# · FORGE · OF · FOXENBY

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# FORGE OF FOXENBY

**BY**

R. A. H. GOODYEAR

*Illustrated by T. M. R. Whitwell*

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[He next felt himself lifted over the ropes]

# FORGE OF FOXENBY

## CHAPTER I

### The County Schools' Final

"A goal!"

"Straight from the kick-off—a goal!"

"Oh, played, St. Cuthbert's! One up! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" came the delighted chorus of congratulations from Cuthbertians in all parts of the field.

But, until the ball is seen resting in the back of the net, it is as unwise to count a goal as it is to reckon chickens still in the shell. There was a youth behind the Foxenby posts with a muddy mark on the side of his face, and he at least knew no goal had been scored.

The first shot of the match had flashed by the upright—on the wrong side of it for St. Cuthbert's, on the right side of it for Foxenby, whose sigh of heart-felt relief was audible when their rivals' untimely cheers had died down.

"A narrow squeak, old man!" said Dick Forge, the captain of the Foxenby team, to Broome, the inside-left, selected from Holbeck's House.

"Rather!" answered Broome. "It quite turned my heart over. Their centre's got his shooting-boots on this afternoon."

"Helped by the wind, of course. It's buzzing across from goal to goal. Feel the pressure of it! Like running up against a house-side."

"We'll never get going against it, Captain. They'll be a dozen goals up at half-time."

"Fudge!" cried the captain. "They've got Lebberston and Lyon—grand old Lyon—to beat first, and Ennis after that. Throw your chest out, Broome, old man, and smile!"

Dick's laughing face was a tonic to the faint-hearted ones always. However dark the picture seemed to be, he had the happy knack of turning it to the light so that his chums could see something cheery in it.

To-day they had much need of his enthusiasm, too. By calling "heads" as the referee span a coin in the air, when it would have been much nicer had he said "tails ", he had passed the luck of the toss to the rival captain, who thankfully grabbed the chance of placing a spanking sea-breeze at the back of his team.

Hard lines indeed, you Foxenby fellows, to lose the toss in a wind like this, and on such a very important day. For you have worked your way through to the final tie of the County Schools' Cup against teams of stronger build, only to meet, in the last match, eleven sturdy youths who outweigh you almost man for man.

Forge and Lyon alone can be said to be up to the average bulk of your opponents. Ennis, your trusty goalkeeper, is certainly tall, but see how thin he looks! Almost like a third goalpost, you might say. Your forwards are fleet-footed to a man, and your halves are like terriers, ever worrying the foe.

But you can't get away from the fact that weight plays a big part in footer, and when a mass of bone and brawn has half a gale behind it to help it whenever it charges you, why, phew! you need all the pluck you can muster to pick yourselves up and start in afresh!

"St. Cuthbert's are a dandy side this season," remarked a young Cuthbertian behind the Foxenby goal. "Scored twenty-three times in the Cup-ties up to date,

and never once had a goal notched against them."

"Ah, well, they'll blot their copy-books this afternoon, if never before," retorted Robin Arkness, a Foxenby Junior, who had gathered round him a little cluster of select pals, and was in a mood to blow his own side's trumpet.

"Who's going to score against them, anyhow?" asked the perky Cuthbertian youngster.

"Forge will, Broome will, perhaps even old Lyon will, from full-back, given half a chance," declared the optimistic Robin.

"Pooh! They can't even cross the half-way line," snorted the champion of St. Cuthbert's, contemptuously. "See how we're peppering your goalie all the time. Play up, Saints! Bang 'em in, boys! Oo—ooo, a goal—no, hang it, only a corner! Allow for the wind, Monty—allow for the wind!"

"You mean 'allow for the gas', don't you, kid?" asked Robin. "You're a tip-topper at scoring goals with your tongue."

Nevertheless the cocksure young Cuthbertian had every reason for his confidence. Already there were many ominous smudges of mud on the newly-whitewashed goalposts and crossbar, and a series of finely-placed corner-kicks had only been hustled away by what seemed to be desperate scrimmages of the Rugby order, with the luck on Foxenby's side.

The impartial crowd of Walsbridge townspeople, on whose ground the final tie was being played, had read wonderful accounts of the Cuthbertians' rock-like defence—it delighted them to see that these hefty youths knew also the straight route to an opponent's goal. Therefore, they began by wishing Ennis, the goalkeeper of the "Foxes", good luck, and plenty of hard work!

They flocked behind his goal, cheering him again and again as he flung himself backwards and forwards to fist away corking shots, some of which he probably knew very little about, though it just happened that his long body was always in the way. The better the goal-keeper, the more good fortune he enjoys as a rule. Forwards seem somehow magnetized into shooting where he is.

"How about that hatful of goals your team were going to score?" Robin Arkness wanted to know, after twenty minutes of this sort of thing. "Rather

overlooked the fact that our side had a goalkeeper, didn't you, Cuthbert kid?"

"He kept that last one out by a sheer fluke," grumbled the young Cuthbertian. "See, there he goes again, bobbing the ball away with his eyes shut."

"How unkind of him!" said Robin, in mock indignation. "Ennis, you're a cad, you know, not letting the nice little Saints add to their twenty-three goals. Stand aside, you naughty man, while they drive holes through the net!"

But older heads than Robin's were being shaken over the sore straits in which Foxenby found themselves so early in the game. Luke Harwood, the prefect of Holbeck's House, and editor of the school magazine, seemed so concerned about it that he voiced his fears to Roger Cayton, prefect of Rooke's House, whose close personal friendship with the captain of the team made him doubly anxious about the way things were going.

"Ennis is marvellous," said Luke, "but one-man shows don't win football matches. Our halves and forwards can't even raise a gallop."

"That's no surprise, seeing that you and I have to hold our caps on in the breeze."

"Granted, Cayton. Still, I wouldn't leave all the donkey-work to Ennis and Lyon if I were captain. I'd fall back and help."

"If you were captain, yes. But Forge has different ideas. Let's give him credit for knowing more about football than a spectator can."

There was a sting in this comment, which Luke Harwood did not fail to observe. As editor of the Foxonian he was unapproachably the school's best pupil, and so obviously the Head's favourite boy that he was known throughout both houses as "Old Wykeham's Pet Fox". But as a footballer he was "only middling", and to-day the selection committee had quietly passed him over. The pill was a bitter one, and Roger's comment made it still harder to swallow, but all he did was to whistle softly and smile.

"I'd like to know the name of the artist who decked Fluffy Jim, the village idiot, in those stripes of coloured paper," continued Roger Cayton. "Club colours, of course, blue and white stripes. Still, football enthusiasm may be carried too far, and such tomfoolery makes me sick. What goats the St.

Cuthbert's fellows will think us!"

"Pray don't take our little joke too seriously, Cayton," said Luke, with a pleasant laugh. "Where's the big league club that doesn't cart its mascot around with it on cup days? Fluffy Jim may bring us luck and some second-half goals."

"Oh, yes, to be sure," snapped Roger. "Particularly as St. Cuthbert's have come through to the final with a clean goal-sheet. They're the sort of chaps who would be scared out of their form by a guy in coloured paper, no doubt."

Harwood gave a resigned shrug of his shoulders.

"Funny, isn't it, how the best-laid schemes 'gang aft agley'?" he commented. "Some of us thought that the sight of a mascot in gala garb would serve to keep the footballing Foxes in good-humour throughout the game."

"It's cheap and nasty," said Roger Cayton, not without pluck, considering that Luke Harwood could have made a broken reed of him in physical combat. "Weakness of intellect is a sorry enough thing in itself. A coloured advertisement of it is worse."

Composed in manner always, seldom without an engaging smile, Harwood did not let this half-challenge pass unnoticed. There was a gleam in his eyes which even short-sighted Roger saw.

Between these two quick-witted boys existed an unspoken feud, founded on Harwood's refusal to print in the Foxonian the contributions which Roger persisted in sending. Doubtless Harwood felt that there was scarcely room in the school magazine for two such literary stars as he and Roger to shine at the same time.

"Well," said Harwood, calmly, "sorry if my cronies and I have given offence. Our consolation must be that Fluffy Jim is having the happiest day of his life. And you fellows may yet come to hail him as a luck-bringer."

"Superstitious piffle, Harwood," Roger grunted, He and Luke then drifted casually, apart. Neither desired to spoil a good football match by bearing each other company any longer. Oil and vinegar, these two!

"I have a rotten grain of suspicion in my nature, doubtless," thought Roger.

"Still, Forge is captain of the football team and captain of the school—Luke Harwood would like to be both, and is neither. He knows Dick is strung on wires, and how small a thing upsets him on big occasions. This fool idea, then, of dressing the village idiot like a circus clown—is there method in his madness? Is there a secret hope that it will put Dick off his game?"

Left to himself, the half-witted youth known as "Fluffy Jim" was as quiet as an old sheep. Now, inspired by someone behind the goal, he used his booming voice to shout out repeatedly, in the dialect of the district:

"Coom back an' keep 'em oot—coom back, coom back, afoör they scoöar!"

Others—and some who should have known better—took up the cry; but Fluffy Jim's voice rose above the rest, just as his paper costume was the most conspicuous thing on the field.

"Mascot, indeed!" thought Dick Forge bitterly. "His ridiculous rig-out gets on my nerves, and now his voice is doing ditto. Some kind friend in Holbeck's House is pulling the strings, I suspect. Bother it, how cold and irritable this standing about makes me feel!"

As if to rub it in, his colleagues in the forward line began imploring him to strengthen the defence. In imagination they saw Ennis beaten by every fresh shot which the determined St. Cuthbert's team fired at the goal, and it certainly seemed impossible that the tall, thin youth, who had already done wonders, could hold the fort much longer. But Dick Forge refused to be "rattled".

"Don't get the wind up, chaps," he urged. "If I'm injured and carried off the field, you can pack the goal then. While I'm captain, you won't."

"But they've worn our backs to fiddle-strings—it's inhuman not to help the poor beggars out," protested Broome.

A grunt was the captain's only reply.

"Do you want Cuthbert's to score, Forge?" continued Broome.

It was an ungenerous speech, of which he was heartily ashamed a moment later. The captain winced as he replied:

"You're as bad as the rest, Broome. This is football—a game—a match—British sport. Backs defend goals—forwards shoot them. Yes, I want St. Cuthbert's to score—if they can!"

His sympathy for the defence in their gruelling was acute, but he shammed indifference to it. Let the Cup be lost or won, none should say afterwards that the Foxes saved their goal by playing one goalkeeper and ten backs. Finer to be a dozen goals behind at half-time than that!

"Good old Dick!" shouted Roger from the touch-line. "Stick to your game, old man!"

Dick turned a grateful face in the direction from which the voice came, and then ran back anxiously as a great yell of "Penalty, penalty!" came from the St. Cuthbert's players and spectators alike.

"What's happened, Clowes?" he said to the centre-half.

"They say that Lyon handled in the penalty-area," answered Clowes. "Hear them bawling at the referee! Hope to goodness he turns them down."

Pushing his way through the crowd of excited players, the flushed referee ran to consult one of his linesmen, who shook his head at once.

"A pure accident, 'ref.'," he declared.

"Exactly what I thought myself, but St. Cuthbert's were positive that he handled purposely."

St. Cuthbert's were very sore about it, too, when the referee bounced the ball, instead of awarding the penalty-kick they wanted so. How very much easier it would have been to beat the lanky Ennis with an uninterrupted shot, than when Lyon was circling round him like an eagle defending its nest!

Lyon was too bad—Lyon had handled purposely, and he ought to have owned up to it, said the mortified Cuthbertians.

But Lyon the Silent set his teeth and said nothing. It still wanted ten minutes of half-time, and for that trying period he meant to save his breath.

The crowd swayed backwards and forwards behind Ennis's goal. They couldn't keep still, and in their excitement kicked one another without noticing it.

Every player on the St. Cuthbert's side, save only the goalkeeper, became a sharpshooter. Each "potted" Ennis from every angle, allowing him no rest. The cross-bar rattled and creaked like the swinging sign-board of a tavern, and corner-kicks seemed almost as plentiful as roadside blackberries. But between the posts that aggravating ball simply *would* not go.

"Three more minutes, Foxenby—kick away, kick away!" yelled Robin Arkness and his frenzied chums.

"It's positively sickening," said the young Cuthbertian, working his shoulders about in sheer agony of suspense. "Your chaps have had chunks of luck thrown at 'em. We ought to have been sixteen goals up by now."

"And still stick at the old twenty-three," was Robin's gibe. "Poor old Saints, such sinners at shooting! Hey, hooray! Forge is on the ball—Forge is tivying off to the other end! Oh, bother! The wind's beaten him—the ball's in touch. Never mind—we're across the half-way line. All together, you Foxes—only a minute more!"

"Fibber!" shouted the Junior Cuthbertian. "It's two minutes off half-time!"

"Blow the dust out of your half-crown watch and open your ears for the referee's whistle, Cuthy. He's got it to his lips now. He's going to blow. He has blown. Half-time! Bravo, you jolly Foxes!"

"Good old Lyon; played, old Ennis!" shouted the Foxenby section of the crowd.

The wild and whirling first-half was indeed over. "Six—one" might easily have been the score; *"nil—nil*" it actually was, with the breeze still going strong. Small wonder that the Foxenby team left the playing pitch with easier minds, and that the Junior Foxes grabbed one another frantically and waltzed and pirouetted round and round the ropes.

# CHAPTER II

## The Captain and "The Octopus"

There was more talk than Forge liked in the cramped little dressing-room during the interval. Nevertheless, he grimly held his tongue while those candid advisers, whose speciality is winning football matches with their mouths, put in their interfering oars.

"What killed St. Cuthbert's pig was the way their backs held aloof till the last few minutes," said one.

"Yes," agreed another expert. "If they'd crowded on all sail like that earlier on, they could have walked the ball through."

"Rather—by sheer force of numbers," chimed in a third.

"We shan't make that mistake," quoth yet another oracle. "Why, even old Ennis will come out of his hutch and have a pot-shot now and again, won't you, Ennis?"

Ennis might have been part of the furniture for all the notice he took of this remark. He just sat back in the corner, sprawling out his long legs, and breathing hard.

Some of his finger-nails were torn, the backs of his hands wore long scratches, and his knuckles were bruised and bleeding. Smears of mud blackened his face, which he had not yet found energy to sponge. Battered knees and swollen shins, too, were part of the price he had paid for keeping his goal unpierced. None but he knew the aches and pains he had endured to hold the fort for Foxenby. It would be many a long day before his skin was free of scars.

"Here, old man, have a drink of this," said Forge, holding to the goalie's lips a cup of coffee. "Good stuff, eh? Buck you up no end. Alstone, hurry up with that bowl of warm water. All St. Cuthbert's have printed their autographs on Ennis's face."

The water was hurriedly brought, and Dick sponged the goalie's features with it as well as he could, what time the babel of voices went on uninterruptedly about them.

"What a narrow squeak when Lyon handled! Looked all over like a penalty to me. Had they got it their 'cap.' would have converted—he never misses a spot-kick."

"If we have a penalty Broome must take it. He put three through for Holbeck's in the practice match last Saturday—didn't you, Broome?"

"Shut up!" snapped Broome, colouring a little. He was still kicking himself for what he had said to Forge before, and was determined in future to leave captaincy to the captain.

Luke Harwood, too, thought the time ripe for an exhibition of the good-sportsmanship which he liked to think was a feature of Holbeck's House.

"Outside, you wiseacres," he commanded. "This is a dressing-room, not a monkey-house. Don't burn up the team's oxygen. Don't speak to the man at the wheel. Other 'don'ts' to follow if you don't clear quickly."

He bundled out a few Juniors, and, as if by accident, bustled Roger Cayton too. Roger flushed and side-stepped, but said nothing. He was a slimly-built, spectacled youth, healthy enough, but physically no match for boys of his own age. By pretending to mistake him for one of the batch of Juniors Luke Harwood was, Roger believed, deliberately putting a slight on him. Still, he pursed his lips and swallowed his resentment, and the bit of by-play passed unnoticed by the others.

"All ready again, chaps?" asked Forge. "Come on, then. The referee's piping up."

Not a word, you will notice, did Forge speak of encouragement or advice. They knew better than to expect "jaw" from him, he being one of those wise captains who shout instructions only when the necessity is strong. He expected them all to do their best without any nagging, and to use their own wits in an emergency.

"Now we'll put it across you, Cuthy," said Robin Arkness, as the teams lined

up. "We're after goals, not 'hard lines' and 'try again, boys!' You'll be wanting to creep into a rabbit-hole, Cuthy, before we've done with you."

"Swank!" retorted Cuthy. "You can't get goals against St. Cuthbert's; nobody ever does."

All the same, the youthful Cuthbertian's voice had an anxious tremor in it. He had a lively idea where all the play was likely to be, for he had never budged from his excellent standpoint behind the goal. Nor had Robin and his chums. Even the chance of a warming cup of coffee had failed to lure them away. The Foxenby "mascot" stuck there, too, grinning amiably at those who chaffed him about his make-up. The bulk of the spectators, neutral or otherwise, had not moved either. They pulled their overcoats closely about them, and stamped their feet to nullify the effect of the cold wind, which still blew straight towards that particular goal with unabated fury.

"Unless they've gotten a goalkeeper as 'wick' as Foxenby—which ain't to be expected—it's all ower but shoutin'," remarked a Walsbridge rustic. "Wi' a wind like this behind me, Ah could scoöar mesen."

"Leave that to us, old boy," Robin answered him complacently. "You won't have long to wait. See that? Oh, what a top-hole shot, Forge! An inch lower, and he'd have been beaten to the 'wide'!"

Indeed, for the past ten minutes one continuous roar of delighted cheering had accompanied Foxenby's sparkling bombardment of the St. Cuthbert's goal. Excellent shots went astray by fractions of inches only. Broome twice nearly did damage to the cross-bar, and one crafty "balloon" from Forge, over the heads of a bobbing mass of players, was scooped out of the top angle of the goal by the keeper's finger-tips only. Hundreds of hoarse throats yelled "Goal!" prematurely. It was only a corner, which tall Bessingham, the six-foot captain of St. Cuthbert's, leapt high to head away.

"Whose toes are you jumping on, clumsy?" grumbled the Junior Cuthbertian, sourly.

"Sorry, Cuthy—I couldn't help it," Robin confessed. "Simply can't keep still. It's our turn for a song and dance this half, you know."

"Laugh when you've beaten old 'Bess', not before," Cuthy cautioned him.

There was something in the warning, too. A wonderful boy this reed-like, overgrown Bessingham, with arms always straight to his sides, and legs that seemed everywhere. He could use either foot with equal power, and when his boot caught the ball he made kicking against the wind seem as simple as kicking with it.

St. Cuthbert's called him "The Octopus", and by that nickname he was known also to certain Football League Clubs, who wanted him to play for them when he left school.

A weird, silent player, ever where the ball was, never seeming to take a useless stride. Those who saw him to-day ceased to marvel at St. Cuthbert's feat in reaching the final tie without yielding a goal. The seventeen-year-old footballer was a man in all but age, with the cool judgment of a veteran to guide his restless legs.

"Botheration, I can't dodge him!" panted Broome to Dick. "Did you see us mixed together just now? His legs were round my neck. It—it's clammy—like having snakes crawling over you."

"We've something to learn from him, Broome," said Dick. "Single combat won't pay us. We must work round his flanks."

"Flanks! Why, he faces all ways," Broome groaned. "Superman, eh! Chuck that, Broome—we've got to hammer away till we find his weak spot. Nothing to fear from the forwards, the wind has them in a bottle-neck. Let's drop this first-time shooting stunt, and try a bit of conjuring."

"And he'll juggle better," said Broome, still despairing. Then, brightening up a little, he cried eagerly: "Here, take that centre from Lake; it's a ripe cherry, Forge!"

So it was. But the Octopus had a taste for ripe fruit too, and at this particular cherry he had the first bite.

Though Dick made quickly for the outside-right's fine centre, Bessingham matched him. Their boots met the ball together, and the greater force of Bessingham's kick lifted Dick off his feet. He sprawled yards within the penalty-area, with a conviction that something awkward had happened to his big toe.

"Penalty, penalty!" roared some of the crowd. It is the habit of football spectators to claim free kicks when things like this happen. To eyes blinded by prejudice it looked as though Dick had been roughly kicked about, but the players and the referee knew better. In a straight-out trial of physical strength, the sturdy captain of Foxenby had come off second-best. Moreover, he limped a little as the result, which was more ominous still.

"What did I tell you, kid?" said the Junior Cuthbertian, taking heart of grace. "You can't get past old 'Bess'. Old Bess is a brick wall. Old Bess is a house-side!"

"He's a clinking player, I admit," said Robin, "but who'll pay the doctor's bill if he kicks somebody's teeth out?"

"That's your affair," snapped Cuthy. "Perhaps you'd like old Bess to play on crutches to give your forwards a chance."

"He's not All England versus The Rest," retorted Robin. "We'll make rings round him yet."

Spoken like a true optimist, Robin! But spectators cannot win games, however loyal they may be, and rose-coloured spectacles are as useless in football as in any other field of activity. Bluff could not disguise that the luck had again turned against Foxenby. The sun came out and shone in their eyes and the wind suddenly moderated. Forwards who had stood idly on the half-way line (glad enough to rest after their first-half exertions) now found it possible to pick up Bessingham's big kicks and move towards Ennis again. True, they kept a respectable distance from Lyon and Lebberston, and only sent in long-range shots with little powder behind them. Ennis, ever reliable, hugged them safely to his breast and punted them back with ease. All very well and good; but each movement in his direction brought relief to St. Cuthbert's defenders, and cut down Foxenby's scoring chances at the same time.

The gathering behind the top goal thinned a little as some of the crowd drifted speculatively down the field. They thought they saw a prospect of a bit of sport at the other end. There was always a chance of Ennis's sun-dazzled eyes failing to judge a straight one, however languidly the ball were kicked.

Gradually the outlook became darker for the Foxes. Broome appeared to have lost heart and could do nothing right. Atack, the inside-right, quite openly shrank

from close contact with the Octopus. He had once chanced his arm in a flying charge at Bessingham, and had been feeling it ever since in the fear that it was dislocated. Lake, bothered by the sun, kept missing his luck entirely and blundering into touch. All he could do, it seemed, was to tread down the flags and inconvenience the linesmen. Meynard, the swift-footed outside-left, certainly kept cool, but that was because he had little to do. He waited in vain to be fed by Broome, who seemed always under Bessingham's feet.

It didn't mend matters when the Foxenby halves lost patience with the men in front of them and commenced to play hard on top of them. Not being marksmen, they drew upon themselves the ironical contempt of the crowd by shooting high over goal—"aiming at the new moon", to quote the gleeful opinion of "Cuthy", who had once more become offensively cocksure of his team's abilities.

Precious time oozed away while spectators retrieved the ballooned ball, and all the while Dick's big toe hurt like toothache. A pretty kettle of fish all round.

Dick had a temper, and came near to losing it publicly. Again the maddening voice of the village idiot began to boom at him. "Owd can't scoöar!" it bellowed monotonously. It had the melancholy effect of a ship's steam-siren in a fog. It worried the sensitive captain more than his damaged toe did.

"This is aching misery," he mentally decided. "Hang it all, I'll waste no more passes on Lake and Atack. Fifteen minutes to go, and not a ghost of a goal in sight. 'Owd can't scoöar' or not, I'll butt right into the Octopus and chance it."

