapel.

Unfortunately, no limitations were placed on the dress of the girls. Therefore, while some rather plain frocks were in evidence, many of the girls were rather elaborately attired.

Laura Bentley, though her father’s means rather permitted, did not “overdo” in respect of dress. Dick felt sure, however, as he offered his arm, and conducted her out on the floor, that Laura was quite the prettiest, sweetest-looking girl there.

All of Dick’s chums felt satisfied with their partners of the evening, for each young man had invited the girl whose company he was sure to enjoy most.

Somehow, though they did not feel just out of place at the senior ball, the six young freshmen and their partners, all of the freshman class, happened to come together at one end of the hall.

“What do you all say,” proposed Dick, “if, in the grand march, we freshies keep together, six couples all in one section?”

“We’ll feel more comfortable, surely,” grinned Dave Darrin.

“Why? Are you scared?” asked Laura, looking at him archly.

“Not so that the band-leader could notice it,” replied Dave. “Yet I think we’d all be making more noise if this were a freshman dance.”

“But the freshmen don’t have a dance until just before commencement time,” put in Belle Meade, who was there with Dave.

“Anyway, the seniors are not so very important,” laughed Laura. “the average age of the freshman class is about fourteen or fifteen. The seniors are only three years older Pooh! Who’s afraid?”

“I am,” broke in Ben Badger, coming up behind them. “Desperately afraid.”

“You? Of what?” asked Laura, turning around upon him.

“Afraid that I’m too late to write my autograph on your dance card,” admitted Ben, with a rueful smile.

“But you’re a senior,” murmured Laura.

“Is that a crime?” demanded Ben, in a tone of wonder.

“Why, we were planning,” put in Belle, “that the freshmen boys and freshmen girls should dance together this evening.”

“I see a ray of hope,” protested Ben. “I’m going to college, so I shall be a freshman again next year. Isn’t that enough to entitle me to one——square——dance, anyway?”

Without waiting for another reply, Ben caught up Laura’s card, and looked it over.

“May I have number nine, please?” he begged.

“Yes, thank you,” Laura answered, so Badger scribbled his name.

“My hopes are rising,” cried Frank Thompson, gliding into the group.

Thereupon other seniors and juniors came up. It wasn’t long before Dick & Co. had to bestir themselves in order to be sure of having dances enough with the girls of their own class.

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“You can retaliate, you know, by going after some of the girls of the two upper classes,” suggested Laura.

“I don’t believe I’ll try that,” Dick replied. “It’s all right for the upper class boys to want to dance with some of the freshman girls, especially when the freshman girls are such a charming lot-----”

“Our thanks!” And six girls bowed low before him.

“But it would be regarded, I’m afraid, as rank impudence, if we little freshmen wanted to dance with senior or junior girls. When a freshman is in doubt the tip is ‘don’t!’”

The orchestra was playing a lively waltz that made most of the girls and many of the boys tap their feet restlessly.

The perfume of flowers was in the air. Lively chatter and merry laughter rang out.

“This is the brighter side of school life,” murmured Dick, enthusiastically.

“One of the brighter sides,” suggested Laura. “Your remark, as you made it, sounds ungrateful. It is a delight to be a High School student. There are no really dark sides to the life.”

“But some sides are much brighter than others,” Dick insisted. “I like study, and am glad I have a chance to go further in it than most young people get. Yet these class dances give us something that algebra, or chemistry, or geometry can’t supply us.”

“This is the brightest spot of the year,” put in Tom Reade, in a low voice. “It must be the brightness of the girls’ eyes that fill this part of the room with so much radiance.”

“Bravo!” laughed Laura and Belle together.

“Have you been quiet the last fifteen minutes on purpose to think that up?” Dave asked enviously.

“Tom can say lots of nicer things than that,” spoke up Bessie Trenholm, half shyly.

“Oh, can he?” demanded Harry Hazelton. “Please search your memory then, Bessie. Let’s have a few specimens of what Tom can say under the influence of luminous eyes.”

Bessie blushed. When she tried to speak she stammered.

“I—–I guess I can’t remember anything,” she pleaded.

Freshman laughter rang out merrily at this. But the waltz had ended, and now the prompter was calling for the grand march.

“Let’s find our places,” urged Dan Dalzell.

“We’re on the side, so we might as well remain right where we are,” proposed Dick. “That is, unless the floor manager or some aide comes along and chases us to the rear of the procession.”

But no one interfered with the freshmen taking their places in the line just where they stood.

As the grand march ended the orchestra drew breath once or twice, then burst forth in a gallop. Dick offered Laura his guidance, and away they flew together. By the time the gallop ended the freshman couples were rather well scattered over the hall.