From the moment of this resolve a mighty change was wrought in the game. Of combination there was none, but of vigorous individual action there was a great deal. Giving his damaged foot no quarter, using it as though it were sound, Dick dribbled for goal by the straightest route, clashing against Bessingham each time he did so. It became a battle of giants, almost too thrilling to those onlookers who favoured one team more than the other. Players on both sides, brought to a standstill by the gruelling pace, seemed to have slipped out of the picture, leaving the centre of the field to Dick and the Octopus, two gladiators at ever-closer grips.

"Stick to him, Forge!" yelled Robin. "He's cracking up! You'll be his 'daddy' yet!"

"Old Bess lets nobody be his daddy," indignantly retorted Cuthy. "Your

captain's only a kid beside him."

"Kid yourself!" snorted Robin. "Just you watch Forge, Cuthy—there'll be a hole in the back of this net shortly."

Lyon alone on the Foxenby side gave useful aid to his captain, and it was from two of the plodding fullback's returns that Dick twice dodged Bessingham and struck the cross-bar.

Both shots went where the keeper was not—each, an inch lower, would have made a goal. Such rough luck notwithstanding, "Owd can't scoöar, owd can't scoöar!" bawled Fluffy Jim, derisively waving his papered arms.

"Some sort of mascot, this," thought the bitterly-disappointed captain, "and to make sure I shan't miss seeing him, they flatten him against the ropes. Fun for them—rotten for me!"

Time travelled apace. The referee looked at his watch—a plain hint that the end was nigh. Nothing seemed likelier than the match fizzling out in a goalless draw—a depressing result, satisfactory to neither side.

Yet there was one among the spectators whose youthful heart declined to be downcast. One also whose lungs were sound as a bell, and whose throat was still capable of leading the way in a fresh chorus of rousing yells.

Robin Arkness was the undaunted enthusiast who started the swelling cheer which infected the neutral spectators and struck a warm, reviving glow to Dick Forge's heart.

"Well played, Forge—played the captain of the Foxes!" yelled the Juniors, in uplifting chorus. "Three cheers for the good old captain—hip, hip, hooray!"

Ah, what priceless encouragement was this, at a moment when all seemed lost! To Dick it seemed to bring new life, fresh strength. He could feel his pulses leaping again as the ball came his way once more. Broome, too, felt the spur of that timely cheer, shook off his ill-humour, and sprinted to the captain's side.

"Hang on, Forge!" he said. "Go ahead! Don't bother passing just yet."

Bessingham, cool and confident as ever, bore down upon the pair, feeling for

the ball with feet that never erred. Clever, uncanny Bessingham! Just how he did it, you couldn't tell, but he nipped the leather right from Dick's toe, and down went the mercury behind the goal, changing the Cub-foxes' cheer to a groan.

"Oh, jumping crackers!" cried Robin. "Forge has lost it!"

"Didn't I tell you?" shrieked the delighted Cuthy. "The chap isn't born that can run round old Bess."

But this time it was not to be altogether a one-man show. Broome did not fail his captain. The funk, which had weakened his knees before, passed suddenly away from him. Brain-concussion was the risk he lightly took as he jumped up to Bessingham's mighty kick and headed the ball down again. Jove, how it hurt him! For a moment it knocked him silly, but he recovered himself sufficiently to dribble a few yards and pass the ball to Dick.

Oh, glorious moment, sweet to have come to see! At last, at last, the Octopus was beaten—stranded in utter helplessness. His long legs, stride they never so widely, could not overtake the flying Foxonian now. His colleagues had trusted implicitly to him to clear; only one of them could get near enough to Forge to thrust out a hacking foot, over which Dick nimbly jumped. It was then a clear man-to-man encounter between centre-forward and goalkeeper, with all the rest of the players as idle spectators.

For the first time, in eighty-eight minutes of strenuous football, the Octopus betrayed emotion and spoke.

"Come out to meet him, goalie!" he cried, in desperation.

Out came "goalie" at the word of command, and round him, with the ease of a dancing-master, waltzed Dick. Tears of real joy stung Dick's eyelids, for there in front of him yawned the empty goal that nobody could miss. To make assurance doubly sure, he would not even risk a gentle kick, but would, he told himself, walk the ball into the net. Oh, surely the Cup was Foxenby's now!

And then, right across his path, almost beneath the cross-bar, there came blundering an absurdly clumsy figure in blue-and-white paper trappings—the grotesque form of Fluffy Jim, the village idiot, who lunged at the ball with a hobnailed boot and kicked it into the net under the very eyes of the horrified captain.

"Theer!" cried Fluffy Jim, with a shriek of imbecile laughter. "Tha couldn't scoöar thesen, so Ah've scoöared for thee!"

Poor Forge! Unlucky captain of the luckless Foxes! What miserable turn of events was this? Why had so farcical a thing come to mock him on the very verge of his triumph? A wild absurdity, yet an unspeakable misfortune! It made him feel dazed and stupid. There was a queer vagueness in the impression he got of an excited crowd of spectators and players falling upon Fluffy Jim and tearing to tatters his blue-and-white costume. He felt himself pulled hither and thither by roughly-sympathizing hands, and with difficulty wrenched himself free. Then up strode the Octopus, genuinely distressed and grimly resolute.

"Forge," said the Octopus, "the goal was yours and the game is yours. You will take the Cup."

"I can't," said Dick despairingly. "I didn't score."

Bessingham turned abruptly to the referee.

"Sir," he said, "that was Forge's goal—this is Foxenby's game. Give them the verdict."

The referee was a big man, nearing middle age, who had ruled exciting games before Bessingham was born. He knew the laws of football from A to Z—had, indeed, helped to make not a few of them. And pleading with him to alter those rules, even by a hairsbreadth, was merely a way of wasting breath.

"Impossible," he said. "I'm sorrier than I can say, but Regulation 17 definitely rules that, if all or any portion of the crowd encroaches on the ground during the game, the tie shall be replayed in its entirety. The spectator broke in—that washes out the match."

"No, no, I beg of you," the Octopus pleaded. "Restart the game here and now, and I'll see that all comes right. Foxenby's won, sir—be a sport!"

"I'm a referee first—a sport afterwards," said the whistle-blower, sharply. "Time!"

## CHAPTER III

## A Rival to "The Foxonian"

Roger Cayton tried in vain to pump the Juniors about Fluffy Jim's luckless interference with the final tie.

"Explain it? Who could! It just happened," said Robin Arkness, the Fourth Form boy who had led the cheering. "You know how it is, Cayton—the wider you open your mouth to shout the tighter your eyes close. I just yelled myself blind."

"Oh, come, now! You had Clodhopper Jim bang in the midst of you behind the goal. Some of you must have given him a final leg-up over the ropes."

"We didn't!" was Robin's indignant denial.

Roger thought he detected a shade of emphasis on the "we".

"Who did, then?" he sharply inquired.

But Robin and his chums—known at Foxenby as "Robin Hood and his Merry Men", because of their escapades in the school shrubbery or "Forest"—were not to be drawn. Their ranks were recruited from both houses, and it was an unwritten law amongst them that nothing to the detriment of either house should ever be spoken outside the select circle.

"We were awfully pipped about it, honour bright, Cayton," said their frank-faced spokesman, evasively. "Why, to be sure, aren't we just as proud as peacocks to know that our rousing cheer bucked old Forge into that great run? And we didn't half 'lam' Fluffy Jim for butting in and queering the pitch—eh, chaps, what?"

"Rather!" the Merry Men chanted, in fervent chorus.

"Oh, cut away—skedaddle!" cried Roger, losing patience. "You're shielding somebody, and that's a rotten thing for men of honour to do when Foxenby's reputation is at stake."

Leaving this barb to rankle, as he knew it would, in the hearts of the young adventurers, who prided themselves on being loyal to the core, Roger returned to the study which he and Dick Forge shared between them.

Dick was seated there, but did not raise his head, being too deeply immersed in the latest issue of *The Foxonian* to heed his chum's entry.

"Hallo! That scurrilous rag out again?" said Roger. "Don't soil your hands, Dick; I'll reach the tongs."

"Oh, rats, Roger! Don't be prejudiced. It's 'extra special' this time," was Dick's enthusiastic comment. "Don't I just wish I could do anything half so clever!"

"Are you quite sure you couldn't? You generally 'click' when you make up your mind to tackle a thing, Dick."

Dick flushed. "Don't!" he said, quickly. "Oh, my dear old pard, have a care! You are stirring dangerously deep thoughts within me. If I could write with the sparkle and wit that Luke Harwood puts into this topping magazine of his, I'd be content never to kick a football or swing a cricket-bat again. Listen to this, lad—it's great!"

Appreciatively he read aloud a little article, in which Luke Harwood had scourged some Foxonians whom he had caught in the act of twisting an inoffensive donkey's tail. The irony was clever, though probably aimed too high to penetrate the skulls of those whom it was intended to shame.

"Literature, my good Roger," Dick declared. "Shows a kind heart, too—he's down on animal-torturers."

"Quite right that he and everybody else should be. Yet," said Roger rather bitterly, "in his laudable anxiety to protect quadrupeds, he might have extended a little consideration to donkeys of the two-legged variety."

"Don't be sphinx-like, Roger! When you look like an owl and talk like a book I'm afraid of you. What are you getting at?"

"In plain English, then, this humane editor slates the fatheaded youngsters who twisted the donkey's tail, but omits to chide himself and his clique for pulling the leg of Fluffy Jim, the village ass. Now, honestly, which do you call the crueller sport of the two?"

"You've turned on the searchlight, Roger, as you always do, you clever beggar! Why, to be sure, that was a rotten business. You told Harwood so."

"It was cruel all round, and hurt the school more than it did Fluffy Jim. Your big toe mayn't be right for months, and what guarantee have we that we shan't lose next term's replay by a couple of goals or more? The maddening part of the affair is that Fluffy Jim couldn't have got to Walsbridge on his own. Somebody paid his fare!"

Dick coughed uneasily. Unsuspicious by nature, believing good of everybody, he had already wiped from his mind the mortification of his lost triumph.

"See here, Roger—no offence, old man, but aren't you in some danger of exaggerating a thoughtless lark into a deep-dyed melodramatic plot? I'll convince you that you are, dear boy. Here's Harwood's own account of the match—a top-notch piece of reporting, too. Listen to the last paragraph.

"'It was heartrending,' he writes, 'to see this Titanic struggle brought to an inconclusive finish, just as the fruits of well-won victory were at our gallant captain's lips. No one can guess what motive was at work in the village boy's mind when he scrambled in to kick the ball from Forge's toes. It is charitable to assume his intentions were good—probably he thought to win fadeless laurels for himself and Foxenby by netting the winning goal. Such intricate things as football rules, involving the replay of interrupted cup-ties, could have no meaning for him. The whole thing seems, at first blush, a disaster beyond compensation. But are we not entitled to hope that good may yet come out of evil—that even the great Octopus may be unable to prevent us winning the replay by such a handsome margin that none can dispute our supremacy? Such a wish, I am sure, is in the heart of every Fox who witnessed that glorious and unforgettable game.'"

Roger stuck it through in silence, repressing an impatient gesture. Useless to "slate" Luke Harwood while Dick Forge so manifestly credited the Foxonian editor's loyalty. The paragraph was engagingly sincere in tone, and by his able

control of the school magazine "Old Wykeham's Pet Fox" always had the last word. So Roger gulped down his bile in an effort to fall in with his chum's mood.

"He puts it well," said Roger, "and we can admire his editorial skill without waiving our right to criticism. I'm open to wager, for instance, that of twelve pages this month he gives quite nine to the affairs of Holbeck's House exclusively. Am I right or not?"

"Oh, quite right, Roger. Rather natural, you know—he eats and sleeps there."

"Getting one-eyed in the process. Now, why shouldn't Rooke's House be more in the picture? We're a robust lot, even though we don't wear the carpet threadbare on prize-giving days. They produce the most scholars; we turn out the athletes. Honours are evenly divided, but the Foxonian's space is not!"

"Granting all that, old spitfire, what remedy have we?"

"A rival paper," answered Roger, dramatically. "Nay, but me no buts. A rival magazine, sir, edited by Richard Forge, and to bear the name of *Rooke's Home Rag*. All in favour, hands up. Carried unanimously!"

"Nonsense, Roger, thumbs down! Your project is crazy; we could never run to it!"

"What!" thundered Roger. "Shall it be said that Dick Forge, Captain of Foxenby, fears to tread where Luke Harwood has so long stalked alone? You can do it, old man, and you shall. You owe it to yourself, and to Rooke's House. Mr. Editor, I salute you. May I have the honour of contributing something to the first number of *Rooke's House Rag*?"

Dick thrilled with delight. His chum's spontaneous enthusiasm carried him along like a cork on the tide. Always he had cherished in secret the hope of rivalling the literary reputation which the school magazine had won for Harwood; now, at last, his dream was to come true. Jottings from his pen, unsigned, but obviously his, were to be printed, circulated throughout Foxenby, discussed indoors and out, compared with Harwood's work, and not necessarily to the captain's disadvantage.

His cheeks burned feverishly with the joyous excitement of it all. Football had small space in his thoughts now; anybody could kick a ball about—that was

brawn, but writing was brain! Enraptured by this new bond of friendship, the pair discussed matters in every detail, and before bedtime their plans were cut and dried.

It was to be a fortnightly magazine, for which Dick, whose aunt kept him well supplied with pocket-money, was to be financially responsible; the subscription was to be at the same rate as that fixed for *The Foxonian*, and the number of pages were, in the aggregate, to be the same also; but there all resemblance between the two papers was to end. Originality of method was to be a strong point, imagination was to have full rein, and the fortnightly publication would give sufficient time for repartee if the honour of Rooke's House were in any way assailed.

"I shan't sleep to-night, I know," said Dick, at the end of their confab. "Not even yet can I wholly credit the thing. Tell me, honestly, Roger—have you the faintest doubt of its success?"

Roger slapped the captain's broad shoulders with unusual zest and strength.

"No possible doubt whatever," he avowed. "We're heart and soul together in this venture, old boy, and success is a certainty!"

## CHAPTER IV

## What followed the First Number

The manager of the Moston Fairtype Press made no bones whatever about undertaking the publication of *The Rooke's House Rag*. Competition was healthy, he said, and he believed there was plenty of room for a second magazine in a big school like Foxenby, "whose pupils," he declared, "were drawn almost exclusively from the noblest and wealthiest classes."

Also, he continued, he welcomed the chance of showing what his firm could

do in trade rivalry with Greatorex & Co., who printed and published *The Foxonian* for "Mr. Harwood". A rough estimate of the possible cost? Certainly, if the young gentlemen wished it, but it would be rather a waste of time, as, from the standpoint of one who had the interests of Foxenby at heart, he was prepared to cut the price as low as it was possible to do it without actually losing money on the job.

Deposit? He wasn't at all concerned about that. He could take it that Mr. Forge held himself personally responsible for the cost of production? That would do, then; the word of honour of the Captain of Foxenby was good enough for him, any day.

"Send your 'copy' along in due course, gentlemen, and it shall have my personal attention from the moment it enters our doors," he declared. "I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

The two boys, who had quite anticipated some hard bargaining, were almost overwhelmed by this ready support of their optimistic plans. Their amazement was so obviously reflected in their faces that the manager laughed.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Forge—keep smilin', Mr. Cayton," he said. "I'm not givin' anythin' away! Though nominally manager of this place, I am, in the main, its proprietor, and I shall not lose in chargin' you on the very lowest scale. There is somethin' in advertisement, you know."

**"DON'T BE ALARMED, MR. FORGE"**
**"DON'T BE ALARMED, MR. FORGE"**

Reassured, Dick took away with him the cash he had come prepared to deposit, and both adjourned to the nearest café to celebrate their good fortune in finding so accommodating a publisher. A happy omen, surely, for the success of the new magazine!

All that week Dick, not without a twinge of conscience, accepted help from Roger in his "prep." so that they might both give more time to the arrangement of the *Rag's* first number. Outsiders had not yet been invited to contribute; the first issue was to be a surprise. Every boy in the school was to receive a free copy, in the confident hope that his subscription would be forthcoming when he had digested the mental food afforded by its contents.

It is the way of all amateurs to be over-sure at first.

A rude awakening awaited Dick and Roger. Had the Thames flowed past Foxenby on the morning of publication, it would have run no risk of being set afire. Nimble youngsters aided in the distribution of the copies, and by midday every boy in the school had received *The Rooke's House Rag*. There was, however, no sign of anyone missing a meal to read it. Some copies, alas, were flapping against the shrubbery trees—cast adrift, as is often the fate of literature circulated free.

Bravely pretending that their hearts were not somewhere in the region of their boots, Dick and Roger smiled at one another.

"Taken their breath away, I fancy, old chap," said Dick. "Knocked them speechless. Anyhow, the silence is uncanny."

His comment was immediately followed by the appearance of Luke Harwood, who came towards him with outstretched hand. With such a smile, too—radiantly disarming!

"Congratulations, Forge, old man!" he said. "A clinking idea, and a topping first number. How 'squat' you kept it, too—quite a refreshing surprise."

Gripping Harwood's hand hard, Dick positively blushed.

"You like it, Harwood?"

"Rather! It's hot stuff. The real goods!"

"Awfully sporting of you to say so, Harwood, old man. You're the first to congratulate us. I say 'us', because Cayton's as much an editor of the *Rag* as I am. Decent of Harwood to give us such a send-off, isn't it, Roger?"

"Oh—ah—to be sure!" agreed Roger, thinking something altogether different. (He would have preferred laughing sarcastically in the Foxonian Editor's bland face.)

"You've done it handsome, too—fine art paper, and all that," said Harwood appreciatively. "Always coveted a similar 'get-up' myself. Never had the pluck to risk it, though. Hope you'll get your subscriptions in all right."

"Leave that to me," Roger cut in, rather waspishly "I'm cashier."

Harwood smilingly cleared off then, and nothing further happened till afternoon school ended. Then, at Roger's suggestion, the co-editors entered the study to talk matters over. It was a warm autumn evening, and a full moon kept the darkness at bay. Consequently, the yard was thronged with boys, and through the study window, open at the top, it was possible at last to hear *Rooke's House Rag* being discussed.

"Class one, I call it. A reamer," declared a fresh young voice, raised high, as if in challenge. "Chews the ears off *The Foxonian*—makes a grocer's sugar-bag of it, by comparison."

Roger peered at Dick over his spectacles. "Hear that, my worthy editor?" he whispered. "The dulcet voice of Robin Arkness sings your praises. Bravo, Robin! Whatever lead he takes his 'Merry Men' are bound to follow. We've a doughty champion there!"

Sure enough, a chorus of approval followed. The Rag was spiffing, top-hole, full of ginger, had the Foxonian skinned a mile—of such a type were the compliments that flew about for a time, making sweet music for the co-editors' ears. Then, as was perhaps inevitable, came the jarring note.

"All rot, seems to me, bringing out another school magazine," quoth a dissentient Junior. "How many of you chaps who are cracking it up have bothered to read it? Dull as ditchwater in my opinion, and half a crown a term thrown away."

"That's the leader of the Fourth Form Opposition—young Osbody from Holbeck's House," explained Roger. "Impossible to take his criticism seriously. Matter of creed with him to oppose whatever Arkness says. Listen—all the 'Squirms' will back him up in slating us."

The title of "The Squirms" had been invented by Robin Arkness for the discomfiture of his rivals, and was not, perhaps, unfair to them on the whole, as they seemed to have the unhappy knack of drawing to their side some of the least wholesome of Foxenby's Juniors. Among the shortcomings of a few of them was a disregard for the laws of hygiene—in other words, a rooted dislike to soap and water. In the matter of personal cleanliness Foxenby's reputation stood high, and the small minority who fell below the standard were deservedly

unpopular.

The "Squirms" justified Roger's inference by shrilly attacking the *Rag*—not because they had intelligent fault to find with it, but because they felt compelled to dissent from "Robin Hood's" views in any case. Word-thrusts were given without mercy and taken without flinching. The Merry Men were accused of becoming subscribers only to curry favour with the captain; the Merry Men retaliated by declaring that fear of Harwood's ash-stick prejudiced the Squirms in the *Foxonian's* favour. All these verbal fireworks would have gone off harmlessly but for the amazing conduct of one particular Squirm, who, during a breath-taking lull, had the nerve to speak well of the *Rag*.

"I say, all you chaps," he chimed in, "The *Foxonian's* all right, of course, but you can't help admitting that *Rooke's House Rag* is a jolly sight better got up—first easily in quality of paper and style of printing!"

What a set-back for the Squirms! The Merry Men uttered an ironical cheer at this falling away from the enemy's ranks, and Osbody rounded furiously on his weak-kneed supporter. "Shut up, Mawdster, you ass!" he cried. "When you're asked for your opinion, give it—not sooner, unless it's a split lip you're seeking."

"Oh, please, Osbody," Robin intervened, in mock terror, "don't split poor Mawdster's lip. If you do he might have to wash his india-rubber collar before Christmas!"

Now, Osbody himself being always irreproachable in tidiness, Robin well knew that this exaggerated taunt would touch his rival's pride more than anything. But even Robin was unprepared for the speed with which Osbody leapt at him and hit him in the face. A rough-and-tumble in the "Forest", well screened by tall evergreens, was a safe amusement compared with a free fight in the school-yard itself.

Keeping cool, Robin warded off Osbody's blows without attempting to retaliate.

"Don't be a loon, Osbody," he said. "Wanting to scrap here, right beneath the windows—it's a madman's trick. Come and settle it in the 'Forest'."

But feeling ran too high for compromise now. The swift attack on their chief had fired the blood of the Merry Men. Each selected an antagonist and went for

him, so that Dick and Roger, peeping cautiously through the curtains, were the uncomfortable witnesses of a pitched battle, of which their editorial venture was the primary cause.

"This is an advertisement we didn't bargain for, Roger," said Dick.

"Hang it, yes! There'll be a miniature eruption of Vesuvius if the Old Man hears of it. Not another prefect about, of course."

"We must run downstairs and nip it in the bud, Roger."

"Most inconveniently for us. Can't we lie 'doggo', Dick?"

"Indeed, no. It's up to us, old man. I've winked at these little Donnybrooks in the shrubbery, but discipline goes overboard for 'keeps' if we let them paint one another's eyes beneath our windows."

"Seems a pity to interfere when our side's getting the best of it!"

It was the voice of the tempter, but Dick heeded it not.

"Stay here, Roger. No good both of us courting unpopularity," said Dick, and Roger, ever a failure as a disciplinarian, willingly remained behind. Unseen himself, he watched the captain hop between the infuriated combatants.

"Ease off, you hooligans!" Forge said. "This is a school-yard, not a cockpit. Boys of Rooke's House will report to me at my study after tea. The rest of you will be reported to the head prefect of Holbeck's House for—for" (he was about to say fighting, but withdrew it in favour of a softer term) "unseemly behaviour. No back talk, now, any of you; clear!"

The Juniors scattered sulkily and formed up again in opposite corners of the yard. In the bright light of the moon Dick watched them long enough to gather that his interference had not been taken philosophically. One Merry Man, of whose identity he was not certain, took out a copy of the *Rag* and ostentatiously tore it up. It was whisked away by the warm wind to join other spurned copies in the bushes.

Dick mounted the stairs slowly, sick with disappointment.

"So much for our literary ambition, Roger, old pard," he groaned. "What sort of a kick-off do you call this? Couldn't be rottener, in my opinion."

And Roger, at a loss for words of consolation, savagely knocked a dictionary off the table.

## CHAPTER V

## Rhymes and Riddles

The School Shrubbery was deserving of a better name, for some of the trees were ripe in years, with interwoven branches "that licked a freehand drawing-book hollow", as Robin Arkness put it.

Indeed, to Robin and his Merry Men it was nothing so common as "The Shrubbery". They called it "The Forest", wherein, on high days and holidays, it was possible to have the most delightful adventures that ever gladdened the heart of a romantic schoolboy.

Arkness himself had gradually gathered the band of Juniors together, and his nimble wits were never at a loss for entertainment. His Merry Men voted the sport he provided "real pie", knowing themselves to be a source of envy to most of the Junior School.

A youngster needed to be sturdy and strong indeed to be admitted to the select circle of comrades who made the Forest their haunt. Sometimes a whole term went by without anyone qualifying for membership. This was a very clannish band of brothers indeed!

On an afternoon which was more like midwinter than autumn, so shrewdly nipped the air, the Merry Men collected fuel and lit a fire—not one big enough to attract a prefect's attention, but still sufficiently cosy to thaw the "cold ache" out of their fingers.

There was to be an open-air rehearsal for a Christmas concert, followed by a play depicting "The Merry Life of Robin Hood, the Outlaw of Sherwood Forest".

"Now," quoth Robin, "those of ye who can sing a cheery stave or two, pray join me in the opening chorus. It is called 'Hail, Merry Men', and goes to the tune of 'Hail, Smiling Morn'."

"But we don't know the words, Robin," said Flenton.

Flenton was a tall, strong boy with a somewhat melancholy face, lacking in humour but well-liked by all. As Robin's right-hand man, he was called "Little John", and no boy amongst them could have looked the part more convincingly.

"Of course, thou knowest not the words, Little John, for of a truth it was only yesterday I wrote them. But thou shalt learn them ere long, for here is the parchment on which is written, good and fair, the ballade of which I speak. List, my men, to the first verse, which I will forthwith proceed to sing:

"'Hail, Merry Men, ye Merry Men, ye Merry Men,
With arrows of grey-goose quill,
With arrows of grey-goose quill,
Whose trusty fingers shoot the stag at bay,
Stag at bay, stag at bay,
Whose trusty fingers shoot the stag, the stag—at her—ay!'"

"Good!" said Little John. "I like that. It goes with a swing."

"But we don't shoot stags, Robin," demurred Will Ponder, known in Greenwood fashion as Will Scarlet. "There aren't any round here. Wouldn't rabbits be better?"

"Rabbits, you fathead! I mean, a murrain on thee for thy stupidity," said Robin. "How oft must I tell thee that we are living now—or supposed to be living—in the reign of good King Henry the Second, when stags were plentiful and nobody kept rabbits—that is, nobody wasted arrows on them?"

"Don't mind him, Robin," put in Dave Storm, who, as a frequent student of

Robin Hood lore, had insisted on being called "David of Doncaster". "Ponder's mind runs on rabbits—he has some lop-eared bunnies at home, and writes by almost every post to remind the groom to feed them."

"Well now, no more daftness," said Robin. "This first verse has got to be learnt by heart before we can tackle the second. All together, boys:

"'Hail, Merry Men, ye Merry Men——'

"No good! You're flat, the lot of you. What we need is the schoolroom piano. Any stout bowmen willing to fetch it out? Marry, speak not all at once! Tinker, hast thou brought with thee thy sweet-stringed lute?"

"I've got my mouth-organ, Robin," said he who answered to the name of Tinker, while knowing himself to be, on the school register, plain Tom Jaye.

"Good for thee, Tinker. And hast thou, Miller, concealed within thy suit of Lincoln green, a mellow flute?"

"I'm never without my tin-whistle, Robin," responded Alf Agers, pulling the instrument proudly from his pocket.

"Then, my stout Merry Men, ye shall blow your hardest on these instruments of torture—I mean on the mellow flute and lute, while we troll our jovial ditty under the greenwood tree."

Robin very much enjoyed talking in old English fashion, and had secretly spent a lot of time in reading up the correct phrases to use. Often he would forget himself and mix his old-fashioned speech with the plainest of modern language, but it all came alike to his loyal followers, who were, as a rule, too happy to be critical.

Buoyed up by the strains of the mouth-organ and the whistle, they made bolder onslaughts on the opening chorus, warbling it more and more to its author's liking each time.

"Now, good my men, the next verse, I beg of ye. It runs thus wise:

"'Hail, Merry Men, ye Merry Men, ye Merry Men,
Who only rob the rich that they may help the poor,
Whose oaken cudgels crack the crowns of knaves,
Crowns of knaves, crowns of knaves!'"

"That's O.K., Robin," said Little John, in honest admiration. "But why shouldn't it be 'crowns of Squirms'? They're the enemy, aren't they?"

"Nay, my valiant John, dost want our first concert to break up in a brawl? Admission will be free to esquires and friars, villains and knaves alike. With their usual cheek, some of the Squirms will wriggle into the front seats. Sing 'crack the crowns of Squirms' and you'll have 'em at our throats in a jiffy."

"We can look jolly hard at them as we sing it, though," said Will Scarlet, "so they will know we mean them by 'knaves'."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Robin. "Your deadly foes will get some sound raps ere the concert is finished, I promise ye, my Merry Men. But never must we give them cause to raid the platform. There'll be prefects present, and perhaps a master or two!"

Being too wise to weary them by endless repetition, Robin dropped the chorus there and then, and passed to the next item on the programme, which was a song by "Allan a Dale", otherwise Frank Locke, the only Merry Man who sang solos as a choirboy, though always painfully shy about using his clear voice.

With nervous fingers he rustled the pages of the ditty which Robin handed to him.

"Really, Robin, you ought to sing this yourself," he pleaded. "It's mostly about you."

"Nay, Allan, wouldst have the populace say that Robin Hood loved nothing better than the blowing of his own horn?"

"I'm all of a shiver," declared Allan a Dale.

"Tune up," said David of Doncaster, encouragingly. "After all, Frank—I

mean Allan—it's nice to have somebody to practise on. We shan't mind a bit, whatever it's like."

"As you're all of a shiver, Allan a Dale," said Will Scarlet, "I've thrown an armful of sticks on the fire. Stand with your back to it, and chirrup."

Thus urged on, Locke sang a ballade extolling the lighthearted way in which Robin Hood had cheated sheriffs, cozened friars, beaten foes black and blue at quarterstaff, outshot England's finest archers, and generally proved himself the "star turn" in the outdoor performances of his time.

Once rid of his nervousness Allan a Dale sang well—must have acquitted himself excellently indeed, for boys are not usually patient listeners to vocalism, and none of them interrupted him.

"Right well wilt thou please the ears of them that list to thee, my worthy Allan. A brave sight shalt thou be withal, clad in many colours, with a lovely harp of gold and silver to twang as thou singest."

"A harp!" cried poor Allan. "One of those things with green cloth round it, which needs a handcart to push it about? Not for me, Robin! I couldn't play it."

"I've got an old mandoline," observed Dave of Doncaster. "I could teach Allan to pluck a few notes out of that."

Robin shook his head vigorously. "Wrong period," he said. "Folk didn't sing Alabama coon songs in those days. Don't worry, Allan; we'll cut out the gold and silver harp. It would cost a term's pocket-money, anyhow."

Came next a brisk bout of conundrums, riddles, and rhymes, covering two foolscap sheets in Robin's small, neat handwriting. The novelty of these airy trifles was that they had nothing to do with the sportive days of Robin Hood. They actually concerned Foxenby School itself, being of a saucily personal character which made the Merry Men first gape and then laugh loudly.

"I shall ask you, David of Doncaster," said Robin, "'Why should Rooke's House and Holbeck's House always be able to work together?' You will scratch your head and look silly——"

"Easy part," murmured Will Scarlet, in between.

"And then give it up," went on Robin, ignoring the interruption. "After that I

shall say, 'You don't know why Rooke's House and Holbeck's House should always be able to work together? Why, because there's a Forge in one house, and a lot of bright sparks in the other.'"

"I don't see that," said Little John, rubbing his chin.

He was the only one who didn't. All the rest voted it "ripping".

"But mayn't some Holbeckians think it rather a slur on their house, Robin?"

"Out upon them for thin-skinned clowns if they do. There are hits at both houses. To you, Little John, I shall put the conundrum—'Why do Rooke's scholars need smoked glasses on prize distribution day?' Gaze at me in puzzled fashion, and I'll answer—'So's they can Luke at Harwood when he dazzles them with his brilliance'."

"Tophole!" was the general verdict.

"That's a smack at the other House which balances things," said David of Doncaster.

"To me it seems rather a left-handed swipe," Will Scarlet commented. "Almost as if Luke Harwood were swanking about with prizes under his arm, you know."

"An it please him to put the cap on, let none say him nay," quoth Robin. "I will hie me to the next item, which is a riddle in rhyme. List, good my men:

"'Forlornly I flap in the tormenting breeze,
Out at the elbows and out at the knees.
Never before such a figure of fun—
See how I make all the little ones run!'"

"Why," said Little John, actually smiling, "anybody knows the answer to that. It's a scarecrow."

"Of course," said a lot of the others.

"Wrong," said Robin. "Keep it dark, all you fellows, till the night of the concert. The answer is 'Fluffy Jim'."

"The Village Idiot at the football match!" exclaimed Will Scarlet. "Best of the bunch, I call that. Robin, old man, how in thunder did you make them all up?"

"I didn't!" said Robin.

"Then who did?"

"That's telling. I'm not allowed to say."

"Whoever put them together was a clever guy."

"He *is*," agreed Robin, "but you'll never guess who, so don't try. There's twenty-two of them in all and they ought to bring the house down. But now, my stout fellows," he broke off, changing again to old-time terms, "right worthily have ye gone through your parts, and I have a mind to reward ye for it. In yonder pack of mine there are sweet venison pasties and sundry cakes, with three pottles of humming ale—ginger ale. If there be any amongst ye who cares not to feast on such goodly fare, let him hang himself on yonder tree for the crows to peck at."

Generous Robin! Few, if any, of his Merry Men guessed how short he went of every other luxury in order to provide these tasty little feasts in the shade of the Forest trees. Other boys had hobbies—stamp-collecting, photography, painting—but Robin had none. For a hobby that needed pocket-money could not live beside such hospitality as Robin gave to his Merry Men. He let them assume that most of the grub came in hampers from home—some of it certainly did, but for the greater proportion Robin quietly paid at the Moston stores.

On logs tugged long ago to this particular spot, they sat in a rough semi-circle round the fire, and fell to with hearty good will. Some supplemented the viands from paper-bags held in reserve, and it seemed a thousand pities that such a jovial little picnic was doomed to be interrupted when the merriment was at its height. But interrupted it was, and in a manner that was both startling and odious.

Suddenly—even more suddenly than showers come in April—there splashed into the fire two jets of liquid, followed immediately by another and yet another.

The fluid drenched the logs and sent up clouds of pungent smoke, making their eyes smart and setting them coughing and sneezing. Simultaneously there was the unmistakable clink of syringes against tin pails, followed by smothered laughter and scampering feet.

With angry cries the Merry Men jumped from their logs and made away from the reeking fire. The fumes had a strong suggestion of acid from the laboratory, making the vicinity of the fire an unhealthy place to stay in.

"Those caddish Squirms!" yelled Robin. "After them, my Merry Men, after them!"

Yes, Robin—a long way after them! Those quick-heeled Squirms have made the most of their start, and, run you never so fast in pursuit, you will not catch them, not even be sharp enough to see the direction they took. They have vanished mysteriously and your vengeance must wait until another day.

"Marry come up, but they shall pay for this!" cried Robin, shaking his fist furiously into space. "Ere this week has gone by there shall not be a bone in the bodies of the Squirms that shall not ache, and ache again, from the cudgelling we shall give them. Are ye agreed on it, my Merry Men?"

"Ay, ay, Robin!" they cried, with deep and passionate sincerity.

## CHAPTER VI

## The Plea of Peter Mawdster

The complete failure of the first number of their *Rooke's House Rag* gave Dick and Roger rather a wretched night. But with the morning-time there came a ray of hope.

Luke Harwood brought in a whole sheaf of subscriptions which he had

voluntarily collected from Holbeck's House. There was a fine spirit of sportsmanship about his unsought assistance, which almost betrayed the grateful Captain into a display of emotion. O'er Roger Cayton's head it heaped coals of fire indeed!

"'Pon my word, Harwood, you're real jannock," Dick managed to stammer. "What hours you must have spent on this collecting stunt! It—it's downright brickish of you."

"Oh, cut that out," said Harwood, with a laugh. "To be honest, it was a jolly good excuse for dodging 'prep.'. I didn't feel like swotting last night."

"But I say, you know, you shame me. I never thought of doing anything like this for you, Harwood!"

"The cases don't run on all fours, old man. I took over *The Foxonian* as a going concern. Generations of Foxonians had edited it before me. It was almost as old and venerable as Nelson's monument. You had competition to face—your *Rag* was an infant in arms. I love rivalry—it stimulates me. Let nothing discourage you, old boy—keep right on making each number better than the last."

He faded away with his customary grace, leaving behind him a completely captivated Dick and a non-plussed and sour-visaged Roger.

"How now, Stormy Petrel!" cried Dick. "It's amusing to what extremes you carry your prejudice against Luke Harwood, Roger. Bears you no malice whatever for the hard knocks you gave him in your 'Sauce for the Gander' column. Now, Roger, knuckle under, old man! He's our Good Samaritan."

"Who appointed him our collector, anyway?" said Roger. "Sly impertinence, I call it. Well," he added, relenting at sight of Dick's crestfallen face, "perhaps I am rather a graceless churl to-night. I'll put this bagful of money safely away in the locker, and then start raking the subscriptions in myself before some other voluntary helper queers my pitch!"

Harwood's "sly impertinence" had gingered Roger up, at any rate. By nightfall he had wheedled "subs" out of the majority of Rooke's House, and when they visited Moston with "copy" for the second number of the *Rag*, they carried with them funds ample enough to defray the cost of publication for

months ahead.

"Gentlemen, do you mind holdin' over the matter of payment a week or two?" said the Manager of the Moston Fairtype Press, almost plaintively. "I'm just now neck-deep in arrears of work—never a spare moment for book-keepin' do I get."

"Oh, but we'd rather pay, really, and get it off our minds," said Dick.

"Then we shall know exactly where we stand," Roger supplemented.

The manager spread out his ink-stained hands imploringly.

"It's all right, Mr. Forge—carry on, Mr. Cayton. I know you both—we can trust one another. I'll make out a bill to-morrow and you can pay me next time you're in town. I'd much rather!"

So the co-editors went away again with the money in their pockets, excusably touched by this further proof of confidence in their honesty. Number two of the *Rag* came out in all its glory, irreproachably printed on fine-quality paper, and so far they hadn't been permitted to pay a farthing towards its cost! It seemed almost like philanthropy.

It was gratifying, too, to see how much better the second issue went down than the first had done. Probably because they had paid for it this time, the boys did not chuck it about, and it appeared to be read with even closer attention than was the monthly *Foxonian*, brought out simultaneously. In truth, the rival papers lashed out at each other, though with perfect fairness, and the contents of both were voted "particularly spicy".

"Roger, old man, shake!" cried Dick, after tea. "This is my life's happiest day, I really think. Thanks, as much as anything, to your pungent 'Sauce for the Gander', we are in this pleasant position—— Now, kid, why are you nosing about here? Clear off!"

He broke into his congratulatory speech to turn irritably on a flabby-faced, unhealthily fat youngster, who had had the amazing cheek to draw his attention by plucking at his sleeve.

"Oh, please, Forge, I'd rather not go until I've spoken to you privately," the Junior said.

"Privately! Well, of all the nerve! You can say anything you've got to say in front of my friend here, and look slippery, too. Doubt if I ought to let you speak at all—butting into our conversation like that."

"Sorry, Forge, but I don't think you'll mind when I've told you everything. I've come to you for protection."

"Protection! From me? I'm honoured—overwhelmed! Take a square look at this young genius, Roger. Is he quite 'all there', do you consider?"

"Nothing balmy about me, Forge," said the youngster, with self-possession. "I merely called to lay a complaint——"

"Well, don't lay it as heavily as a foundation-stone," interrupted Dick. "That'll do for the first part of your speech, youngster. Hurry up with the second. I'll give you a couple of minutes."

He took out his watch.

"I'm Mawdster, from Holbeck's House—the boy who stuck up for the *Rooke's House Rag* when all my chums were slating it."

"Ah, to be sure!" said Roger. "One of the Squirms, and looks it, too."

The Junior gave Roger a quick glance which seemed to say, "It's none of your business, anyhow." Then he made his moan.

"Ever since that day, Forge, I've caught it hot from both sides—my own and Robin Hood's. And all because I said your mag. was better got-up than *The Foxonian*."

Dick and Roger exchanged half-amused glances. Then Dick looked back at his watch.

"One minute," he chuckled. "Any more of this, kid?"

"A lot, Forge! They blackguard me all the time—I've a dog's life between the two gangs—and yesterday they held my head down ever so long in the fountain."

"Did you report that to your prefect?"

"Yes—to Harwood. But he only laughed and said it would save me the trouble of washing myself—or some such rot. I know why he did nothing—because he'd heard I'd been running *The Foxonian* down and praising your *Rag*, Forge. He'll always have his knife into me for that."

"Oh, rather!" said the Captain, ironically. "Quite a natural assumption that Harwood will lie awake o' nights wondering how to get even with you. Don't be an idiot, young Mudster."

"Mawdster, if you please, Forge," the Junior corrected, not too respectfully.

"Mawdster, then! Don't snap! I think I understand you now. You belong to Holbeck's House, whose prefect snubs you. Then, because you once praised my magazine, you expect me to slip across and break a stick over the backs of a score of youngsters who are ragging you. If there's a more brazen little bounder in the whole of Foxenby, I've yet to hear of him. Quit!"

"But please, Forge——"

"Quit, you little ass!" put in Roger. "Don't you know how hard the Captain can kick?"

The flabby youth, realizing that his audacious appeal had failed, got quickly out of the range of Dick's boot. But he paused long enough to get in a parting shot—a stinger, too.

"After all," he said, "it's putrid to be bullied for praising the *contents* of a magazine, when all you really fancied was the paper and print!"

Both laughed ruefully at this when Mawdster had vanished.

"That's a backhander for us, straight between the eyes," said Roger.

"Rather!" Dick agreed. "The oily maggot! I only wish I'd taken your tip, Roger, and driven my uninjured foot into his fat carcase!"

# CHAPTER VII

## The Squirms in the Forest

On a dull Saturday afternoon Robin Arkness and his Merry Men, rigged out for football, passed through the school-yard.

Their voices were raised eagerly as they discussed, in a friendly way, who should play on Robin's side and who should form a team under the captaincy of Little John. Almost all they said was, therefore, audible to Osbody and his Squirms, who, from the windows of the dining-hall, contemptuously watched them depart.

"Silly asses, booting a ball about with only themselves to score against," scoffed Grain, cracking a walnut between his teeth.

"Going by the fuss they make, you'd think it was a match for the World's Championship," said Niblo, a boy who never wasted pocket-money on regular haircutting.

Practically every Squirm had some skittish comment of this character to make. As a body they hated football. Much more in their line was it to go marching about the premises, annoying the servants and "ragging" inoffensive youngsters. In this way they missed a lot of fresh Foxenby air, which would have done them a world of good.

Osbody, leader of the Squirms, had outdoor ambitions this afternoon, however. The departure of Robin and his Merry Men in the direction of the football field had given him an idea.

"Boys," he said, "is there any reason why one gang of Foxes, more than any other, should have the Shrubbery all to itself?"

"Not a bit!"

"Confounded cheek on their part!"

"Old Man Wykeham ought to stop it!"

"Ours as much as theirs!"

"We're all in one mind about it," said Osbody. "So, as Arkness and his band of bounders are off leather-chasing, what's to prevent us having a bit of sport ourselves under the greenwood tree?"

With one accord they tumbled to the notion. Such a jolly sight less "fag" to walk right into the Shrubbery without the painful necessity of fighting their way through its outskirts—a plan of campaign which, with disastrous results, they had twice tried before, on each occasion retiring as a routed and damaged rabble.

Singing and shouting and skitting, they slouched in straggling array to the Shrubbery. That morning gardeners had been busy lopping the tree branches, many of which were strewn on the ground. Some were green and damp, but others crackled crisply when trodden on.

"They'd burn like—like blazes," said Grain, not very brilliantly. "What say you, chaps, to lighting a fire where they've had theirs?"

"That'll be clinking," agreed Osbody. "Not on the spot they last used, though. I guess our squirts made that wet for the winter. A ripping score to make off them, wasn't it, boys?"

"Rather!" said Niblo, gleefully. "Some of them were coughing and rubbing their eyes all next day."

"True. Mr. Rooke looked in and asked if any of them wanted cough mixture, but they didn't bite!"

"Ha, ha! Buzz round, boys, and rake up the fuel. If I can't beat Robin Arkness at fire-making, I'll chew my boot-protectors for a week!"

Bold words. But there are days when fires simply will not burn as they should. Match after match was struck and thrust vainly into the newspapers which formed the foundation of the pile. Some black smoke rose in a languid way, but again and again a fitful breeze blew out the tiny flame.

"Somebody must be breathing hard," said Osbody, trying to hide his vexation beneath a show of humour. "Get round, boys, and fan it with your caps."

"Funny thing, this bad luck," Grain remarked. "When Arkness lights a fire it blazes up like billy-o inside half a minute."

"Go on, Grain, skit," growled Osbody. "'Spose you think of me as Guy Fawkes, unable to set the fireworks going? Come and have a whack at it yourself, then, Mr. Clever!"

Grain swaggered nearer. "Don't mind if I do," he said. "Couldn't very well make a worse boggle of it, could I?"

He knelt beside the fire and drew from his overcoat pocket a brown-paper parcel, through which grease was oozing slightly. This was a bad investment in ham sandwiches, which Grain (almost always eating) had found far too fat for his liking.

Without opening the package, he scooped a hole for it amongst the newspapers and dry twigs, covered it with spreading boughs, and restarted the fire. It crackled, spluttered, and burst into a blaze, flinging off an unpleasant odour of rancid fat.

Still, as a warming spectacle its success was immediate. Grain had scored over Osbody, the established leader of the Squirms, and made but a poor effort to conceal his satisfaction.

"Smart!" sneered Osbody. "Since when did you start out hawking lard and dripping, Grain?"

This was the sort of bickering which was always going on between the two leading spirits of the Squirms. You never get a pleasant atmosphere where fellows are always trying to score off one another.

For a moment there was a waspish interchange of sarcastic remarks all round. Then Niblo, less peevish than the rest, started them off round the fire in a mock Indian war-dance, which warmed their blood and put them in a better temper.

"Rather a jolly stunt, Niblo, old boy," said Osbody. "Gives me a rattling good idea for a new band—one that should chew the ears off Robin Hood and his

Merry Men."

"Out with it, 'Body, my bantam," Niblo said.