Dick danced well. He enjoyed himself immensely. So did his partners. Some of the freshman girls finally drifted off with upper class partners.

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Toward midnight, Dick, alone, drifted to Dave Darrin and Harry Hazelton.

“I haven’t a thing to do, now, for four dances, unless some senior drops dead,” Dick remarked.

“I’m in as bad a plight,” admitted Harry.

“And I,” nodded Dave.

It wasn’t many moments ere the other three partners happened along, all disengaged.

“We don’t want to be wall-flowers,” muttered Dick. “It’s going to be more than half an hour from now before any of us are due to dance again. See here, fellows, what do you say to our getting our hats and coats and getting out into the air for a while? A ballroom, isn’t the worst place in the world, but I’m so much a fresh air fellow, that I’m half stifling here.”

“Good! Come along to the coatroom, then,” nodded Greg Holmes.

“Going home?” asked Laura Bentley, in a tone of protest, as she whirled by on Thompson’s arm and saw Dick & Co. headed for the coatroom.

She was gone before Dick could answer by word of mouth. But he saw her regarding him from the other end of the room, and smilingly shook his head.

“Feels good to be out, doesn’t it?” asked Dan Dalzell, as the freshman sextette struck the open air.

“Yes; but what has happened to the blooming town?” demanded Greg Holmes.

Even this Main Street of Gridley presented a curious look. It was a freezingly cold December night and it looked to the freshman as though the senior ball must be the only live thing left in the little city.

All the stores were closed, and had been for some time. All lights were out in the nearest residences. At first the boys thought they beheld held a policeman standing in front of the First National Bank, half a block away, but a closer look revealed the fact that he was only some belated loiterer—–the sole human being in sight save themselves.

“Come off this other way, and let’s go down the side street,” proposed Dick.

“Yes; if we’re to find signs of life anywhere, it will have to be on the smaller side streets,” observed Greg Holmes.

Music wafted to them from the hall.

“There’s life going on up there,” remarked Dave. “We left it behind us.”

“It isn’t life,” laughed Dick, “when some other fellow is dancing with your girl.”

Along the side street the first corner was at the beginning of a broad back alley that ran parallel with Main Street.

Along this alleyway they turned.

“By looking up at the windows,” suggested Prescott, “we may get some glimpses of the dance that are not so apparent when you’re up in the hall.”

True, as they passed by the rear of the dance hall they caught some glimpses of moving couples going by the windows, but that was all.

“And I want to remark,” grunted Tom Reade, “that it’s cold outdoors tonight.”

“An outdoor fellow like you ought not to mind that,” chaffed Dick

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“Oh, I’ll stand it as long as the rest of you do,” challenged Reade.

Dick and Dave were in the lead, the other chums coming behind them in couples.

So Prescott and Dave Darrin were the first to catch a glimpse down the short lane that led from the alleyway to the back of one of the buildings.

Here stood a man, with cap drawn well down over his forehead. He was beside an automobile——a big black touring car.

Dick saw and guessed. He almost jumped. Giving Dave’s arm a quick squeeze, Prescott marched by without appearing to pay any heed to the man and the autocar.

Once past the lane, Dick kept on walking, but he turned and walked backwards. He signed to the other four, putting a finger to his lips for silence.

All six of the chums had guessed swiftly what the man and the auto, at that particular point, must mean!

“Keep walking, fellows,” whispered Dick, as the other startled freshmen reached him. “And laugh——loudly!”

Their forced laughter rang out. Then Dick, again at the head with Dave, started in on the first bars of the latest popular song. Again the chums understood, and joined in with a will.

When he had gone two hundred feet further, Dick countermarched his little force. Still singing they went back by the head of the lane, but not one member of Dick & Co. allowed himself to glance down the lane at man or automobile.

Then the song died out.

“I say, fellows,” called Dave Darrin, banteringly, “we’d better get back to the hall if we don’t want to find other fellows going home with our girls.”

“I’ll fight before I’ll let that happen,” proclaimed Dick Prescott.

“Hustle, then!” urged Dan.

Once out of the alleyway and into the side street the freshmen halted for an instant.

“Fellows,” spoke Dick Prescott, “you all know what that means? One lookout in front of the bank, and another at the rear. An auto at the rear, too. Greg, you hustle to the police station as fast as you can make your feet fly. No use trying to find a place open where you can telephone. Come, the rest of you fellows.”

There was a side entrance to the hall from the side street.

Dick and his four remaining chums ran in at this side door, that the man in front of the bank might not see them.

Up the stairs the freshmen rushed.

“Dave, take care of the orchestra,” panted Dick. “The music mustn’t stop for an instant after we get the fellows out.”

Something in the looks of the five freshmen, as they burst into the hall attracted the attention of nearly everyone present.