"It's this—why shouldn't we all be Wild West cowboys, with Buffalo Bill as the head of the band?"

"Bravo! Hurrah!" cried some of the Squirms.

"I reckon it would be tophole," went on Osbody, flushing with excitement. "We'd have such fun as never was. I'd be Buffalo Bill——"

"Of course!" Grain dryly commented.

"And we'd go on the trail and hunt buffaloes and scalp Red Indians, and—and—well, do all those topping things you see 'em perform at the picture-shows. Now, boys, all in favour of a Buffalo Bill band, hands up!"

Shouts of approval signified an almost unanimous consent.

"Then squat round the fire, my cowboys, and we'll talk over the details," said Osbody.

"Fire's too low," Grain said. "Gone down while we were doing the tomahawk crawl. Wants something on it to make a rattling good flare. What price the fibre-matting which is chucking about over yonder? Jove, it wouldn't half burn."

"So would our ears when the masters had finished clouting them," Osbody observed. "Matting doesn't grow on trees. The gardeners have left it there."

"Shows they've no use for it, then," Grain persisted. "Come on, boys, bring it to the fire."

"No, no," Osbody said. "It's there for a purpose. Covering up saplings from the frost, perhaps."

"Covering up fiddlesticks!" scoffed Grain. "They've chucked it there to get rid of it. Christmas, won't it blaze! Who'll join me in fetching it?"

"It means a furious swishing for whoever does," was Osbody's warning.

"Pooh, 'Body, old man, you're afraid!" Grain jeered.

The taunt reddened Osbody's cheeks still more, but he had the courage to stick to his guns.

"Rotto!" he exclaimed. "I like a lark, but this is sheer fatheadedness. Don't we get hidings enough without seeking them?"

"Who'll get a hiding?" argued Grain. "Not us, if anybody. Every master and prefect in Foxenby knows who prowls round this shrubbery. Supposing the matting is missed, then who'll 'click' the blame for it?"

"Robin Hood and his Merry Men," said Niblo. "I see your drift, Grain."

"Come, Osbody, be a man," Grain urged. "You can see there's no risk. Robin's 'put it across you' more than once lately. What a fine chance of getting your own back!"

Osbody hesitated. His sporting instincts were not altogether dead. In better company he would have realized that Grain's proposal savoured of a dirty trick. But he lived always in hopes of "doing down" Robin Arkness, whose successful rivalry had lately thrown him very much in the shade. Temptation assailed him strongly: he wavered and fell!

"In for a lamb, in for a sheep, chaps," he said. "Come along! We'll fire the matting."

Without giving his conscience any further time to prick, he darted across to the huge sheets of fibre-matting, clutched one, and dragged it towards him.

Then up before his astonished sight there sprang suddenly a bunch of sturdy young figures in football costumes, while from under other similar coverlets emerged the remainder of Robin Hood's Merry Men, with challenging cries that struck terror to the hearts of the dumbfounded Squirms.

"Caught!" cried Robin, leaping straight at Osbody. "Have at them, my Merry Men."

"You rotten sneaks, skulking about in there after pretending to start for footer," cried Osbody, in mortified fury. "Stand your ground, chaps, and slug

'em!"

He certainly set them a gallant example. Whatever his failings, funk was not one of them, and he gave Robin measure for measure in a rough-and-tumble encounter, more like a wrestling-match than a bout of fisticuffs.

Old enemies amongst the rest picked each other out and came to grips, but not more than half of the Squirms faced the music. The remainder ran from the sudden appearance of the Merry Men as they would have galloped from ghosts, and their judgment was good, for those of their gang whom they left behind were in for a sorry time indeed.

A dozen of them were collared and held captive almost at the first attempt. "I yield, I yield!" they cried, in craven chorus.

Not that they lacked reason for giving in so soon on this occasion, because the flight of the majority left them hopelessly outnumbered.

Their arms were pinned behind them, and they were unceremoniously bustled out of the way of the very much severer bouts which were taking place between Robin and Osbody, and between Grain and Little John. Osbody and Grain had far more "ginger" in their natures than any of the other Squirms, and the Merry Men gave them every chance to fight it out, confident that Robin and Little John would sooner or later prove themselves the victors.

Twigs snapped sharply beneath the combatants' feet as they pushed one another to and fro in determined efforts to bring about a fall. But with Arkness and Flenton there rested all the moral advantage that comes of fighting in the presence of friends, and slowly but surely the tide of battle turned in their favour.

"You've got him this time, Robin!" somebody shouted. "His back's bending; he'll be down in a second."

Osbody made a last gallant effort to prove that this prophecy was all wrong, and managed to spin out the struggle half a minute longer. Then over he went with Robin on top of him, and almost simultaneously Little John succeeded in putting Grain flat on his back.

"Hurrah!" cried the Merry Men, rushing to the spot to relieve Robin and Little John of the custody of the vanquished Squirms.

"By Jove, that was a tough job," Robin panted. Then, remembering the part it was his delight to play, he continued:

"Chins up, foemen, for I would have speech with ye. Little did ye guess, when ye talked of burning the matting and letting the blame fall on me and my Merry Men, that beneath it I and they lay snugly hidden, ready to pounce out upon ye, and drub ye soundly for such villainous behaviour."

"Villain yourself!" snapped Osbody. "Who pretended to go footballing, and sneaked round here instead? You and your dirty dogs of Men!"

"Bandy not such words with me, caitiff, or it shall go hard with thee and thy crawling Squirms. Fair as the day was the trick we played on ye—a stratagem to draw ye to the Forest, whither ye would have been too chicken-hearted to venture had ye thought to meet us there. Yet ye and Grain have fought a good fight to-day, and I am minded to treat ye well."

"I don't want any of your favours," said Osbody, sulkily.

"I will give thee the chance, nevertheless," said Robin. "Tell me the names of those who put out our fire with garden-syringes, and all but choked us into the bargain."

"Shan't!" said Osbody.

"Thou flatly refuseth, then, to hand the miscreants over to justice?"

"What miscreants? What justice?"

"A murrain on thee for thy saucy back-talk! There will be more trouble than thou wottest of if thou dost not speedily humble thy pride."

Osbody could see that Robin was in a mighty passion at the recollection of the quenched fire, and the heart of the leader of the Squirms sank within him. He was just about to make a clean breast of it when, glancing at Grain, he saw that youth looking at him with contemptuous eyes, as much as to say: "I know you're going to blab to save your precious skin." For it was Grain who had planned and carried out the squirting scheme, besides insisting on mixing chemicals with the fluid, a notion which Osbody had condemned as dangerous.

Grain's sneering gaze stiffened Osbody's back.

"You can save your breath, Arkness," he said. "You know as much about it as you ever will."

"All right, you chump!" answered Robin, dropping back into modern speech. "If you will ask for it, you shall have it, and not only you, but every one of your gang that we've got trussed up to-day, innocent and guilty alike. Boys, bring the master Squirm to the old bonfire."

Laughing in gleeful anticipation of what was to come, the two Merry Men who held Osbody fast dragged him, kicking and struggling, to the ashes of the bonfire which the Squirms had previously extinguished with squirts. Beside this Robin knelt, scooping up a generous handful of black ashes.

With a quick inkling of what was coming, Osbody redoubled his efforts to get free. Finding himself too well held, he panted:

"Here, what's the game? None of your dirty tricks on me, now!"

"You sing loudly," said Robin, "so I'll make a nigger minstrel of you. Hold him tight, my Merry Men!"

Thereupon he rubbed upon Osbody's neck and face the whole handful of bonfire ash, smelling pungently as it did of mingled wood and acid.

Osbody yelled furiously at first, but was compelled to close his mouth to prevent his tongue being coated with the ash. Very soon his grey eyes shone comically out of a coal-black face, and the ludicrous sight he presented made the Merry Men laugh so much that they were in some danger of releasing their captives.

"You filthy brutes, you shall suffer for this," Osbody howled, with difficulty suppressing tears of mortification.

**"YOU FILTHY BRUTES, YOU SHALL SUFFER FOR THIS"**
**"YOU FILTHY BRUTES, YOU SHALL SUFFER FOR THIS"**

"Why, knave, what ailest thee? Art thou not being adorned by the lovely chemical dye which thee and thy henchmen made? I have changed thy mealy

countenance into a glossy black one, and yet thou slingest abuse at me. A plague on thee for thy ingratitude!"

"He looks just like a shoe-polish advertisement!" gurgled Will Scarlet, between his paroxysms of mirth.

"I'll knock the face off you, when I get at you, Ponder!" stormed Osbody.

"You'll have to wash your own better than usual first," Ponder smartly retorted.

"Six paces to the rear with him," commanded Robin. "Prithee, Grain, if thou mindest not my chaff, step forward to receive thy new complexion."

Grain did no stepping forward—he was forcibly propelled by merciless knees from behind. Ash there was in plenty, and Robin did not stint it. In generous measure he smeared it all over Grain's features, being quick enough to save his fingers from the snapping teeth which viciously strove to bite them.

"Now there are two little nigger boys," said Robin, giving a final deft touch to Grain's chin. "Bring along another eight Squirms, and then there'll be ten."

What aching ribs the Merry Men acquired as the wriggling Squirms, one after another, had their faces well blackened by the charcoal of the fire! No revenge could have been more deliciously sweet. In vain did the wailing victims threaten to inform their respective housemasters if the performance did not cease. There was not a Merry Man who believed that they would dare to peach, nor, for the matter of that, was there one who would not have taken a swishing in preference to missing a lark such as this.

"Now," said Robin, "every mother's son of you would make an excellent Man Friday to Robinson Crusoe."

"Perhaps they'd rather think of themselves as the cannibals of Monkey Island," David of Doncaster suggested.

"Whichever they like," said Robin. "Oh, I can't laugh any longer—I'm positively weak with it! Rush them to the Forest edge, Merry Men, and give them a flying send-off. Good-bye, you gentlemen of colour!"

Knowing themselves to be fearful figures of fun, the limp and groaning Squirms allowed their rivals to push them out of the shrubbery and send them flying into the school-yard. Not even Osbody and Grain had any fighting spirit left. Holding their caps over their faces to hide themselves as best they could, they made a bee-line for the kitchens, where soap and hot water would be plentiful.

"Oh, what a scream!" cried Will Scarlet. "I believe I've cracked a rib with laughing. They'll never forget this as long as they live!"

"I'm not so sure that we haven't done them rather a good turn than a bad one," said Robin. "They *will* have to wash themselves to-day, if never before!"

## CHAPTER VIII

## The Burglary

A storm of extreme violence swept across Foxenby one night. It was like a gigantic oratorio of wind-music, with the sea's roar as an accompaniment.

The dormitories faced west, and therefore missed the worst of the gale, though some of the boys lost sleep through it. Dick and Roger were among the sufferers from insomnia, and got up before daybreak by mutual consent, meaning to make themselves a cup of coffee in their study.

"Jove, listen to the windows rattling!" cried Dick. "And how blinking draughty it is! Why, there's snow on the table!"

"No wonder," Roger said. "Here's a pane of glass blown clean out, just as if it had been cut by a glazier's diamond. We shall have to do the 'Mary Ann' business this morning. Bring the mop, Dick, old son."

"Plus a sheet of brown paper as a dummy window-pane, what? I say, Roger,

flash your electric torch into this corner—it's as dark as Erebus. Things seem topsy-turvy, too. I've cut my hand against a broken teacup already."

Roger's torch pierced the gloom, and the chaos it disclosed brought a cry of dismay from Dick.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed. "There's been dirty work here to-night, and it's not all the wind's doing, either. Have a squint, Roger!"

"Burglars!" cried Roger. "They've burst open the locker, and it's any odds our money's gone. Investigate, Dick, quick!"

No investigation needed! The thieves had made a good job of it!

"Not even left a luck-penny behind them!" groaned Dick. "Roger, old man, we're 'broke'. The hounds have cleaned us out!"

"Our savings gone, and every cent of the *Rag's* subscription money, likewise! Oh, confound that printing-works' manager—why the dickens couldn't he have taken the 'dibs' when we offered to pay? It—it's stark tragedy, Dick!"

He sank into a chair with his head in his hands, apparently overwhelmed. Dick, always more practical, hastened to the door.

"Crying mops up no spilt milk, old boy," he said. "The police must know of this. I'll knock up Mr. Rooke, and get him to telephone down."

Roger's teeth were chattering, but he followed Dick to the housemaster's quarters, and helped him to pommel the bedroom door. Mr. Rooke grumbled sleepily at this unceremonious alarum. He had been awake half the night, and he eyed the boys with sour disapproval until they had explained matters. Then he became gravely alert.

"Show me the damage," he said. Having seen it, he flew back with long strides to a room next his own and examined a cabinet there. It had been wrenched open and its contents extracted.

"Boys," he gasped, "that's the Headmaster's coin and pewter cupboard, and they've stripped it bare. Coins of the Roman era, with some almost invaluable old silver and pewter besides. He had them insured for some hundreds of

pounds, but money can't replace them. Hello, there!" He was at the telephone now. "This is Foxenby School; get me the Moston police-station, please—I don't know its number. Quick as you possibly can—there's been a burglary."

At his command Dick and Roger hurried off to awaken the Head and the other masters, some of whom speedily discovered that they, too, had been robbed in a greater or lesser degree. But all their troubles paled before the Old Man's loss. He had thought his treasure-cabinet burglar-proof, and his usually stern face now seemed almost boyishly distressed. He was writing a book about his unique collection, and the recovery of the treasure was essential to the manuscript's completion.

"I'm sorry for everybody who has been robbed," he said, "and devoutly hope we may recover the stolen goods. You boys have lost nothing, I hope?"

Roger was beginning to explain that they had, indeed, lost a very great deal, but the prompt arrival of a police-inspector silenced him.

"Our men are already out scouring the district," the inspector briskly reported. "The burglars may not have escaped. Awfully sorry this has occurred, sir; must have slipped in between the beats. Can I see the rifled rooms, please?"

His tour was so thorough that Mr. Rooke and the boys lost patience, and begged the Head to let them join in the search for the thieves.

"Yes, go," the Old Man agreed, "but be wary. Burglars are usually armed. Don't jeopardize your skins by indiscreet valour."

It proved altogether an unprofitable adventure. The wind on the heath stung their faces with icy points of hail, and over that wide expanse of moorland a regiment of hidden men could have escaped detection. But it was quite unlikely that the burglars had remained in the district. They had the choice of several roads leading inland, and were probably miles away by now.

Fagged out and wet to the skin, the trio gave it up towards lunch-time, hoping that the police had had better luck. But they hadn't, nor had any of the hardier schoolboys who had taken up the quest.

It looked like a cleverly pre-arranged piece of cracksmanship, and few of those despoiled entertained much hope of seeing their property again. The local

police were up against a big thing, which oppressed and baffled them.

The inspector took away a few photographs, together with an index of the Head's stolen valuables. Dick and Roger could give him no workable details of their loss.

"It was all in silver and notes, and we hadn't taken the numbers," Roger explained.

The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, young gentlemen, but recovering cash is like getting butter out of a dog's throat. I've made a note of the totals, and we'll do our utmost, but——"

"Oh, we quite understand, thank you, inspector," said Dick. "It's 'good-bye for ever, good-bye', to quote Tosti's song. Hope you'll have luck with the Head's stuff, anyhow—that's far more important. He's fearfully cut up about it."

The two chums walked off together in silence. Both feared to voice the dread that was in their minds, and it was a relief to come across Hadwin, the school librarian and sports' secretary, who was pinning three announcements on the hall notice-board.

Hadwin was a quiet boy, exceedingly tactful always, and he left them at once, saying as he went:

"There's something there which will interest you chaps, I think. We're all awfully sorry to hear of what happened last night. Mr. Rooke told us you'd lost everything. Hard lines!"

Not too pleased that everybody knew, they thanked the librarian, and turned to read what he had fastened on the board.

One paper announced that, owing to the urgency of commencing structural alterations within the School, the Christmas holidays would begin a week earlier than usual.

"Good biz!" commented Roger. "That should save us publishing a Christmas Number, anyhow."

Another paper asked that boys who had seen or heard anything suspicious on

the previous night would at once communicate with the Headmaster, so that the police might be given every possible clue.

"Nothin' doin' there," said Dick. "It all happened away from the dormitories, worse luck. They knew their way to the Golden West all right!"

The third announcement quickened their interest somewhat. It referred to the County Schools' "Final", and set forth that "the Committee had carefully considered the unfortunate incident which terminated the final tie at Walsbridge, and, while appreciating the sportsmanship of St. Cuthbert's written request that the Cup should be awarded to Foxenby, were unable to do otherwise, in face of Regulation 17, than order the match to be replayed in its entirety. The re-play would take place on the Walsbridge F.C. ground, before Easter, on a date to be mutually arranged."

"Well, that's sticking to the strict letter of the law, in all conscience," commented Roger. "St. Cuthbert's, like good sports, give us the Cup, but the Committee won't."

"I agree with them, Roger—they're right!"

"What!"

"Honest, old boy! A goal's a goal when the ball's in the net—not before. Fluffy Jim put it there; I didn't."

"Oh, come off it, Dick! You would have done."

"I should, almost certainly. But there's the very outside chance that I might have slipped on the goal-line, and lost the ball. Funnier things have happened, especially in exciting cup-ties. Therefore, the Committee's ruling is fair."

Roger's eyes shone with appreciation of his chum's absolute impartiality.

"Righto!" he agreed. "You and the Octopus are a pair! Anyhow, it'll be great to see such another football duel as that was."

"I wish the re-play were to-day, Roger," said Dick, earnestly. "It would take my mind off the—the other thing."

"Agreed. We're both of us trying, with poor success, not to look as miserable as we feel."

"I shall get a special 'exeat' to-morrow, Roger, and go down to tell that printer chap how things are."

"Quite the soundest policy, dear old chum. I heartily approve. Here, let's go to the Common-room and have a bit of music. Nero fiddled while Rome was burning—we'll bang the piano and trust to luck, too. Are you game, Captain?"

His begone-dull-care manner, so unusual with Roger, lifted Dick up responsively.

"Cheerio!" he cried. "Lead the dance, Sir Roger de Coverley!"

## CHAPTER IX

## Luke Harwood in the Picture

British weather is notorious for its very quick changes. Thus, the day after the fruitless burglar hunt, the Captain of Foxenby was sitting in warm sunshine on the verge of the Shrubbery when the Prefect of Holbeck's House strolled across to condole with him.

"At the risk of seeming to rub it in, Forge, I want to tender my sincere sympathy," said Harwood, sitting beside him. "In your shoes I'd be puzzled what to do."

"Thanks—yes. I'm pretty well bunkered, Harwood. Unconsciously, by your kindness in collecting all those subs., you did us a bad turn; they all went."

"And by now, doubtless, have been spent on a fuddle in the Thieves' Kitchen," Harwood agreed. "More of my mistaken zeal coming back on me! The

money's gone—Kismet! No subscriptions, no paper!"

The captain turned sharply round to stare at the Prefect. "What do you mean, Harwood? 'No paper!' Are you thinking, then, that there'll be no *Rooke's House Rag* after this?"

Luke gave his pleasant laugh. "Well, it's rather a natural inference, Forge. Paper costs money. Printing-ink ditto. If the money's in the Thieves' Kitchen it can't be spent here. Ergo, you are justified in ceasing publication."

He felt annoyed during this speech to find himself getting somewhat red in the face beneath the questioning scrutiny of Dick's clear eyes. There was something about what he had said which evidently did not appeal to the Captain.

"I say, Harwood, please don't suggest a get-out that I'm sure you wouldn't adopt yourself! Take the Foxes' money and give them nothing in return! Impossible!"

"But you didn't take the brass—the burglars pinched it. Don't be too straitlaced, Forge, for your own sake. Men of business 'wind up' when their funds are stolen, and nobody blames them. It's simply Fate!"

"Oh, thanks for the tip, Harwood! Perhaps I am over-squeamish, but I took a quarter's subscription from Foxenby in exchange for a fortnightly mag., and I mean, by hook or by crook, to deliver the goods."

Harwood jumped up and shot out his hand impulsively. There seemed to be a troublesome lump in his throat as he spoke.

"Bravo, old fellow! You're top-hole. Keep the flag flying by all means, and if there's anything I can do to help; any—er—little loan——"

"Oh, by Jove, no thanks, Harwood! Awfully decent of you, but this is entirely my own show."

Contrary to his custom, Harwood did not efface himself this time. He resumed his seat beside Dick and talked in quiet tones of other things, apparently oblivious of a growing disturbance in the shrubbery behind him—a row which closely concerned him, too, because the Juniors of his House were foremost in making it.

It was not now the old squabble between Merry Men and Squirms, to which the Prefects, by common consent, turned a deaf ear. On this occasion the Squirms had it all to themselves. They were "ragging" somebody, and the shrieks of their victim were agonized enough to suggest a lynching.

"Are your youngsters killing a pig this morning, Harwood?" the Captain inquired, uneasily. "Rather more din than usual, what? Shouldn't like the Old Man to hear it in his present raw state."

Harwood looked languidly round at the heaving mass in the shrubbery. "It'll die down," he said. "Like Bo-peep's lost sheep, they're better left alone. Let me see, what was I saying? Oh, about that Cup re-play, old man——"

He got no further, for at that moment the dishevelled victim of the Squirms' horseplay burst from the shrubbery and fastened his dirty hands frantically on the Prefect's knees.

"Oh, Harwood, please, they're murdering me—murdering me, I say. Send them back—take their sticks from them. I'm beaten black and blue!"

The boy's fat, unwholesome cheeks shook like those of an overfed man. His small eyes protruded with fear. Though bearing no visible sign of ill-usage, he looked the picture of abject terror.

"Get up, Mawdster—take your filthy paws off my breeks!" Harwood commanded, in disgust.

"But—but aren't you going to do anything for me, Harwood?"

"Yes—I'm going to cane some of the dirt off your hands if you aren't inside Holbeck's within half a minute," said Harwood, inexorably.

This was an order which few Juniors would have dared to disobey, but the trembling boy, after a nervous glance back at the Squirms (discreetly silent now), stretched out an imploring hand to the Captain.

"Oh, please, Forge, won't you protect me?" he whined. "Harwood never will. He doesn't care if they kill me!"

Here, indeed, was rank rebellion—open defiance of a prefect, and insult

heaped upon it. For the second time, Peter Mawdster had committed the gross offence of appealing to the Captain of the School over the head of his own prefect.

Dick said nothing at all. With a nod to Harwood, he rose to go.

"Hop into my study at once, Mawdster," said Harwood furiously. "As you're determined to seek trouble, you shall have it—six on each hand."

This incident—trivial perhaps in itself—left an unpleasant impression on Dick's mind. That a cheeky youngster from another House should twice have tried to secure his protection was irritating enough, but Harwood's method of handling the shrubbery trouble did not strike him as possessing the wisdom of Solomon. Whatever Mawdster had done to deserve his unpopularity, in bullying him so badly the Squirms had earned punishment. Yet the Prefect of Holbeck's House, without inquiry, caned the victim and let the tormentors go free!

"Is that bias or just an error of judgment?" Dick asked of Roger, to whom he confided the details of the occasion.

"I'd better not voice an opinion, Dick! Where Luke Harwood is concerned, possibly I'm one-eyed, too!"

"But wouldn't you, in my place, have interfered?"

"Emphatically, no. If anybody in Holbeck's House has a grievance against its prefect, he can report it to Mr. Holbeck. There is a further Court of Appeal—to the Headmaster himself."

"Well put, Roger, K.C.! You have freed my mind. I want nothing more on it than is already there, I can assure you."

He was about to tell Roger what Harwood had said about ceasing the publication of the *Rag*, but a second thought stopped his tongue. He did not himself question the sincerity of Harwood's suggestion, but he felt instinctively that Roger would. He feared that Roger, always prejudiced against *The Foxonian's* editor, would say that the wish was father to the thought—that the early death of *The Rooke's House Rag*, leaving *The Foxonian* once more alone in the field, would just suit Harwood's book. So he changed the subject for another.

"I've got my *exeat*, Roger, and shall cycle to Moston to see the Fairtype Press manager this afternoon."

"Good luck!" said Roger. "Hope he'll be decent about it."

Head scholar of Rooke's House though he was, neck-and-neck rival of Luke Harwood in the race for the Christmas prizes, Roger made mistakes that afternoon which caused amused astonishment in class. Work could not hold him. His thoughts were elsewhere. Heart and mind he was with Dick Forge in the Moston printing-office, wherein much that affected their reputation at Foxenby was in the balance to-day.

What if that fair-spoken printing manager declined to wait for his money, or, worse still, refused to print off another number of the Rag? Luke Harwood had already announced a "special term-end number" of *The Foxonian*—how humiliating it would be if no *Rag* appeared as a counter-blast to it!

Yet, if such a downfall threatened them, Roger was powerless to avert it. His people were in poor circumstances; only by dint of winning scholarships could Roger keep himself at Foxenby. The small burden of his scanty savings had been lifted from him by the burglars, and Dick had been relieved of far more. No wonder Roger had no appetite for tea that night! His eyes were pools of troubled light as he raised them to greet Dick on the latter's return.

"Come, dear old fiddle-face, cheer up!" laughed Dick. "All's well!"

"Dick, I can see the good news oozing out of you. Bravo—you've worked the oracle!"

"Easily!" said Dick. "That printer's heart must be all aswim with the milk of human kindness. It seems he'd read about the burglary in the newspaper, which was obviously hard up for 'copy', because it mentioned us by name as co-editors of the *Rag*, and made far more sympathetic fuss over our loss than it did over the Head's. Well, Mr. Printer put out his hand, said how sorry he was and all that, and told me to lose no sleep—he'd do his bit in the publication department if I cared to carry on."

"Why, what a brick! Who'd have thought it from the looks of him? At first I considered him rather soapily insincere."

"You're a funny old ox, Roger—always suspicious of everybody!"

"Except of you, old sport," Roger replied. "Didn't he want a guarantee of some sort?"

"None whatever. Accepted without demur my promise to pay up in full next term. Made me blush half-way down my back by saying he could see I was the soul of honour. And I can manage it quite O.K. by the exercise of strict economy. It means mortgaging a year's allowance at least, and docking every kind of luxury, but who cares for that if the dear old *Rag* goes on?"

"Nobody—three cheers!" cried Roger. "Out with the ink and paper, you jolly old editor chap! I'm going to present your next number with a burlesque of the burglary, just to show the school how lightly we carry misfortune!"

## CHAPTER X

## The Merry Men give an Entertainment

The big room in which the speech-days and prize-distributions were held was always open to any of the Foxes who fancied themselves as entertainers. Many odd concert-parties had aired their graces there, sometimes to full "houses" at the commencement and empty chairs before the end.

Always brimful of confidence in himself, Robin Arkness had never a doubt that his variety-show would eclipse every entertainment previously staged at Foxenby.

With bland assurance he issued special invitations to all the masters, not excepting Old Man Wykeham himself, and made every preparation for a record "house", firmly believing that only those Foxes who were temporarily in hospital would be absent on this great occasion.

"My main fear is that there won't be seats for all," he confided to his Merry Men, an hour before the commencement. "Some of you chaps had better slip into the corridor and arrange the first comers into a queue, as the policemen do outside the theatres. We don't want a pancake scramble when the doors are opened."

"I'll bob out and see how they're rolling up," said David of Doncaster.

"'Rolling up' is hardly the right term," he reported, when he came back. "There isn't a soul about."

"What!" shouted Robin, disbelieving his ears.

"You could shoot a cannon-ball down the corridor without fear of hitting anybody," Dave declared.

"Rot, Dave! You're an owl—you're a bat—no, you're neither, for you can't see in the dark, you chump. The corridor ought to be packed like a sardine-tin."

"Ought to be, perhaps, but isn't. Go and see for yourself, Robin."

"Doesn't matter—haven't time," said Robin, with dignity. "Don't talk so much, Dave, but freeze on to the other end of this table. Help me to turn it upside down. We don't want any of those beastly Squirms dancing a cellar-flap on it during the performance."

This was no high-class concert hall, where the performers strode elegantly in by the side-door at starting-time. There was hard work for each perspiring member of the troupe.

Chairs had to be collected from all parts of the school, oil-lamps had to be filled and lighted (for at moorland Foxenby there was no such luxury as electric light or gas), and the big palms had to be carried from the conservatory to give the stage a classical appearance. Then, to complicate matters, Tom Jaye, known as the "Tinker", misplaced the music which had been entrusted to him as accompanist on the school piano.

"Think, you chump; where did you have the stuff last?" Will Scarlet demanded impatiently.

"If I knew that, idiot, couldn't I go straight to it without asking anybody?"

"I suppose you've been making a fire with it to warm your nose," commented David of Doncaster.

The Tinker had a little nose like a scarlet button, and this personal remark did not serve to sweeten him.

"Play your own silly old music," he remarked. "I shan't!"

"You mean you can't, having torn it up for a paper-chase or something."

"Stop barging, you chaps," said Robin, "and hustle round to find the missing sheets. It'll be time to start shortly."

He split them up into search-parties, and with frantic haste they explored every nook and cranny of the building. Useless! At the time fixed for the opening of the door nothing of the missing music had been seen by anybody.

"Tinker, they knew something about you when they called you Jaye," Robin panted, half-ironically, half-despairingly. "You're not only a Jaye but a cuckoo as well. There's no help for it. You and Miller will have to do duty on the mouth-organ and the whistle."

The Tinker grabbed nervously at his inside pocket. Then he looked wildly around at the Merry Men.

"By Jove!" he gasped. "I wonder where my mouth-organ is? Somebody must have pinched it. It's a Squirmish trick!"

"You're the silliest ass ever, Tinker. Have another look, man, quick! *That's* the pocket it ought to be in."

Robin slapped the pocket indicated and drew from the Tinker's chest a crackling sound.

"What's that you've got across your chest, Tinker?" he asked. "A sheet of tin?"

Then over the Tinker's features there spread a smile that was sickly to look

upon.

"Golly, I remember now," he said. "Mother always warned me to beware of catching cold. I felt shivery after to-day's rehearsal and stuffed the music under my vest to keep my chest warm. Here it is!"

They called him anything but pet names as he shamefacedly produced the music, but their chief feeling was one of amused relief. It could hardly have been expected that the audience would have taken seriously ballads sung to the strains of a tin-whistle.

"All of you get behind the curtain for the opening chorus," Robin commanded, "while I throw the doors open and admit the surging crowd."

To his surprise and disappointment, however, the crowd did no surging. It entered casually in twos and threes, and showed an almost unanimous desire to occupy the chairs farthest away from the stage.

"Plenty of room in front!" Robin called out.

"All serene!" somebody answered. "Don't care to be too near, thanks: rather afraid of earache."

"Besides," said another wag, "some faces, seen close, are a strain."

"Heard say that the opening chorus is a rattling good imitation of a cat-fight in the shrubbery," remarked a third boy. "That's why I came early."

Observations such as these, from an audience far scantier than he had expected, would have depressed any other stage-manager than Robin. But nothing, it seemed, could quench the sunshine in the heart of the Merry Men's leader.

"If, after the show, any of you gentlemen are dissatisfied, you shall have back whatever money you paid at the door," he told them, airily.

Ten seconds later he was on the stage, with the curtain up and the performance in full swing.

"Hail, ye Merry Men" was not, perhaps, an operatic number, yet it had plenty

of "kick" in it and was sung to a tune everybody knew. Moreover, through it all there rang the rich alto of Allan a Dale, whose voice would have redeemed any chorus from the commonplace. It bore down the derisive laughter of the critics in the audience, and won from some of the quieter ones a fair round of hand-clapping.

Sung with an enthusiasm that carried it to almost every part of the school, it served also as an advertisement, reminding the boys that something was afoot. Chessmen were bundled into boxes, darts were left sticking in boards, and there was a fairly general exodus from the play-room to the play-house. Robin, peeping through the side-curtains during Allan a Dale's solo (which, unluckily, was somewhat marred by the tramping of feet), observed with pride that the Captain of Foxenby had entered with the Prefect of Rooke's House, closely followed by Luke Harwood, Broome, and other Sixth Form boys of both houses.

All chose seats as far back as they could get, but most of them were in time to applaud Allan a Dale, who, under less disturbing conditions, would doubtless have taken an encore.

"I'll nip down the steps and lock the door, before we start the riddles," said Robin. "Otherwise the clumping of feet will spoil the fun."

How heartily he wished, a moment later, that this thought had occurred to him earlier! Before he could put it into execution the Squirms entered in a body, saw the empty seats, and noisily took possession of them. Then, chattering like rooks in a tree, they settled down to watch, if not to listen.

"Just what I most feared," said Little John, moodily. "Now we shall have them gaping at us like stuffed fish all the time."

"Don't get stage-fright about it, chaps," Robin urged. "They'll not dare to fly at us while the Captain and both prefects are here. Fancy they're off the earth!"

Signs of impatience on the other side of the curtain caused him to bustle his Merry Men on to the stage for the next item. Just as he had hoped and believed, the riddles took the fancy of the mixed audience. Forge's jolly laugh was early noticeable; Harwood clapped heartily and several times called out "Good!" Even solemn old Lyon chuckled now and then, and only Roger Cayton kept a fairly straight face.

"Can't think why you don't laugh, Roger, old man," Dick said. "Funny as a circus, I call it."

"They're comical kids, right enough," Roger admitted.

"I was thinking more of the riddles than of them. All-round leg-pullers! Flashes of real wit, and so topical. That riddle about Fluffy Jim, for instance—would you have guessed it? I shouldn't in a blue moon."

"They've got the audience tickled, anyhow," commented Roger.

Said Harwood behind them, in dulcet tones: "Wonderful stuff for such young 'uns to put together, eh, Forge? We must look to our laurels!"

"Undoubtedly," Forge agreed. "It's first-class skitting, free from any malice. Let's give them a jolly good cheer at the finish."

"Beware of distending their skulls," Roger grunted. "Junior 'swelled-head' is a troublesome disease."

They brushed aside his warning laughingly, and led the applause when the last saucy conundrum had been asked and answered. It was then observed, for the first time, that both housemasters were standing by the door, laughing and clapping as heartily as anyone. Even if nothing else happened to-night, Robin's concert was already an assured success.

Songs and recitations of a mirthful kind rounded up the first part of the programme, the Merry Men making up in enthusiasm for what they lacked in vocal talent. The Squirms, however jealous they might be, had perforce to squat there as quietly as sheep in a field. They could only show their pent-up feelings by wriggling uneasily and yawning frequently.

The ten minutes' interval gave them the opportunity of escaping had they been so minded. Instead, they clung to their seats and ate oranges, apples, and nuts, saving the shells of the nuts in the hope of using them as missiles later on, perhaps, when the masters and the prefects had departed.

"Quick work and no waiting" was Robin's stage motto. Well inside the ten minutes he had the curtain up again, displaying to view a very creditable imitation of Sherwood Forest, painted on canvas by some of his more artistic

Merry Men.

For the words of his play he depended on a two-penny book, selected because of its cheapness, so that every performer could, when learning his part, thumb a copy of his own if he chose.

There was a good deal of "knave and varlet" about the dialogue, but actions speak louder than words, and some very fine bouts of quarter-staff, varied by vigorous wrestling exhibitions, provided so much amusement that the melodramatic nature of the words was easily overlooked.

The cudgels were made of cardboard, warranted to give nobody a headache, which was lucky, for in the course of fifteen minutes Robin had six bouts with sundry adventurers, felling them all to earth in turn.

It was a part which suited him to perfection, and none of his Merry Men grudged him the largest share of the limelight, for he had worked far harder than any of them to ensure the success of the play. There were no pauses in the ding-dong little performance, which looked like proceeding to a triumphant conclusion when a startling incident occurred.

It happened almost immediately after the two house-masters, the Captain, and the prefects had quietly left the room to attend a meeting.

Robin Hood and Friar Tuck were hammering merrily at each other with stout wooden swords, when one of the oil-lamps above them was suddenly put out of action by a direct hit from an apple.

Intent on the performance, none of the Merry Men on or off the stage noticed who hurled the apple, but everybody saw the flare as the burning oil ran swiftly along the stage and ignited the flimsy scenery.

"Sherwood Forest" was in a blaze immediately, and there were all the makings of a stampeding fire-panic if prompt action were not taken.

"Down with the curtain!" cried Robin. "Rush to the front, Dave, and tell them to keep calm. Say we've got it under—we shall have in half a tick. Little John, fetch the fire-extinguisher beside the back door."

Without thinking of the risk he ran of singeing the hair off his head, he

dragged some of the canvas away from the running fire, and then tried to beat out the flames with his sword. His cool, quick example inspired others, who tore away anything that might have become involved in the fire. Little John's return with the fire-extinguisher settled matters. When the contents of that had been sprayed upon the blaze, nothing but smoke and smell remained of what might have been a very serious conflagration.

"That's a part of the performance that wasn't in the bill," said Robin. "Jove, how my heart thumps! I really thought we should all be burnt alive! What started it, chaps? I wasn't looking."

"*This* started it," said Little John, picking up a hard russet apple, which had rolled into a corner. "Some bounder in front chucked it at the lamp."

"Or possibly at me," Robin said, "and hit the lamp instead. Don't let's make more than a silly trick of it, or the masters may hear about it, and there'll be such a row as never was. The show's over for to-night, anyhow. What a thundering mess to clear up!"

"Beastly shame we should have it to do," grumbled Will Scarlet. "It's pretty certain one of the Squirms threw the apple. Why not bring them in to swab the deck?"

"Good idea!" agreed Robin. "We could threaten to tell the prefects if they didn't."

Just then Dave came back, vastly relieved to find the fire out, for he had been too briskly occupied in front to give a hand in quenching it.

"Those cowardly Squirms would have rushed out like rabbits if I hadn't shamed them into leaving quietly. They've all cleared off, but some of the other chaps are waiting about to see if you need any help."

"Tell them they can hop it, Dave; everything's safe," said Robin. "Ask 'em to keep their mouths shut, though, to avoid any fuss. Later on, we'll find out who threw that apple and settle the score!"

# CHAPTER XI

## Settling the Score

Russet apples are not everyone's fancy. They need to be well-ripened before they are palatable, and most boys prefer a larger, juicier kind.

Which of the Squirms had bought russet apples on the day of the Robin Hood concert? Apples too green for him to eat with relish, seeing that he had thought fit to waste one by throwing it on the stage. Therein lay the clue to the particular Squirm who had caused the fire, cheated the performers of their well-earned applause, and left the majority of them with scorched costumes and slightly-burnt fingers.

"Whoever the little bounder is, it isn't right that he should get off scot-free," said Robin, a few days after the trouble.

"But how are you going to discover him? Osbody's an oyster. He wouldn't tell who squirted acid on the bonfire, even when you were blackening his face with the ashes."

"True, Dave: he's no blabmouth. Best of the bunch, by far. Shan't ask him who threw the apple—we'll find it out ourselves."

"Take a bit of doing," Little John observed.

"Chance for the amateur detectives amongst you," Robin answered. "What are the Squirms doing all day long? Stuffing themselves. Even gorging under cover of their desk-lids. Watch 'em. See what they eat. If any one more than another grinds up russet apples, he's our man."

The plan seemed delightfully simple. Anybody might be a Scotland Yard 'tec with such a straight-forward clue to work on. Every Merry Man became a sleuth from that moment. After meals, when it was the custom of the school to throng into the common room for fifteen minutes or so before restarting work, they watched the Squirms out of the corners of their eyes, noting with what kind of

apple each of them supplemented his diet. The cores of several varieties of both eating and cooking apples, and even those of sour crab apples, were picked clean and cast into the fire, but never once was a Squirm detected in the act of eating a russet.

"No good," declared Robin; "it's 'nix', as the Yankees say. The chap who flung the russet is too 'fly' to go on eating that kind. We must try another way. Let us fare forth, Little John, old son, to ye olde village tuck-shop. I would have speech with the stout dame that selleth prog therein."

The proprietress of the little village tuck-shop was waxing fat on the proceeds of what she sold to the hungry Foxes. She received Robin and Little John with an expansive smile, her hand going mechanically to the tin containing Robin's favourite biscuits. Robin chatted pleasantly as she weighed out his customary purchase.

Politely offering her a biscuit before passing the bag to Little John, Robin said:

"Mother, I heard our matron talking about you the other day. She said she'd give her ears, or something like that, for a complexion as nice as yours."

"Did she now? Not really? Ah, well, I expect she does feel it, poor dear, with her so pale and thin—almost green as you might say—and my cheeks like—like ——"

"Apples," Robin promptly put in. "Perhaps you eat a lot of apples, Mrs. Roe, to keep your cheeks rosy."

"Never touch 'em, Master Robin. Can't ever get sufficient to keep you Foxenby boys going, let alone myself."

"You don't seem to have any to-day, Mrs. Roe?"

The proprietress pointed to some empty baskets.

"Them was half-full an hour ago," she declared, "but a dozen or more young gentlemen came in and took the lot."

"Hard lines! I particularly wanted some apples. Haven't you a few russets

left?"

"Given up stocking them, Master Robin. No demand. Sold the last pound to one of your young friends a few days ago. He was about the only one who ever bought any, and catering for one person alone doesn't pay."

"Certainly not, Mrs. Roe. Still, I did so fancy a russet apple to-day. I wonder if the chap who bought 'em will have one or two left? Just possible, isn't it, Flenton? Could you describe him to me, Mother?"

"I'm a bit short-sighted, lovey, without much memory for faces. He's a biggish boy, about your age, but stouter. If he were my son, I'd see that he kept himself cleaner and smarter."

"Ah, well, perhaps he was born with a sallow skin, Mother. Can't you describe him a little better than that? What name did the other fellows give him?"

"There, you're asking me something! I've such a poor memory for names. Let me see, what did they call him? Barley—no; Wheat—no; bless me, something like that, but not quite."

"Was it Grain, Mother?"

"Grain, that's it! I thought I couldn't be far out."

"Have another biscuit, Mother. No? Then Little John will, won't you, old chap? You're quite sure Grain was the boy who bought the russet apples, Mother? I do so fancy a juicy russet!"

"They weren't what you might call juicy, lovey—rather green, I should say. Master Grain certainly bought all I had left. He might just have one by him still."

"Thank you, Mother—I'll speak to him about it. Good-day."

He took Little John's arm and walked quietly from the shop, crunching a gingerbread between his firm, white teeth. Outside, he slapped Flenton gleefully on the shoulder.

"Flenton, old kid, we've got this apple mystery whipped to a froth," he cried.

"Grain it is who knocked over the lamp with his russet apple, and Grain it will be who'll go through the hoop for it."

"Seems as plain as a pikestaff," Little John agreed. "But how shall we catch Grain alone?"

"Leave it to me. I'll think out a scheme. We'll make the beggar sorry he upset our applecart with his russet, never fear!"

All unconscious of the rod in pickle for him, Grain went about his blustering way, pinching and prodding the luckless nippers who chanced across his path, forcing his fellow Squirms into episodes they would fain have funked, and generally making himself openly feared and secretly hated. The only way to "buy him off" was with food and sweetmeats, he being so greedily fond of both that he seemed, like some animals, to be always chewing.

One half-holiday, passing through an empty class-room, he saw by the other door a paper-bag, through a slit in which a biscuit peeped.

"Hello!" he muttered. "Some clumsy idiot's dropped a bagful of fodder." Picking it up he opened the bag. "Half-a-pound of mixed biscuits, mostly chocolate ones! Whew! What a find! Nobody about. Impossible to know who owns them. Might be any one of the four hundred kids in Foxenby. Grain, old son, you've stumbled on a good thing."

Glancing quickly round to make sure he was unobserved, he turned his back on the door and popped a chocolate biscuit into his mouth.

"Scrumptious!" he murmured. "Any more little waifs and strays in want of a good home? A dozen of you? Walk right in!"

His hand was in the bag again, when the sound of a soft footfall behind him caused him to swing round nervously. Then all the toothsome biscuits went crashing to the floor as he found himself engulfed by a resistless wave of Merry Men, who, led by Robin, spread themselves round him and half-smothered him in their tight embraces.

"Another beastly trap, you cowardly cads!" he cried. "Let go of me, or I'll half kill somebody!"

Considering that he was as firmly trussed up as a turkey at Yuletide, this threat was empty and vainglorious. His immediate captors numbered half a dozen, and there were so many more in reserve that a strong man might have despaired of breaking away.

"Shut up, you greedy food-sneak," said Robin. "You're our prisoner, and you're going out to the Forest. There you will be tried as a robber and a knave. Bring him along, my Merry Men."

"I'll yell the house down," Grain declared.

"Not you! Little John, throw thy muffler round his mouth if the varlet maketh the slightest sound. Across the yard with him, lads; there's no time to waste."

Vigorously they pushed Grain out of the house, and as unceremoniously propelled him across the yard towards the Shrubbery. Half-way there the captive caught sight of Roger Cayton, who was walking about with his hands behind his back—the Prefect's characteristic attitude. Nobody else was about, and Grain, terrified now of what was in front of him, chanced a yell.

"Hi, Cayton, stop them, please!" he bawled.

Roger's head seemed to twitch a little, but he did not turn it in their direction, nor did he move his hands from behind his back. He continued his placid walk, and, before Grain could call out again, Little John's muffler had done its work in silencing him.

Once within the Forest he knew himself to be entirely at the mercy of his captors, and ceased to throw his limbs about in wasted effort.

"Now, by my troth, thou shalt answer for much thou hast done in the past," said Robin, assuming the post of judge. "Didst thou, on the night of our entertainment, see an oil-lamp on the stage knocked over by an apple, and tongues of fire burst therefrom?"

"Carrots!" was Grain's irreverent reply.

"Thou art a right saucy varlet, sirrah! Answer me 'yea' or 'nay'. Didst see the apple thrown?"

"Fish and fiddlesticks!" snorted Grain, looking more defiant than he felt.

"Thou wilt not answer sensibly, but preferreth to play the right-down giddy goat. So be it. My Merry Men, jerk up the prisoner's head. He squinteth upon the ground as though still seeking for grub that is not his own. That's better! Now, caitiff, watch me carefully. Dost recognize this?"

With a dramatic jerk, Robin drew from his pocket the russet apple which Little John had picked up from the stage after the fire.

Grain wriggled again in the hands of his captors, colouring with surprise, and frowning with annoyance. Never could a face have betrayed guilty knowledge more clearly than his did at that moment.

"More play-acting," he managed to sneer. "What has all this rot to do with me?"