Dick held up his hand as a sign for the dancing to stop. But Dave Darrin was already up on the platform, talking in the leader’s ear, and the music did not cease.

As quickly as could be Dick got the upper classmen away from the girls, at the lower end of the hall.

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“What is it? What can be the matter?” all the girls wanted to know.

But Dick called out, loudly enough to make himself heard:

“Young ladies, it is highly important that the music and the sounds of moving feet be kept up. Won’t you young ladies please dance with each other until we bet back? Then we’ll tell you an interesting story—–if you’re good.”

In the meantime Tom Reade was telling Thompson, Badger and Edgeworth, and as many more as could get close enough, what had happened.

“See here, fellows,” spoke Thomp, “there’s a big chance fer the crowd to win fun and glory for good old Gridley H.S. Seniors and Dick & Co. will steal down the alleyway, and be upon that lookout before he can say ‘batter-cakes and coffee.’ Juniors and sophs go in a bunch, prepared to catch the lookout on Main Street. All get your coats and come softly down the *side* stairs!”

In many gatherings the speed and comprehension with which all the Gridley High School boys acted would have been regarded as marvelous. But they were always in training for athletics. Team work and the spirit of speed and discipline prevailed among them.

Almost in a jiffy, so it seemed, the masculine part of the senior dance party was out on the sidewalk of the side street.

“Don’t you juniors and sophs show yourselves on Main Street for a full sixty seconds, unless you hear us raise a row at the back of the bank,” advised Dick.

Somehow, none of the upper classmen seemed to think it strange for young Prescott thus to take command. He and his chums had discovered the attempt on the bank, and it seemed natural, just now, for the freshman leader to lead the whole school.

On tiptoe Dick and his chums led the way into the alley, the seniors following just as stealthily.

When the freshmen were within thirty feet of the lane Dick Prescott held up his hand, then signed to all hands to make the grand rush forward.

Just an instant before the High School boys could start, the earth suddenly shook and swayed under them, while on the frosty night air there came a great, sullen, fearsome —–

BOOM!

That was the explosion designed to blow open the door of the bank’s vault.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CAPTURE OF THE BANK ROBBERS

In answer, a rousing defiance, the Gridley H.S. yell was roared out. And by this time, seniors Dick & Co. were in full motion.

“Four——thirteen——eleven!” bellowed Sam Edgeworth.

The football men heard that signal and understood the application of it.

Though the flying wedge is now no longer tolerated in football, there are other plays evolved from it, and the signal called for one. Edgeworth himself formed the point of the wedge.

“Freshies in the center!” he bawled back lustily.

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As the High School crowd rushed around the corner, giving their vocal chords full play, Dick and his chums were hustled inside of the inverted “V” formation.

It was a human battering ram that launched itself into the lane——filling that narrow passage, choking it.

One of the bank robbers was still on the lookout duty. At the first sound he had drawn his revolver, prepared to shoot right and left. But this avalanche of torsos, arms and legs was more than the fellow had bargained for.

If it be true that a community can’t be indicted, then it is still truer that a community can’t be murdered. The armed rascal gasped at the magnitude of his task of defense.

In another second he had been bowled clean over off his feet, and a half a dozen seniors were reaching for his weapon.

As Dick Prescott and his chums got out of the wedge they made a dash for the automobile.

At that same instant the air bore to them the battle-yell of juniors and sophs at the front of the bank.

The rear door of the building was yanked hastily open. Two masked men shot the rays of their bulls-eye lanterns out into the lane, while their right hands held revolvers.

Bang-bang! Bang-bang!

The rear door slammed, the robbers retreating behind that barrier.

In the first moment the High School boys themselves were a good deal startled, though they didn’t make any effort to run.

Then the news pulsed swiftly through the senior crowd. The noise hadn’t come from pistols. Dick & Co. had shut off any possibility of automobile flight by falling upon the tires with their pocket knives. Any robbers that could bluff their way through the crowd and start the engine would have to hobble along on flat tires!

The rear lookout of the robber band was now a safe prisoner in the hands of four stalwart seniors. Ben Badger had the fellow’s revolver.

Out in front of the bank the juniors and sophs held the enemy at bay inside. The lookout, after trying to hold up the rush at the point of the pistol, had turned without firing, and had tried to get away. But four of the juniors had sprinted after him and caught him.

Thus the forces stood. Inside the bank building were at least two of the robbers, armed and presumably desperate. Yet they knew they couldn't shoot their way out through a multitude, either at the front or the back of the building.

On the other hand, the High School boys didn't care about rushing into a darkness that was held by armed men.

Thus the opposing sides stood holding each other at bay until new actors came upon the scene——the police reserves.