"More than thou wottest of. I tell thee to thy face that thou didst hurl this very apple at the stage, smashing a lamp and setting the scenery afire. Didst then come to help to put out the flames thou hadst caused? No, like the cowardly Squirm thou art, thou tookest to thy heels, and left us to battle with the fire as best we could."

"Cut it short," growled Grain.

"I will," said Robin, promptly. "Boys, tie his hands firmly behind his back. Little John, bring forth the bucket of ice-cold water."

The bucket was produced and Robin dropped the apple into it.

"Now, caitiff, kneel," he commanded, "and with thy mouth pick thy precious russet from the water. Quick, or thou wilt rue it!"

"I knew you'd be up to some dirty trick or other," Grain growled. "I won't play bob-apple to please you or anybody, that's flat."

"Then put his face in, my Merry Men," said Robin. "'Twill take no harm from an extra wash, I'll warrant ye."

Ready hands thrust Grain to his knees and immersed his face in the bucket.

The water was freezing cold, and one dose was quite enough. Swallowing his pride, he began frantically trying to snatch out the apple with his mouth. Each time it bobbed serenely away from him, to the vast amusement of the spectators, who felt no pity for this helpless Squirm, himself a far greater tormentor of younger boys than they now were of him. It was a very small price he was paying for the cruel "fun" he had given himself for so long a time.

If any of you have tried, at the sports, for the sheer jollity of the thing, to stop with your mouth the swimming of an apple in a pail of water, you will know how tantalizing a task it is. You will have attempted it in summer, too, in sun-warmed water, whereas Grain had to dip his face into water that had previously been covered with ice. The more frantically he tried to end the ordeal the farther away did the maddening apple float. Finally, he did what he had so often seen the little victims of his own tormenting do. He burst into tears.

"I c—can't c—catch it!" he wailed. "Lemme go!"

The Merry Men ceased laughing at once and looked at one another rather foolishly. Grain, the swaggerer, crying like a baby! What a hollow fraud he was —a pricked balloon!

"That'll do, chaps," said Robin. "Wipe his face with a handkerchief, somebody. Grain, if I untie your hands and let you go, will you confess to having thrown that apple?"

"Yes, I d—did it."

"And was it you who squirted acid on our bonfire, nearly suffocating us all?"

"Oh, yes—yes; lemme loose!"

"Untie his hands, chaps. Stop blubbing, Grain; you'll be free in a minute. Nice chap you are to want to be leader of any band, even of the stupid Squirms. Osbody's a swankpot, but he's got pluck to back it up. You're a bully, a cad, and a baby. Here's your cap. Put it on—scoot!"

# CHAPTER XII

## Dick has Friendship thrust upon Him

The lighter the heart the better the work. Roger performed wonders in the Christmas examinations, and "did Rooke's proud" by taking as many prizes as Harwood did. Indeed, one of his scalps was the English Literature prize—a real jar for Harwood, whose supremacy in that subject had never been previously challenged.

"Owe that entirely to the practice I got writing for the *Rag*, Dick," Roger chuckled. "Topping prize, too—well-bound set of Shakespeare. Old Wykeham didn't half like his 'pet lamb' losing it. He looked positively sour as Lady Maingay handed me the goods!"

"Imagination, old boy!" laughed Dick. "All the same, I'm overjoyed you pulled it off so finely. Rooke's House wears a feathered cap to-day. What'll you say when Harwood comes across to congratulate you?"

"Nothing! Shan't have the chance. He won't come."

Nor did he. It was breaking-up time, and Luke Harwood probably found enough to do in Holbeck's House without going out of his way to congratulate his rival. Moreover, he had other excuses for jealousy, inasmuch as the whole school seemed to be laughing over Roger's delicious burlesque of the burglary, with its cleverly-rhymed raillery of the bewildered local police.

Indisputably the new magazine outshone the old on this occasion. Mr. Rooke and Mr. Holbeck, masters of rival houses, were seen chuckling over it together, and no success on the playing-fields of Foxenby could have thrilled the Captain so much. It sent him off for the Christmas holidays with a brighter feeling than he had known for weeks, and he went straight to his aunt on his arrival home, confident that in her he would find the solution of all his money troubles.

Aunt Bella was a tall, athletic, merry-featured woman—a tennis champion and a golf-prize winner still, but very much prouder of "her boy's" feats than she was of her own. Usually her eyes twinkled with the joy of living, but to-day

Dick was startled and embarrassed to see her cheeks wet with tears.

"Cry-baby, am I not, dear lad?" she said. "I quite meant to be as bright as a button when you arrived, but evidently I am not of the stuff from which heroines are made. I'm an elderly woman in distress, and I can't hide it!"

"Oh, I say, Auntie, who's been making you wretched? Show me the blighter and I'll go for him and punch his head, though he be as big as a house-side."

Half-laughing and half-crying, Aunt Bella pinched Dick's ear.

"Dear boy, you scent a love-romance! It's nothing like that. And there are two reasons why you cannot punch his head. He's small and insignificant and three times your age. Also he's in jail!"

Alarm shot through Dick's heart. "Why, Aunt Bella, have you had a burglar, too?"

"Too?" Aunt Bella repeated, looking interested.

"Yes—we've had a burglary at school, but never mind that now—tell me about the chap that's in jail, and why."

"Oh, it's the old tale, Dick. Lonely widow seeks solace in golf—leaves trusted lawyer to manage her affairs—wakes up one morning to find that he has coolly spent all the money she has asked him to put out on mortgage."

"The blackguard!" cried Dick.

"Oh, I'm not the only sufferer—I can survive it better than some of his other clients, notably the officers' widows, poor souls. Still, I shall have to give up this house and go into rooms, which I hate. Moreover, I shall lose my golf, which is worse."

Dick, never a great spokesman, was overwhelmed by this story of his aunt's misfortune. His own trouble, of which he had been so full a few minutes before, went clean out of his head. Vainly he racked his brains for words of comfort and sympathy. A tragedy like this was too deep for glib consolation.

"Dear old Auntie, I hope he gets fifteen years," he blurted out at last. "You're

a brick to laugh over it. Let—let's get out of this and have a round of golf—not for the last time, either. Things are bound to come out all right. There'll be something saved from the wreck."

Aunt Bella's eyes shone almost happily now. "God bless you, dear boy, for your cheeriness!" she said. "You've bucked me up no end. Golf? Why, certainly. We need another enthusiast in the family to carry on the good work. Come, I'll teach you something that even a football captain doesn't know!"

From that day until the morning of his return to Foxenby, Dick kept his mouth shut about his difficulties at school. Twice Aunt Bella pressed him for particulars of the burglary, and each time he laughed the matter off. She must never know how greatly the pocket-money she could no longer send would be missed. Clearly, he could never take a farthing from her again, and it mortified him to be unable to volunteer the return of at least some of the cash with which, from his babyhood upwards, she had always so lavishly supplied him.

In his widowed stepmother it was impossible to confide. She just did endure his presence in the house at holiday times, and that was all. She had no use for "a hobble-de-hoy stepson", she had been heard to say, and quite frankly grudged him what, under his father's will, she was compelled to pay for his education.

In these cheerless circumstances Dick decided to return to school a day before the other fellows did, and to make a hole in his scanty allowance by putting up for one night at the village inn. Thus, he would be enabled to see the publisher of the *Rag* and explain things. Practically it amounted to throwing himself on the printing-manager's mercy, much as his pride revolted against that course.

At Peterborough everybody alighted from the East Coast express save one man, a heavily-built individual with a square jaw and glittering black eyes. He was dressed in tweeds of a "horsey" pattern, and the moment the train re-started he thrust into Dick's arms a sheaf of coloured sporting papers.

"Good biz!" he wheezed. "Now that those over-fried old pelicans have buzzed off, we can breathe. Open that window, sonny! You and I can suck in some winter ozone without needing a bronchitis-kettle, what?"

Disinclined for conversation, wanting to be alone with his thoughts, yet incapable of being surly with anyone, Dick acknowledged the loan of the papers

and turned the leaves disinterestedly.

"Not much in your line, sonny, eh? Well, chuck 'em into the rack—the porter'll simply eat 'em. Can't size up them letters on your cap. What's your school? Foxenby! Why, that's the team which drew with St. Cuthbert's in the final. Shan't forget that match in a hurry. Lost a hundred pounds on it!"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Dick, surprised into a show of interest. "Did you have your pockets picked?"

"Not so very much, youngster. I'd like to see the crook that could pick my pocket and live. When I say that I lost a hundred pounds, I mean that I stood to win that sum if Foxenby had scored. Everybody in Walsbridge had a bit on with me—and they backed St. Cuthbert's to a man. Consequence was, when that dotty waxwork of a mascot chipped in and spoilt the Foxenby centre-forward's goal, I lost a little fortune as clean as a whistle."

Dick stared at the bookmaker in unconcealed amazement and disgust.

"Do you say that people actually betted on the match—an amateur game between rival schools?" he asked. "It's preposterous—incredible!"

"Look here, sonny, how old are you—where were you brought up? You're either younger than you look, or grass-green for your age. What good's a football match—any sort of match, boxing, cricket, whatever you like—if people can't have a little bet on it? Tripe—ditchwater!"

Dick flushed with annoyance. "The cup final was pure sport," he declared. "To bet on it was positively vile. If you were encouraging people to do so, you ought to have been warned off the ground."

The bookie laughed harshly at this straight hit. "Oh, I wasn't there in person, sonny—what I know of the game was from hearsay. But if you didn't have a little gamble on it yourself, there are other Foxenby chaps who did."

"It's a lie!" Dick hotly denied. "There isn't a fellow in Foxenby who would be skunk enough to play it so low down."

"All serene, young feller—keep your hair on. I know what I know, but we'll not talk about it, as I never betray a client. Anyhow, if that young Foxenby chap

had scored, there'd have been a five-pound note in the school letter-box for him next day. Just a friendly memento, so to speak, and no questions asked."

"And straight to the police-station it would have gone, too," was Dick's indignant comment. "If you try buying over a 'Fox' to your dirty betting business, you'll find yourself in Queer Street, whoever you are."

The bookie gazed across at him with serenely-smiling eyes. "What ho!" he cried. "When I see shells, I guess eggs. So you were the Foxenby centre-forward that day, eh? Well, youngster, I like spirit. Slang me back-and-edge, call me dud names, tear my honest business to tatters, but accept my congratulations as a sportsman on the clinking game you played that day. My pals still talk about it."

Now Dick was no snob, and too genuinely boyish not to appreciate a word of praise, from whatever quarter it came. Besides, he realized that the man was to be his travelling companion for the remainder of the journey, and that no discouragement could silence him. So, while saying as little as possible himself, he let the bookmaker run on, and at last found himself being entertained, in spite of his prejudice, by the man's racy reminiscences of famous sporting events of the past-great boxing contests between world champions, doughty wrestling matches in the Westmorland hills, exciting International games won "dead on time", all mingled with less savoury stories of the shady side of sport, where combatants were kidnapped, drugged, or bribed to lose, so that huge sums of money might go dishonestly into the pockets of the betting-ring.

The man was a born story-teller, and his determination to be friendly was such that he insisted on sharing with Dick the contents of a very excellent luncheon-basket. This the Captain frankly enjoyed, and said so.

"Yet it took me twenty minutes to persuade you to have a bite," laughed the bookmaker triumphantly. "Look here, lad, we shall soon be at Moston, and perhaps I shan't see you again, though I'm generally knocking about near the market-place. Now, I like you. You've called me a liar and a thief—that's straight talking, and better than a cisternful of 'soft soap', though it isn't true of 'Chuck' Smithies, the commission agent. Still, I've enjoyed your society, and you can always remember you've got a pal in me if ever you're 'up against it', and want a lift. Here's Moston, and the best of friends must part, as the old song says. Come, now, are we going to shake hands or not?"

He put out his hand in an awkward fashion, quite obviously expecting Dick to ignore it. But the Captain gripped it without hesitation, and smiled rather shyly back.

"You've been good to me," he said. "I hate betting—yours is a putrid business—but if I've said anything to hurt your feelings, wash it out. I'm sorry!"

## CHAPTER XIII

## The Printer is Polite no Longer

Christmas appeared to have upset the liver of the printer of *The Rooke's House Rag*. He was half-way down Dick's throat, in a manner of speaking, the moment that unfortunate young editor entered the works.

"There'll be no more copies of your precious magazine issued from this establishment, I warn you," he flared. "Call yourself captain of a gentlemen's school! You're captain of a lot of prigs and bullies, that's what you are!"

Dick was getting used to reverses of fortune nowadays, and he received this outburst calmly.

"I've some recollection that you called me the soul of honour last term," he replied. "Now you apparently think me a hooligan."

"I didn't say that. But you're a captain of hooligans all the same, Mr. Forge. A nice life you let them lead my poor boy last term! I sent him to Foxenby to learn to be a gentleman—not having had the advantages of a public-school education myself—and instead he's set-upon and browbeaten daily by gangs of young blackguards, and you never lift a finger to protect him."

Dick looked bewildered. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "How, please, does this concern me? Your son at Foxenby! Who, pray, may that

be?"

"My name is Mawdster, and my son's name is Peter. Now, perhaps you'll 'get' me. My poor, delicate boy has been shockingly ill-treated, and you've stood by and looked on. Come, you don't deny it, Mr. Forge."

This was truly an eye-opener to Dick. Clear as noonday now became the mystery of young Mawdster's championship of the *Rag*. That parting shot of his, in which he had told the co-editors that he had not meant to praise the contents of the *Rag*, but only its printing and "make-up", was fully explained. The manager of the Cleartype Press and the fat, unhealthy Squirm were father and son.

"Well, Mr. Mawdster, I admit that your boy has become unpopular with his class-mates, but he boards in Holbeck's House and is therefore not under my protection. His remedy for ill-treatment lies with his own prefect and housemaster. I cannot interfere in any circumstances."

"Oh, can't you, Mr. High-and-mighty Captain!" snarled the manager, mocking Dick's dignified tones. "But you'll jolly well have to, or I'll know the reason why. You've got into my ribs for a lot of money—more perhaps than you dream of—and I guess I hold the whip-hand of you all right. You'll either take my poor boy's part at Foxenby or sup sorrow, Mr. Forge."

"Don't be vulgar, and don't be absurd, Mr. Mawdster. Keep business and private affairs apart. Admittedly, I cannot pay you yet for publishing the magazine, but on that account you shall not blackmail me."

At this the manager suddenly dropped his threatening manner, and became more like his old suave self. He commenced to wheedle.

"Look here, Mr. Forge, don't let us quarrel, you and me," he said. "You've got a rare lot of power at Foxenby if you like to use it. I appeal to you as a father. I love my boy—he's the only child we've got, and it cost a little fortune to rear him, he was so weak at first. But I'd spend another fortune—ay, all I've got in the world—to see him happy and to know he was making nice chums amongst gentlemen's sons up yonder. Stop them bullyin' him, Mr. Forge, and—and——"

"And what?" asked Dick.

"And I'll present you with a signed receipt for every penny that your magazine has cost me," the printer blurted out. "I say, that's fair, isn't it? You couldn't have a more sporting offer."

Beneath his calm exterior Dick was conscious of a heart that beat quickly and uncomfortably. Here, if he could bring himself to adopt it, was a way out of all his difficulties! But he gave no second thought to the temptation.

"It is neither a sporting offer nor a workable one, Mr. Mawdster," he answered, without hesitation. "I am sorry you are unhappy about your son, but I can do nothing for him."

"What! You, the Captain of Foxenby, can't save my poor lad from being beaten black and blue?"

"I have told you I cannot. It would be an unpardonable breach of school etiquette."

"Etiquette be blowed!" cried the manager. "You've got to stick up for my boy, or else——"

"Drop that, Mr. Mawdster. I won't be threatened. If you are dissatisfied with your son's treatment, why don't you write to his housemaster, or direct to the Head himself?"

"And have the poor, dear lad hounded out of the place as a tell-tale! Not much, young fellow—he's suffered enough already without that. See here, Mr. Stiff-neck Forge, you and I have got to have a straight talk about this editorial stunt of yours."

"Certainly. That's why I came here so soon."

"I've published three numbers of the magazine on art paper, and they've cost a lot of money. If I pass you the bill now, can you pay it?"

"I'm sorry to say I cannot."

"Very well, then. You're a minor, and therefore I can't sue you in the County Court. I knew of that risk when I took your job on, but I trusted to your honour as a gentleman."

"You shall be paid every farthing in the end."

"So you say! But I'm not prepared to wait. Either you'll pay now, on the nail, or you'll protect my boy from insult and injury!"

"I have already explained that I can do neither."

The two faced each other angrily now. No quarter was asked or given.

"Is that your last word, Mr. Forge?"

"Quite!"

"Then your blood be on your own stupid head. A fortnight from to-day, when your next number is due to be published, I shall go to your headmaster and tell him how you've let me in! Politely ask him, I shall, to write to your people about it, or to give me their address so's I can write them myself."

At once Dick's thoughts turned home in alarm to his distressed aunt and disdainful stepmother. There were strong reasons, of a different character, why neither should know of his humiliating bother.

"Oh, don't do that, Mr. Mawdster, please!" he pleaded.

"Ah, that touches you, does it?" sneered the printer. "You wince now, my proud young aristocrat. Well, I rather thought you'd see reason in the end. You've got a fortnight's grace. Stretch a protectin' wing over my poor, delicate boy, and all will be well. Be pig-headed, and it won't! Your people will know all about it, and so will the whole school. Nice pie for the editor of *The Foxonian*, eh? He won't half smack his lips over it!"

These were the taunting words which followed Dick through the doorway as he wisely decided to go. It was a relief to pass from the stuffy printing-office into the clear air of a frosty January afternoon. Out in the street he had rather less of the feeling of a rat caught hopelessly in a trap.

"The beggar has me by the throat," he groaned inwardly. "Either I've got to save the skin of his corpulent skunk of a son, or be shown up at home and here as a fellow who doesn't pay his debts. Dear old Roger little guessed what a rod he was making for my back when he egged me on to start journalism."

It was the Moston half-holiday, and farm-lads were strolling about in their best bell-bottomed trousers, in search of more amusement than the little place was capable of providing. Some of them had gathered in the Tavern Square, and were entertaining themselves by roughly baiting Fluffy Jim, the village idiot.

One big rustic, probably about eighteen years of age, though he had the beginnings of a strong beard on his unbarbered chin, was holding Fluffy Jim's head tightly between his legs while the other lads took turns at knocking dust out of the idiot's clothes with the ash-sticks and canes they carried.

"Nah then, yo' chaps, let drive at him," shouted the biggest tyrant. "Iverybody as makes him 'bale oot' scoöars one point, and them chaps 'at he 'shoots' moöast for gets a fat cigar apiece!"

To "bale oot" and to "shoot" meant the same thing in the dialect of the district —the poor half-witted boy was to be made to shout out in pain beneath the succession of strokes, and from this cruel pastime the yokels were obviously deriving coarse amusement. Now, Dick had no reason to feel tenderly disposed towards the village idiot, who had had so much to do with one of the greatest disappointments of his life. Nevertheless his blood boiled as he joined the little crowd of watchers, some of them elderly men, and realized that, far from showing any desire to interfere, they seemed actually to be enjoying the "fun".

Dick had meant going straight into the inn to claim the shelter of the snug little private room which he had booked. His brain was in a whirl, and above everything he craved quietude. His last wish was to be mixed up in a brawl with skylarking farm-hands. The Captain of Foxenby could not really afford the luxury of a "scrap" in the open street.

A very genuine howl of agony from Fluffy Jim settled the matter, however. Dick suddenly appeared in the centre of the laughing rustics, and tapped the leader of them on the shoulder.

"That'll do, you," he said, curtly. "Let Fluffy Jim go. He's had enough knocking about for to-day."

The young horseman gaped, as well he might, for this was an audacious thing that the Foxenby schoolboy had done. The square was thick with the yokel's friends, a united rush by whom would speedily have put the intruder out and under.

"Oh, by gum! An' who's thee when tha're at hoöam?" inquired the horseman. "Run away to thee mammy, kid, afoöar tha gets hurt!"

Great laughter rewarded this outburst of rural wit. But Dick's reply, eagerly awaited, was not in words. Catching hold of the yokel's neckcloth he jerked him smartly back, thereby releasing Fluffy Jim from that unhappy youth's painful position. In an instant there was angry uproar.

"Hit 'im in t'mooth, Juddy! Clart 'im in t'lug, lad! Rub 'is cheeky nose in t'snow, Juddy, boy!"

Thus urged on all sides to action, "Juddy" bunched together a fist of terrifying size, swung it round a few times to emphasize its power, and then lifted it carefully to the level of Dick's eyes.

"See that?" he said. "It's what tha're goin' to get for interferin' wi' the likes o' me. Ah've gi'en thee fair warnin', so look art!"

**"SEE THAT?" HE SAID**
**"SEE THAT?" HE SAID**

He drew back his arm to strike, and Dick, secretly somewhat dismayed by the size of the fist he had been invited to inspect, got ready to defend himself. Then it was that the landlord of the "Anvil Inn", an old quartermaster-sergeant, took a hand in the game.

"Not here, gentlemen, I beg," said he. "Do you both want to spend a night in the lock-up? There's the bowling-green behind, nice and handy. If you must fight, come and have it out there!"

This fresh turn of events was still more hateful to Dick, who would have preferred to be done with the unfortunate affair after a quick set-to in the open. But some gratis sport of a thrilling character was exactly what the crowd wanted, and they swept both Dick and the horseman, willy-nilly, on to the snow-covered bowling-green at the rear.

"Now then, gents, you all know me as an old boxer and a clean sportsman," the landlord shouted. "So I'll be referee and see fair play. Juddy here will have plenty of supporters, but who's going to hold the sponge for the representative of Foxenby?"

"I will, old bean," said a man at the back of the crowd, which parted to make way for him. "Give me your coat, youngster. I'll see you through this all right."

And it was with a thankful heart that Dick saw "Chuck" Smithies, his travelling companion of the previous day, elbowing his way towards him. In this hostile crowd he was now assured of at least one friend!

## CHAPTER XIV

## The Fight on the Bowling-green

There are some boys so serene of temper that they can go through school life without a serious quarrel with anyone. Dick Forge was a boy of this type. He had risen from the First Form at Foxenby to his present responsible position as captain of the school without having had a single pugilistic encounter of any moment. Still, he was too all-round an athlete not to have gained a sound knowledge of boxing, and he was nail-hard physically. It was not the ability but the desire to fight that he lacked.

Now that he had done what he deemed to be his duty in releasing Fluffy Jim from torture, he had no grudge against the big young horseman with whom he found himself matched. He felt listless about the matter—bored by it, though keenly alive to the necessity of keeping that huge red hand as far as possible from his face and body. One fair smack from such a leg-o'-mutton fist might well serve to put him to bed for a week, which would be particularly awkward.

For fully three rounds, therefore, he remained entirely on the defensive, much to the disappointment of the crowd, who saw no merit in his performance of side-stepping and dancing beyond the reach of their champion's writhing arms. To them that indicated cowardice, with which they freely taunted him.

"Hit him hard, an' knock his teeth oot, Juddy," they urged. "Barge cloöase up tiv him!"

Which, being interpreted, meant: "Get close up to him"—excellent counsel, but rather more difficult to follow than they realized.

"Keep on playing him, lad—that's right," whispered Chuck Smithies, encouragingly. "He'll tire first at this game. Has no more idea of boxing than a backwoods-man. But you mustn't let him hit you, mind—he'll knock you sick if he gets one in."

"I wish it were over," said Dick, devoutly. "It's such a farce. There's really so little to fight about."

"Oh, true enough, that village idiot seems to be your evil star," the bookmaker agreed. "Like fighting for a block of wood, sure! But you butted in to save him, sonny, so you've got to stick it out. Buck up! Juddy's coming for you baldheaded this time."

Yes, Juddy was indeed in most desperate earnest on this occasion. With all the vocal support on his side, and a big advantage in weight, he had every inducement to force the fight to an early and successful issue. If, he told himself, he could slam his fist once, just once, into the schoolboy's face—so cool a face it was, too, as it tantalizingly bobbed up and down in front of him—there would be a straight road into the public-house, drinks round at some hero-worshipper's expense, and three cheers for a jolly good fellow. The said "good fellow" being, as a matter of course, Juddy himself.

Dazzled by the prospect of such hero-worship, Juddy made the pace "mustard". Twice his sledge-hammer fist got near enough to sting and redden Dick's ear—another inch to the left and the schoolboy would have gone down like a felled ox. Every artifice in Dick's box-of-tricks had to be brought into play before the termination of that hurricane round. It left him badly in need of his second wind, but unhurt. Moreover it had begun to dawn on a section of the crowd that the swiftness of his movements was not altogether due to funk, and some few amongst them shuffled round to his side of the ring.

"Ahr Juddy ain't hevin' it all his own roöad this journey," observed one elderly farm-hand, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

"Noa," his mate agreed. "T'young feller from t'schule seems ter hev some soöart of a game on. Leastways, Juddy canna fetch him one."

"Cos why? Cos t'schule kid's 'wick' on his feet," put in another, wiser than the rest. "He's t'captain o' t'foöitball team, an' it wor him as would ha' scored t'winnin' goal at Walsbridge if Fluffy Jim hedn't spoilt him."

"What! And after that he runs up agin Juddy to save Jim fro' a hidin'! Why, if Ah'd been him, Ah'd hev seen Jim cold as frozen mutton fust."

"Nay, that's soöart o' thing they do in them big schules, tha knows. 'Code of honour' they calls it, Ah'm telled. Of all the daft ideas—hey, sitha," he broke off, "what a sissup Juddy's just given him!"

"Sitha, what a sissup" was the yokel's way of announcing to those behind him that their champion had at last "got home" with that vicious right hand of his. An exultant cheer marked the success. Dick spun round with the jarring shock, and in that helplessly sick moment he would have fallen an easy prey to Juddy's next blow but for a lucky chance. Dick slipped on the snow of the improvised prize-ring, worn glassy by now, and thereby escaped the full force of his opponent's second drive. As it was, blood flowed from a cut on his cheek, which Chuck Smithies had difficulty in stanching.

"Didn't I warn you not to let him hit you?" he grumbled. "One more swipe on the napper like that, and you'll be dreaming of home and mother, sonny."

"I'm not so particular what happens," gasped Dick, in his giddy agony. "Can't stop rotting about here all afternoon."

He was dimly conscious that Chuck Smithies was breathing fire and brimstone into his ear as he rose to face the next round. He was quite too badly shaken for the time being, to realize that his triumph-flushed opponent was blowing like the bellows of a blacksmith's shop.

Juddy was no pierrot, and the unaccustomed prancing he had done before "clumpin' t'schule-kid's chump" had almost emptied his lungs of ozone. Greatly to the chagrin of his supporters, he seemed quite unable to break again through Dick's somewhat groggy guard.

"Oh, Juddy, lad," they passionately pleaded, "dew slap it across him. He nobbut needs a push—why, tha could blow him o'er!"

Which was precisely what Juddy could not do. He could scarcely have cooled

his porridge with the breath that was left in him just then. Still, there was no reduction in the carthorse strength of his muscles, as the bruises on Dick's protective arms could have testified. Both of them came out of that round with diminished glory, and the referee cast anxious glances back at his neglected public-house, darkly hinting at a draw "if things don't buck up quick".

"They're pumped, both of 'em," observed a candid critic. "You could wring 'em out like a couple o' dishcloths. What a frost!"

And a "frost" it most likely would have been, with a bored-stiff schoolboy on one side, and a Puffing Billy of a horseman on the other, had not Mr. Mawdster, dressed in his Sunday best, and obviously "out for the afternoon", taken advantage of a parting in the crowd to insinuate himself amongst the foremost spectators. There, with his nose superciliously wrinkled, and a contemptuous smile playing on his thin lips, he formed a conspicuous figure which Dick could not fail to note, even though one of the schoolboy's eyes was rapidly closing under a puff of tender skin.

The scorn of an enemy is the surest form of tonic to a fighter of mettle. The printer, deliberately meaning to be insulting, did Dick an immeasurable kindness. Pride surged up like a red sea in the school captain's veins. The feeling of numbness passed from them—they tingled into leaping life.

"The worm's come here to gloat over me being pole-axed," he decided. "Very well, I'll disappoint him. Juddy Whatshisname, Esquire, can look out for his eye now. I'm going to fight!"

Into the ring he jumped, a new man from head to foot. No more back-pedalling and side-stepping—no more trelliswork-formation of defending arms before an elusive head. Dick sought out his opponent with a refreshing newness of purpose which astonished everyone, more particularly the young horseman, who was called upon to shield himself for the first time, and plainly didn't know how to do it.

Rap, rap went Dick's knuckles between the yokel's wide-set eyes. No damage done, apparently! Dick ducked to avoid the round-armed return blow, and brought his left instantly to Juddy's jaw. "Ugh!" grunted Juddy, but that was all. A weather-beaten head like his could stand a lot of pommelling.

"Like hitting a wooden Highlander outside a snuff-shop," Dick inwardly

commented. "Nil desperandum! I'll hurt him yet!"

"Hit him on t'neb, Foxey—hit him on t'neb," came a familiar voice from the crowd—the hoarse voice of Fluffy Jim.

The village idiot was not quite so daft after all! While the fight had been going against his champion he had kept a shut mouth—he was sharp enough to realize the change in the feelings of the crowd, which made it safe at last to venture on an encouraging yell. He knew, too, that his own body would probably be free from violence for a long time to come if Juddy were beaten now. This time he was to be a help, not a hindrance, to the Captain of Foxenby, who really appreciated a heartening cheer at the turn of the tide.

"Bravo, sonny!" cried Chuck Smithies, at the end of the round. "You've sparred him to a standstill. But that isn't enough by a jugful. The shades of night will fall before you knock him down by hammering his dial. I know these farm-hands—bred on beef and bacon pasties—tough as prairie grass. The referee is fidgeting to declare it a draw; if the police pop in and catch him amusing himself like this, they'll haul him before the beak. There's only one way to end it. Just one spot to hit Juddy on——"

"The solar plexus?" queried Dick.

"Don't recommend it; too dangerous, even if you could locate it. No, you must tap him on the neck; here, behind the ear."

"Any risk of serious harm?"

"None whatever. Absolute kindness to animals, my dear boy. Safer than chloroform. He'll go to sleep like a babe for a few minutes, that's all. Now, at it again. It's cat-and-mouse, lad, so put him out of his misery, sharp!"

The village idiot's voice, still harping on the necessity of smiting Juddy's "neb", boomed out again, and the crowd's sympathy seemed now to veer to Dick's side. After all, many of the farm boys had gone too long in fear of Juddy the Unconquered—a wholesome pasting, they began to think, would do him no harm!

He seemed to know what was in store for him, too, for his crouching attitude as Dick approached him was curiously suggestive of an exhausted bull awaiting

the dash of a matador.

A pang of perilous pity shot through Dick's heart, so woebegone did his rival look. But the recollection of the torture this hulking bully had inflicted on Fluffy Jim served to steel his heart. Conscious that the round was wholly his, he lured the tired giant into the exact position necessary for the *coup de grace*. Then, setting his teeth, he followed Chuck Smithies' directions ruthlessly. To his unutterable relief, the medicine worked like a charm.

Juddy crumpled up and fell, and was counted out before his astonished supporters could haul him to his feet and shake the breath back into his body.

Amid the babel which followed, the sportsmanship of the farm-hands rose to a higher level than had previously seemed possible. Rather shamefacedly, as though they were afraid of being caught at it, they cheered "t'Foxenby kid", and would have stood him a good many drinks if he had coveted such a doubtful appreciation. But Chuck Smithies shepherded him into the tavern, and, with those cunning restoratives known best to frequenters of the prize-ring, modified the pain and unsightliness of his face and eye.

"You're a boxer of parts, sonny," said the admiring bookie, "but you'd never make a professional bruiser. Too soft-hearted! Still, you'll be the talk of the country-side after outing Juddy Stockgill. He's been Cock o' the North two years. At the school, too, they'll make no end of a song-and-dance, what?"

"I hope to goodness they never hear a syllable about it," said Dick fervently.

The kindly bookmaker stared.

"Why, laddie, you ought to be jumping glad to have your chums know of this victory," he said. "But you don't seem happy at all."

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks. Don't worry about me," Dick hastened to say.

The bookie adjusted his hat and drew on his gloves with care.

"Well, chin-chin, sonny—I am hopping it now," he said. "Many thanks for a jolly afternoon! I like you. I'm no fair-weather friend. Remember what I said to you in the train—hail me if you're ever in a hole, and I'll do my little best to dig you out. Keep on bathing your eye till bedtime. Warm water will fetch the

plaster off in the morning. You'll feel better then than Clodhopper Juddy, I'll wager a crown!"

## CHAPTER XV

## The Cloud with the Silver Lining

Loving Foxenby with all his heart, as one who had been far happier there than at home, Dick Forge had always hitherto come back to it in joyful expectation of pleasant days in store.

As its captain he had striven hard, particularly on the athletic side, to keep it well in the picture, and there was evidence of his zeal in the hall, where the County Schools' cricket-shield now hung. Moreover, he had steered the Socker team into the final of the football cup, and there was still a chance of winning that and bringing off the double event.

Never had a winter term started with greater possibilities, yet Dick entered upon it with leaden feet and downcast spirits. It appeared to him that, unless something approaching a miracle happened in less than a fortnight, a storm would burst over his head that he would be unable to weather. He would have to pack up stealthily and go.

With frank or half-concealed curiosity everybody stared at his bruised face and half-closed optic. Old Man Wykeham, in discussing with him the prospects of the term, seemed to have eyes for nothing other than those scars of battle; Mr. Rooke was even more inquisitive, and made no bones about asking him the reason of it.

"I'd rather not say, sir, if you don't mind," Dick answered.

How long, he wondered, would the story of yesterday's encounter be in making its way to Foxenby? By anyone mischievously disposed towards him, it

might so easily be described as "a pothouse brawl".

His fears in this direction were only too well grounded. Lyon, the cup-team's doughty full-back, speedily brushed away his last hope that the affair might never reach the school.

"I say, Forge, old man, somebody's set a nasty tale about concerning you," said the full-back anxiously.

"Why, what's being said?" Dick inquired, fearing the worst.

"Oh, some tin-pot yarn about you picking a quarrel with a yokel in Moston—a stupid clown who couldn't fight for toffee. The impression is that you were showing off your superior pugilistic skill, and that you sort of butchered this unscientific chawbacon to make a Moston holiday. Awful rot, of course, but what did actually happen?"

Dick groaned in spirit. Was he never to enjoy a minute's freedom from malice? There could be no doubt about it—Lyon was looking hard and pointedly at his battered and still-swollen face, and it was that close scrutiny which proved Dick's undoing. With all his nerves on edge he lost his temper.

"Well, Lyon, if you like to believe lots of confounded tosh, it's your own affair entirely," he burst out. "Let the old woman's tale go round the school. I shall take no trouble to contradict it!"

He left Lyon gasping there, and went off in search of the only person from whom he seemed likely to gain any sympathy—Roger Cayton, to wit. But Roger had not yet arrived, nor was there any sign that his baggage had come on in front of him.

The absence of the Prefect of Rooke's House on the first day of a new term was a matter of some concern, and Dick at once reported it to Mr. Rooke.

"I was just coming to see you about that very matter, Forge," the housemaster said. "Cayton's father has written to say that the poor lad is down with cerebral inflammation."

"Ill!" exclaimed Dick, blankly.

"Rather seriously, I fear. Over-study during the holidays, his father says. Been working hard, unknown to the rest of the family, when he ought to have been in bed. Trying to make sure of his Varsity scholarship, no doubt."

"Do—do you think I could get leave to go and see him, sir?" stammered Dick, pale of face and visibly distressed.

"No use if you could, Forge. They wouldn't admit you to a delirious patient. Better wait and hope for the best. I'll let you know the bulletins as they arrive, or you can write for information yourself."

Calamity on calamities! Trouble heaped on trouble, pressed down and brimming over. Deprived of the moral support of his trustiest friend, Dick had now to face his editorial dilemma entirely alone, with the added anguish of knowing that Roger might succumb to the fever and be for ever lost to him.

No shame to the Captain of Foxenby that he locked himself in his study —*their* study—that night, and, with his head buried in his-arms, gave way to silent sobbing. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune were coming too fast about his ears—it was more than human endurance could be expected to withstand!

He was soon bitterly angry with himself for this outburst of grief. He, the Captain of Foxenby, blubbering like a First Form kid with the toothache! A smile must be pumped up from somewhere for that last walk along the dormitories—poor old Roger's work if he had been there. It must never be said that Foxenby's Captain went to bed, on the first night of the term, with a countenance as long as a fiddle.

Pride brought the smile, and sheer physical weariness—the reaction of yesterday's fight—the sleep. And in the morning his damaged eye was heaps better, and the marks of Juddy's fist were far less noticeable. So Dick set about his duties with philosophical resignation, determined to look facts in the face, intent on wearing a mask of nonchalance which would deceive all but the shrewdest boys around him.

One of his first ordeals was to eat humble-pie over the *Rooke's House Rag*. With many pen-scratchings and painful recommencements, he prepared and pinned on the notice-board the following announcement:—

*THE ROOKE'S HOUSE RAG*

> Subscribers to the above Magazine are notified that, pending the recovery of the funds lost in the burglary last term, the publication of the Rag has been temporarily suspended. As soon as arrangements can be made its issue will certainly be renewed. In the meantime, any Subscriber who desires the return of his unexpired subscription may receive it on application to the undersigned,
>
> Richard Forge,
> Editor.

"The flaw in that literary 'wangle'," thought Dick, as he gazed ruefully at the foolscap sheet, "is the rash promise to refund unexpired subscriptions. If many of the Foxes take advantage of that, I shall be cleaned out of 'tin' for the rest of the term."

He walked off sharply as though from an unclean thing. Had he turned his head, he would have seen that Luke Harwood was the first to read his public confession of failure. And he might have had some of his laudable faith in human nature torn from him could he have observed the self-satisfied smirk on the face of *The Foxonian's* editor. "I told him so—I knew it," was the verbal key to that smug expression.

Luke Harwood had reason to feel at peace with all the world to-day. After long waiting, things were coming his way at last. This humble suspension of the *Rag* would not be exactly popular with those who had subscribed to it. They would laugh ironically at the clause "pending the recovery of the funds lost". How very likely that the burglars, conscience-stricken, were saving up stolen money for an opportunity of returning it! Then there was that ugly affair at the public-house—the fight with the ignorant yokel. Very severe things were being said about that in school. If any other Fox had been guilty of a vulgar scrap in such squalid surroundings, would not Forge himself, as captain, have reported the offender to the Head? Then, the School was asking, why did not he report himself?

Oh, truly, reflected Luke, when the annual election of Foxenby's captain took place at Easter, it would not be altogether such a walk-over for Dick Forge as it had been in the two previous years!

During the rest of that miserable week, better news of Roger provided the only relief to the background of dull misery. Roger, his father wrote to say, had made a wonderful recovery, and was already itching to get back to school. Such good tidings served to sustain Dick's pluck as he saw, on almost every side, the growing animosity towards him. It was suspicious, too, that nobody had asked for a return of a subscription to the *Rag*. Was that also a conspiracy against him —a sort of half-veiled boycott? Even Lyon, that reliable old football warhorse, avoided him whenever possible. Forge was distinctly in the School's black books this term.

Feeling almost an outcast, Dick grew morose and silent, and it was with difficulty that he spoke civilly to Robin Arkness, leader of the Merry Men, when that bland young gentleman accosted him outside his study door.

"What d'ye want, youngster?" he asked irritably. "Sing out, quick; I'm busy just now."

The quite unexpected answer took him, metaphorically speaking, off his feet.

"Oh, please, Forge, will you sign your name in my autograph album?" asked Robin, producing from behind his back an oblong book in a somewhat grubby, red-leather binding.

"Why, kid, what's the game? No nonsense, now? I've a pretty rough way of dealing with Juniors who try to pull my leg."

"Oh, honour bright, Forge, I want your autograph ever so much," declared Robin with the utmost gravity. "Put it here, please, on the page I keep for footballers and boxers."

"Boxers! What are you driving at, you little monkey? You are trying to pull my leg, after all!"

"Indeed, no, Forge! Do sign. There, underneath the autograph of the light-weight champion of the world."

Dick found himself breathing rather fast as he looked from Robin to the book, and from the book back to Robin again.

"Though you don't seem to realize it, younker, this is rather a tender subject for me," he said at last, quietly. "You say you want me to sign your book amongst the footballers and boxers! Footballer I may be, in a measure, but why boxer?"

"Because you beat big Juddy Stockgill to a frazzle on the Anvil Inn bowling-green," Robin replied, almost reverently.

Dick gasped. This was a newer and altogether pleasanter version of the episode, anyhow!

"But that's not what the School thinks, kid. Foxenby's opinion is that, for swank, I selected a nice, fat, juicy victim, and used him as a punching-ball. Have you heard a different story?"

"No, Forge. But one of the—that is, somebody said they'd seen it was Juddy Stockgill you walloped, and I know what a big brute he is, 'cos my uncle had a farm next to the one where Juddy works. And he must have been doing something rotten, or you wouldn't have struck him, Forge."

Here was a golden opportunity to put things right, and Dick, after slightly hesitating, took it.

"Juddy and his choice associates were knocking Fluffy Jim about rather badly," he said. "I chipped in because of that, kid, and not for personal glory. You believe me, I suppose?"

"Up to the hilt, Forge! You're a 'white man'. Sign my book, please, so's I can 'hop' it back to 'prep'."

With a cheerier laugh than he had uttered for weeks, Dick did himself the unsought honour of placing his signature beneath that of the world's light-weight boxing champion, and Robin cleared off contentedly.

"Never say die, after all," Dick told himself, more hopefully. "With Robin Hood and his Merry Men behind me, and Roger burning to get back to my side, I think I can discern a tiny rift in the clouds at last!"

## CHAPTER XVI

## In which Peter has an Unhappy Day

"Give me back my tin of biscuits, I tell you! You've pinched my cakes, chocolates, apples, bananas, everything. Cads, thieves, pirates!"

"Peace, thou scurvy knave! Dost dare to speak slightingly of the great Robin Hood and his Merry Men? Have a care, thou pestiferous Squirm, lest I order thy foul tongue to be torn from its roots by red-hot pincers."

"Oh, stop your high-falutin' rot and give me back my grub. If you don't——"

"Well, caitiff, what then?"

"As sure as my name's Peter Mawdster I'll report the whole boiling of you to the Captain of the School!"

"Yah! Sneak! Hound! Soapless Squirm! Down with him, Merry Men! Slug the crawling viper!"

"Hold, Merry Men!" It was the shrill voice of Robin, raised high in command. "Soil not your honest hands with the watery blood of this rapscallion. Spread yourselves around, so that there may be no escape for him from the depths of this noble Forest. I would have speech with him—words of serious import indeed!"

Hugely enjoying the sport, the Merry Men drew round Peter Mawdster a cordon that it would have been hopeless to attempt to break.

"Now, Mawdster, black-handed imp of the printing press, slimiest of Squirms," began Robin, "venture to ope thy sloppy mouth during this speech o' mine, and my trusty fellows shall immediately stuff it full of holly leaves and

clay, which will please thee less than the greasy provender which has made thee fat and scant of breath. Know now the two charges that are laid against thee—firstly, that thou didst carry to school a disgustingly hoggish hoard of costly viands, which, rather than share with thy dormitory in the time-honoured Foxenby fashion, thou didst bring into the Shrubbery and endeavour to conceal there, like a dirty overfed dog with a surplus bone."

"I didn't!" denied Peter. "If you'd only waited I was going to ask everybody to share."

Hoots of derision from his captors greeted this assertion.

"Villain! Thou liest in thy teeth! Make not thy odious crime worse by perjury, or thou shalt fare ill at our hands. If he speaks again before I've finished, Merry Men, bung up his mealy mouth!"

"Ay, ay, worthy leader!" shouted the gleeful band.

"Thou hearest, toad of a Squirm? Silence, on thy life! Charge Number Two against thee is that thou didst, of malice aforethought, bring to Foxenby a garbled story about its honoured Captain—to wit, that at ye royal and ancient sign of Ye Anvil Inn, in ye historic and flyblown borough of Moston, he did single out and do grievous bodily harm to a gaping, flabby, half-baked clodhopper who could make no show of resistance.

"Now," continued Robin, getting a fresh breath hurriedly, "think well how thou answerest my questions, as whatever thou lettest slip from thy bloated lips may be used in evidence against thee. Didst thou, or didst thou not, witness the encounter between Forge and the chawbacon?"

"I—I—here, give me my grub and let me go, you fellows!" was the wildly evasive reply.

"Stand ready with the clay, my Merry Men! Answer my question without further ado. Wert thou present at the fight?"

"No; I wasn't."

"Then thy foul slander was the fruit of thy own squirming and villainous imagination?"

"If I wasn't, somebody else was," quavered Peter. "Gimme my prog!"

"Silence in Court—I mean cease thy gluttonous wailing after venison pasty. By my halidom, humble-pie is fitter fare for such carrion as thou. For the last time, from whom didst thou glean the details of the fistic bout?"

"My father saw it, if you must know."

"Thy father, eh? Scullion and knave and thrice dirty dog! Who and what is thy sire that his word should be taken before that of a gentleman of Foxenby? Didst, then, thy low-born father vow to thee that Forge made a punching-ball of a crackpot yokel who could not defend himself?"

"Yes, he did—and don't you call my father names, either, Robin!"

"But I shall call him names, thou caitiff, and to his face if I get the chance. He is a liar and a knave, and by the shaven crown of Friar Tuck I swear that, should he ever defile Foxenby with his obnoxious presence, I and my Merry Men will split his mean carcass with arrows. What say ye, Merry Men?"

"Ay, ay, Robin Hood," was the joyful chorus.

"I tell ye, Merry Men," went on Robin, who was most thoroughly enjoying himself in the imaginary limelight, "that the doughty opponent of our Captain was none other than the notorious Juddy Stockgill, a six-foot-high horseman, four stones heavier (more or less) than Forge to start with. Forge caught this hefty horseman torturing Fluffy Jim, the village idiot, and forthwith dotted him one on the beak—that is, I should say, Forge valiantly took the—side of the downtrodden and the Oppressed, and with his trusty quarterstaff—I mean to say, his good right arm—laid the tyrant low!"

"Bravo! Three cheers for Forge of Foxenby!" cried the delighted Merry Men.