Four officers ran to the front of the bank. Chief Coy and four more appeared in the lane among the High School boys.

"Now, young gentlemen, jump out, if you please!" rang the chief's order, "We've got to get inside at those fellows, and there may be a good many bullets flying."

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“Huh!” objected Thomp. “We penned that gang up for you. Now, are you going to chase us off just as the real fun starts?”

“If you stay, it’ll be at your own risk, then,” answered Chief Coy, with a rather pleased grin, for he had followed the fortunes of Gridley H.S. on the football gridiron, and well enough he knew the school grit.

Pushing their way through, the police made their way to the closed rear door.

“Within, there!” summoned Coy, knocking lustily on the door. “You are surrounded, and may as well give up. Open the door, and come out, and you’ll be safe.”

There was a pause. Then a gruff voice demanded:

“If we open you don’t fire on us?”

“Not if you come out with your hands held up high.”

“All right, then. Give us time to open the door.”

The light from the police dark lanterns played on the door as it swung open. Then two very crestfallen robbers, holding their hands well aloft, came out on the steps.

The windows of the hall, some distance away, had been thrown up. A lot of white-gowned girls, some with covered heads, and some not, looked wonderingly out at the spot lighted up by the dark lanterns.

Chief Coy and two of his officers quickly entered the bank. It was ten minutes before they reappeared.

“Somebody has done us the good turn of discovering this thing just in time tonight,” announced Coy, with a grave face. “The vault door is blown entirely off, and the vault is stacked high with sacks of money. Who first discovered this thing anyway?”

“Don’t you know?” called Ben Badger.

From a score of throats at once the information broke forth:

“Dick & Co.!”

“It’ll be a good night’s work for Dick & Co., then, when the bank directors meet” declared Chief Coy. “In three or four minutes more these robbers would have been going sixty miles an hour with an automobile loaded down to the guards with real money!”

The police party being large enough to take care of everything, it was not many minutes more before the High School boys were back in the hall. It took half an hour, however, for the young men to gratify the natural curiosity of the girls. At last the orchestra leader, tiring of the long delay, passed the word to his musicians. Then the music pealed out for that good, stirring old eulogy:

“For he’s a jolly good fellow!”

In an instant bright-faced boys and girls caught up the refrain, making the hall shake with the din of their voices.

In the midst of it Thomp and Badger made a rush for Dick Prescott, caught him, and rushed him to the platform. But they had to hold him there.

“Speech! speech!” roared the boy and girl assemblage. There was a volley of hand-clapping.

But Dick, as soon as he could make himself heard, responded:

“You’ve got my number——nothing but the freshman class. When a freshman is in doubt he doesn’t dare do it!”

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Suddenly turning, Dick bolted for the floor once more. Then the next number on the dance programme began, and laughter reigned.

But these events had not been in the dance programme, and it was now late. For an hour or more the chaperons had been fretting, so they brought the dance to a close. Then followed the merry bustle of departure, the hasty goodbyes, the rattling of wheels through the sleeping town and all was quiet in Gridley.

But many a household was awakened to hear the story of the attempted burglary and the part that Dick & Co. had taken in preventing it.

CHAPTER XXV

CONCLUSION

It isn't all play in a High School. A vast amount of study has to be mastered. There are nerve-racking examinations. It is a tremendously busy life despite its sport.

So here we would better take leave of Gridley H.S. so far as this volume is concerned.

It was soon known that, had not Dick & Co. taken their little walk the robbers would have gotten away with one hundred and twenty thousand dollars in cash.

As it was, however, all four men were in the police toils, and they were presently sent to the penitentiary, where they are serving long terms.

The bank directors *did* vote to reward the H.S. boys as individuals, but Dick & Co. and all the upper classmen refused to accept anything for their own pockets.

In despair, the directors finally hit upon the scheme of subscribing one thousand dollars to the funds of the Athletics Committee.

The catching of the bank robbers solved the nitroglycerine mystery. One of the safe-blowing quartette was recognized by the police as having been in Gridley at the time when that nitroglycerine package was received at the express office. Had they gotten their box in safety the robbers would have entered the bank that night, and there might have been a different story——one of great loss to the bank.

Fred Ripley? His further story belongs to the following volume.

Dick & Co. went through their freshman year with credit all around.

When next we meet them we shall find them sophomores, with all the privileges of upper classmen. We shall meet these young sophomores in a sparkling tale of High School life and doings, ambitions and work, sports and pastimes. The next volume will be published under the title: "*The High School Pitcher; or Dick & Co. on the Gridley Diamond*." This will be a rousing story of baseball in particular, but likewise replete with other situations of absorbing interest to all high school boys and girls.

THE END