"Gimme me my biscuits and things, and let's be going," whined Peter, ungrammatically and fearfully.

"The fat-producing provender, scoundrel, with which thou camest boastfully back to school, is easy enough of access to one of thy elegant figure and nimbleness of foot. If thou so delightest in eating, thou wilt gladly climb for thy food. Thou wilt find it dangling from the topmost bough of yonder sycamore

tree, whither the Forest nymphs, disgusted by thy swinish greed, spirited it."

Peter gave a scream of baffled rage as, looking up, he saw that his basket of eatables had actually been tied high up in the sycamore tree. Stout as he was, sluggish with over-feeding during the Christmas holidays, the task of climbing that high tree, slippery with hoar-frost, was quite beyond him. Stung to reckless fury by his impotence, he first of all showed Robin his teeth in an ugly snarl. Then he set up such a hullabaloo of weeping as might have been heard a mile away.

"Uh, bu-bu-bu-bub-bub-oo!" he blubbered. "You know I can't reach it up there, you cads. I'm not strong. (Oh, bub-bub-oo!) My father's doctor says I haven't to c-c-climb trees. I've to have plenty of rich and sustaining f-f-food, and I'm hungry now. Gimme my biscuits, bub-bub-bub-oo!"

"Bub-bub-bub-oo!" the Merry Men mocked him, by common consent. "Gimme my biscuits, bub-bub-bub—ooo!"

What cursed spite was it that turned Dick Forge's footsteps in the direction of the Shrubbery just then? Every good reason was his to be conveniently deaf on that side to-day. No kudos could be derived from stopping yet another of the constantly recurring demonstrations of Robin Hood and his Merry Men. They were his only friends in the school just now, and as such were surely entitled to as much rope as he could discreetly allow them. Yet here he was, urged on to an unpopular action by that stern inner monitor which we know by the name of Duty.

"Now then, you chaps, what's this Bedlam about?" he demanded. "Playing at wild beasts escaping from a menagerie, eh? There's a howling wolf amongst you, at any rate. Why," he exclaimed, as the cordon of Merry Men parted to admit him, "it's young Mawdster again!"

Peter ceased blubbering as suddenly as he began. "Yes, Forge, it's me," he said. "They've slung all my grub up there in the sycamore tree. Make 'em fetch it down for me!"

"Whom do you think you're talking to, Mawdster? Keep your paws off my coat-sleeve, if you please. Why are you always sneaking about in here, making disturbances? Cut off out of it!"

"Shan't!" replied Peter, as bold as brass. He was even looking rather pleased with himself now. "I'm not leaving this shrubbery till they've fetched my grub out of that tree. And you'll make 'em do it, Forge!"

The Merry Men stared in amazement at this defiantly impertinent Squirm. Was his brain, never of average power, softening at last?

"Cheeky little monkey," said Dick. "You're not of my House, or I'd give you the lamming of a lifetime. Report yourself at once to Harwood for insolence. I'll see him myself about you."

Quite unawed, cocksure of the weapon he held in reserve, Peter coolly held his ground.

"No, you won't, Forge," he declared. "You'll either send Robin Arkness up the tree for my food, or fetch it down yourself!"

So brazen an outrage to the dignity of a School Captain could not be tolerated for a moment. Forgetting Foxenby etiquette, which had no precedent for a prefect of one House visiting summary justice on a boy of another, Dick raised his hand to cuff Peter soundly. But the Squirm was too quick for him.

"Lay a finger on me, Forge, and I'll tell my father! Yes, I will, and then he'll come straight to the school and tell Old Wykeham how you cheated him out of every penny of the money he spent on your rotten *Rooke's House Rag*!"

Disgusting little vulgarian! Full well he knew, and vastly did he enjoy, the sensational effect of this revelation amongst the Captain's stanchest supporters. They were clearly staggered by it; he could see them exchanging quick and questioning glances, and the success of his verbal boomerang emboldened him still more.

"I will now have my biscuits and things, Forge, if you please," he smilingly demanded.

Pale with suppressed emotion—anger and chagrin, heart-sinking and mortification—Dick came then to a deliberate decision. Not as Captain of Foxenby, but as plain Dick Forge, grossly insulted in public, would he act.

"You will get what I give you, Mawdster," he quietly said. "And you're not likely to smack your lips over it, either. Turn round!"

"Shan't! If you touch me, I'll tell my father!"

Dick beckoned then to Robin Hood, who ran forward with alacrity.

"Arkness, just you and Flenton swing Mawdster round and hold him tightly for a minute," he ordered.

Oh, what a great day this was for Robin Hood and his Merry Men! Kicking and scratching and struggling in vain, the stout and oily Squirm was manoeuvred by Robin and Flenton into a position lending itself admirably to corporal punishment. Dick's stick, selected from the sycamore, fell like a flail where it would hurt the most and show the least. For sixty seconds or so he spared neither his strength nor Peter's feelings.

Feverishly happy, the Merry Men skipped like frolicsome lambs. Here was rich entertainment indeed—the Captain of Foxenby, in defiance of school traditions, giving a slimy Squirm a first-class whacking in the full glare of publicity!

Grimly finishing his task, Dick threw away the stick, which one of the Merry Men fastened on as a souvenir of the occasion.

"That will do. Release him, you fellows. Now, Mawdster, will you go back to your House at once, or shall I boot you there?"

Mawdster hobbled away, too genuinely sore for noisy sobbing this time, but turning once to shake his fist in ludicrous fury at the Captain.

"You'll pay for this, Forge. Mark my words!" he called back.

And Dick, as he marched away with his hands deep in his trousers pockets, quite believed that he would have to pay for this public vindication of his dignity —pay to the bitter utmost in pitiless exposure and disgrace.

## CHAPTER XVII

## The Friend in Need

"It is distinctly unusual to grant a special *exeat* so early in the term, Forge," said Mr. Rooke, lifting his eyebrows. "Must you really go to Moston this afternoon?"

"That I should go is vital, sir, though I regret I cannot tell you why."

"Rather awkward, though, Forge. Cayton is still away, and Lyon's rule-of-thumb methods do not exactly make him an ideal deputy prefect. Your absence may annoy Mr. Wykeham. Won't you take an afternoon off next week instead?"

"I'm sorry to seem unreasonable, sir. But, with or without a special *exeat*, I must go to Moston to-day. So you will see how serious the situation is."

The housemaster shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Well, Forge, if you put it like that, I suppose I must sign," he said. "Here's your *exeat*. Don't be too long away. Discipline is getting rather slacker than I like. There was an appalling hubbub in the shrubbery yesterday. Luckily, Mr. and Mrs. Wykeham were out to tea.... By the way, Forge, I'm sorry for the stoppage of your sprightly little *Rag*. It was doing the House good. May I help at all—can I do anything?"

Dick was touched by the kindly offer, and had his difficulty been other than a financial one, he would have gladly confided in Mr. Rooke. But he knew the house-master had no private means, and it would be embarrassing to refuse any money that might be volunteered.

"You're awfully good, sir," he said, "and I may take advantage of your kind offer if nothing comes of my visit to Moston."

An hour later Dick had discovered Chuck Smithies in a dark little office at the top of some very steep stairs. On the door was a small brass plate, bearing the words "Smithies' Advance Bank and Commission Agency".

"Hallo, sonny! Got your eye back to its normal colour, I see," was the bookmaker's cheery greeting. "Wanting me particularly?"

"I want you badly," said Dick. Then, having made up his mind to take the plunge, he told Smithies the full story of his editorial dilemma, and anxiously waited to see what his sporting friend would say.

"Sonny," said Smithies, "you're in the clutches of a dangerous man. Mawdster's all 'butter' to your face, all vinegar behind your back. Chairman of 'Welfare' Societies, yet the most uncharitable hypocrite you could meet in a month of Sundays. Always trying to worm himself in with the nobility and gentry—you know the sort of viper I mean. He'll give you short shrift, lad, if you don't steal a march on him."

"But what can I do?" asked Dick, gloomily.

"Pay his bill and have done with him."

"As easy as catching trout with a bent pin. I haven't the money."

"Pooh! That's soon settled. Wait there till I count it out. How much? Shall we say ten or twenty pounds? We'll be on the safe side and call it thirty."

Dick sprang to his feet in evident concern.

"Oh, I say, you know, this will never do. I—I didn't come here to cadge. I wanted you to give me your advice—not your money."

"Softly, softly, my young friend. You've made me count 'em wrong—I must begin again. Who the dickens said I was going to give you money? This is a business transaction, pure and simple. I'm going to lend you the cash to pay off that loathsome toady, Aaron Mawdster. You're just shifting your obligations, lad, from a black man to a 'white' one."

"But I really can't accept your—your splendid generosity," Dick managed to say. He was almost stupefied by the bookmaker's immediate and practical response to his tale of woe. "What guarantee have you that I shall ever pay you back? None whatever!"

"Lad, I prefer some people's honest faces to other people's dishonest signatures. I'll trust you with my money—I'd trust you with my life. Still, don't run away with the idea that this is a favour I'm doing you. It isn't. You'll pay me five per cent on the money when you return it, and that's more than I'd get on it if it were lying idle in the bank. Choose your own time for repayment—I shan't miss that little lot for a year or two. Now, run off and get out of Mawdster's debt, there's a dear lad. I only wish I could come with you, and see his ugly face drop when you pay him!"

Isn't it aggravating how completely words fail you when you want most of all to be profuse in your gratitude? Dick felt an absolute dummy as the bookmaker forced the banknotes into his fingers and hustled him downstairs. This was the man whom, on his journey from King's Cross, he had practically called a liar and a thief! This was the man whose methods of business he had denounced with withering scorn—yet here he stood, clutching a fistful of notes from Smithies' safe, a party to one of those very transactions which he had so emphatically condemned in the train!

"No, no, I can't take this money," he cried, making a last fight against the temptation that was weakening him. "Do have it back, there's a good fellow!"

"Look here, youngster, stop rotting," fiercely replied Mr. Smithies. "I'm a bit of a boxer myself, let me tell you, and, old as I am, I'll set about you and give you worse than you gave Juddy Stockgill if you throw that wretched packet o' money in my teeth again. Are we pals or aren't we? Didn't we shake hands, like two Britons, in the train? And what good's a pal if he won't get his hand down when his pard's in a deuce of a mess? But it ain't a favour in any case—it's a commercial transaction. I've got a mortgage on your honour, so to speak, and that's as safe as the Bank of England!"

Again exhorting Dick to rush straight down to the printer's with the cash, Smithies withdrew smartly into his office and shut the door. Dick heard the key turning in the lock and the scraping of a chair as the bookmaker resumed his seat. He knocked hard and obstinately, pleading for admission.

"Not in!" was the equally stubborn response. "Come another day, sonny, and tell me how old Mawdster takes the swipe you're going to give him!"

Out in the street, Dick looked at the notes he was tightly holding, and placed them in his safest pocket. That was an elementary precaution for a boy who had lost so much loose cash before. Then he turned mechanically in the direction of the printing-office, struggling at every step with his severely unyielding conscience, which was all against his acceptance of the favour, though his heart would fain have acquiesced in it.

To be done with this load of debt which pressed so heavily on his mind—to be free to sleep dreamlessly again, to face the morrow with a head held high! The passport to such happiness was on his person—he had only to sink his

perverse pride, and he could be done for ever with the manager of the Moston Cleartype Press!

A waverer's mind can be made up for him, yea or nay, by the accident of chance. Thus was Dick's indetermination brought to an end on this January afternoon. Stepping off the pavement irresolutely, he bumped into the somewhat insignificant person of Mr. Mawdster himself, and almost sent him sprawling into the gutter.

"Clumsy fool, look where you're going!" snapped the printer. Then, noticing who had accidentally buffeted him, he turned ironically polite, even to the point of raising his hat.

"Ah, bon soir, Mr. Forge, delighted to meet you, sir! I fancy there is a little matter of business which awaits settlement between us. Is an agreement possible before matters go too far?"

"It is quite possible, I think!" said Dick, coldly.

Aaron Mawdster gave him a sharp glance. It was difficult to reckon up this haughty schoolboy, whose pride seemed unbendable.

"Very good, sir; this way, if you please."

Dick followed the printer into his office, resolved now to battle no longer against the inclination to be rid of this man's veiled tyranny. Better by far to owe money to a friendly bookmaker than to a blackmailing enemy!

"Now, young man, I had a letter the other day from my poor son, who still complains of vile ill-treatment and lack of protection. My heart bleeds for his sufferings. I am a kind and generous man, Mr. Forge, as Moston people have good reason to know, but I can be a ruthless foe when I choose."

"I know that," Dick commented, without moving a muscle of his face.

"Oh, you know it, do you, Mr. Head-in-the-air! Very well. For positively the last time, do you intend taking my misjudged and ill-used boy under your wing?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Mawdster, I gave the impudent young cub a well-

earned thrashing with a stick yesterday!"

Dick might have hurled a hand-grenade at the wall with less effect than this calmly-blunt declaration produced on the printer. Aaron Mawdster's face passed from its wonted pallor to an angry purple.

"You dared to strike my poor weak boy—you, twice his size, beat him with a stick?" A volley of oaths, in the worst slang of a slum pothouse, relieved his feelings here. "Then, you great, hulking bully, I'll cast you in the dust and trample on you!"

"Not literally, I suppose?" Dick said, with contempt. "Look here, Mr. Mawdster, when you've quite emptied yourself of swear-words, you will oblige me by naming the amount of my bill. I want to pay it and go!"

"Bluff!" scoffed the printer. "Why should I waste time making out a bill—what proof have I that you can pay it?"

> "'To Simple Simon said the Pieman,
> First show me your penny',"

Dick quoted, with a laugh, which drew the printer into a fresh outburst of abuse. "So be it; here is the money, Mr. Mawdster, in my hand. Take a good look at it."

It was the act of a novice in the game of commercial poker to lay his cards on the table like that. The printer stared at the notes, and with rapid mental arithmetic summed up their approximate value. Then he took full advantage of his opponent's youthful inexperience.

"My account comes to thirty pounds, four shillings, and sixpence," he said. "Very reasonable, too, allowing for the dearness of paper and labour."

A boy of shrewder business instincts—Roger Cayton, for instance—would have haggled over that figure and possibly secured some reduction. But Dick, though suspicious that he was being overcharged, made no protest. Out of his scanty store of pocket-money he added four-and-sixpence to the notes Smithies had lent him, and laid the full amount on the desk.

Mr. Mawdster made for the cash as a greedy sparrow darts down on crumbs of cake, but Dick quietly put his school-cap over the little pile.

"Pardon me, Mr. Mawdster, but I'll keep this company till you bring the receipt," he said.

"Most insulting," snapped the printer.

"Yet most essential," retorted Dick. "Fizz off, Mr. Mawdster; I don't want to take root here!"

Considering how glibly he had arrived at the total it seemed to take the manager of the Cleartype Press an unusual time to arrange the items of the bill. It filled a quarto-memo, before he was satisfied with it, and altogether looked a very imposing document. But the signature over the stamp was all Dick looked at or cared about.

"That'll do," he said. "Good-bye to you, Mr. Mawdster."

"Stop!" cried the printer, still boiling hot. "I don't know where you got this money from—perhaps I ought to enquire—but don't think you've washed out all your obligations by it, my lad. You have brazenly confessed to beating my poorly son, and I know enough about Foxenby's rules to imagine what a row you'll be in when, to-morrow, I tell Mr. Wykeham of your illegal brutality."

On all counts, this would have been a threat permitting no possible repartee, as it was clearly undeniable that Dick had taken the law into his own hands and broken one of Foxenby's strictest regulations. But Dick had a brain-wave worthy of Roger—a happy thought which made him feel almost proud of his intuition.

"Yes, Mr. Mawdster," he replied, "and *I* know sufficient of Moston's social rules to guess what townspeople would think of you, the local paragon, 'the granny white hen that never laid away', if they learnt that you had taken advantage of a schoolboy's misfortunes to try to blackmail him into showing favour to your namby-pamby son. If you come with any of your sneaking tales to Foxenby to-morrow, I can find ways and means of retaliating."

This sudden turning of the tables visibly upset the printer.

"Don't you have the impertinence to libel me, young feller," he snarled. "I

possess the unbounded esteem of everybody in Moston."

"Not quite everybody, as I happen to know," retorted Dick, with kindly thoughts of "Chuck" Smithies, whose estimate of Aaron Mawdster's character had provided him with this verbal weapon.

"I don't care what you say," spluttered the angry printer. "I shall come up to Foxenby to-morrow."

"I'm very sure you won't," cried Dick, putting a bold face on his qualms. "Good-bye, Mr. Mawdster. I trust mine may be the pleasure of never seeing your face again!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

## Fluffy Jim provides a Sensation

Moonlight mingled its rays with daylight as Dick passed up the main street, his heart feeling "like a flake of pure delight borne on an ocean wide". He ran along the pavement, not caring that there were no coins in his pocket to jingle in harmony with his movements. How much better was an easy conscience than a heavy purse!

Knowing that he ought now to get quickly back to school, he was not too pleased to have a detaining hand laid on his sleeve, and to find, on turning abruptly, the grinning face of Fluffy Jim gazing amiably at him.

"Don't try to stop me, Jim, there's a good chap," he said. "I'm in a hurry."

"Um," said Fluffy Jim, "um." But he still kept his tight hold on Dick's sleeve. Something seemed to be on his mind, though he failed in language to express it.

"Anything up, Jim?" queried Dick, impatiently. "If so, get it off your chest. I

haven't a minute to spare."

"Um," said Fluffy Jim again. Then, removing from his lips a short clay pipe, he pointed with it to the moonlit hills.

"Want ter show thee summat," he said. "Summat funny, like."

"I dare say you do," said Dick, with a laugh. "But I don't want to be shown—at least not at this end of the day. Try me when we meet again."

"Um," said Jim. Yet he tugged hard and insistently at Dick's sleeve, and there was in his cunning eyes a depth of meaning that impressed Dick in spite of himself.

A spirit of adventure seized the Captain of Foxenby, and a moonlight visit to the hills, on that ideal evening, did not lack attraction for him. Still, he made one more effort to disengage himself from Fluffy Jim's grasp.

"Run away and play, Jim, that's a good boy," he urged. "Your penny show will wait awhile."

"No," said Jim, with quite convincing decision. "Coom now! Want to show thee summat!"

Curiosity got the upper hand of Dick. He pushed back from his mind the repressive thought of Mr. Rooke, who had bidden him return early, and motioned to Fluffy Jim to lead on. There was something rather whimsical in the idea of the Captain of Foxenby playing truant, for all the world like a roving imp from the Junior School!

Off set Fluffy Jim in high feather, making for the moors as fast as he could pull one heavy hobnailed boot after the other. He looked an odd figure of fun in the moonlight, but Dick knew better than to laugh.

"You know, Jim, you did me out of a goal as clean as a whistle in that cup final at Walsbridge," Dick took the opportunity of reminding him.

"Um," grunted Jim.

"Why did you butt in? You robbed us of the cup, Jim."

"Um."

"It's all very fine saying 'um', Jim, but 'um' doesn't cut any ice. Here, I say, tell me this—who put you over the ropes and sent you across to kick the ball from my toes?"

"If Ah telled *thee*, tha'd *know*," was the crafty answer. "And then," he added, unusually communicative, "Ah'd ger a worse 'warmin" fro' Ike Doccan than Juddy an' his pals wor gi'ing me that day tha stopped 'em."

"Ike Doccan! Why, that's the porter and handyman in Holbeck's House. Did *he* tell you to do it, Jim?"

But Fluffy Jim was quick enough to see that he had gone too far in mentioning names.

"No, it worn't him. Ah did it mesen, 'cos tha couldn't scoöar. Um!"

Nothing more would he say, despite all Dick's most artful questioning, so that the subject had to be dropped. But in the captain's mind a suspicion had been born. He remembered now the frequency with which Ike Doccan had joined the little group of Holbeck's House Seniors in the days that preceded the final tie. Not in the least snobbish himself, he had nevertheless thought it rather indiscreet, from the standpoint of discipline, for the prefect of Holbeck's House to be seen fraternizing with its porter, whose character for sobriety and good manners was not above reproach. He had, indeed, been twice dismissed for drunkenness, and twice reinstated because school porters were hard to find.

"Now," thought Dick, "I wonder if that precious gang were gambling on the match—betting against Foxenby winning—and didn't *want* me to score? By Jove! I recollect Smithies hinting in the train that some of our chaps had made bets with him, but I jumped down his throat about it. I guess it'll soon be my painful duty to have a talk with Luke Harwood about this."

By this time they had reached the crest of the long hill which led to the moors. The early moon shone clear upon the rough heathland path, along which Jim silently plodded.

"What's your game, anyhow, Jim? Strikes me you've brought me all this way on a fool's errand."

"Want to show thee summat."

"'Summat', yes—but where is 'summat'?"

"In t'owd cottage. Here 'tis. Come inside."

With quickening interest, Dick followed the idiot into the empty cottage, through the paneless casement of which the moonlight streamed on a scene of dilapidation. The oven door of a rusty kitchen-stove stood open, and in the corner was a tumbled pile of abandoned tinware. Condemned as unfit for habitation, the cottage had obviously been left to fall asunder in its own time.

"Well, Jim, there's nothing here to write home about," said Dick. "Come, now, own up that you've been making a fool of me, and let's get away."

"Ah'm not hevin' thee for t'mug," said Jim solemnly. "There's summat here 'at'll please thee. Ah fun it art for mesen. Noabody knows but me. This ere floor plays a tune. Listen!"

He raised his heavily-booted feet with deliberation and commenced a shuffling dance, grotesquely like the performance of a captive bear. And sure enough to Dick's profound astonishment, the floor did play a tune a jingle that, though harsh, was sufficiently musical to wreathe the face of the idiot dancer in a delighted grin.

"Ah telled thee—didn't Ah tell thee?" cried Jim, in great excitement. "Music!

> 'All around the mulberry bush,
> Pop goes the weasel',"

he sang, kicking up his legs in ludicrous imitation of a pierrot outside a travelling show.

"Here, slow down, Jim—that's enough! Got any matches in your pocket? Good! A stump of a candle, too? Better still! Stick it in the neck of that old beer-bottle—right-o! Now, just you lean up against the window to keep the draught off, while I make a light. Don't move from there, Jim. I want to see what's under these musical floor-boards of yours."

Shielding the flickering candle with his body, he examined the boards, and

immediately saw that they had been fastened down with new nails. They seemed loose, but not loose enough to be prized up by his pen-knife, the larger blade of which snapped off when he tried his luck with it.

"Bother!" he exclaimed. "The little blade's no use. Got a knife of any sort on you, Jim?"

Jim produced a huge clasp-knife, containing a blade as strong as a file.

"T'coastguard gave me this," he chuckled. "Ah cuts me baccy wi' it. Catch!"

Such an instrument was as good as a carpenter's tool to Dick. Speedily he had raised one of the boards, and for the moment dropped it again in sheer astonishment, so amazing was the discovery which his peering eyes made. In the light of the candle he had seen coins and medals and bric-a-brac, jumbled hastily together as though they had been poured there from a sack.

Quickly regaining his control, he forced up another and yet another of the boards, with the revelation of precious curios in each case.

"Jumping crackers! Here we have the headmaster's missing collection, or I'm a Dutchman. Jim, don't stand grinning there like an ape. Come over here and sit on these boards until I return. I'm going to Moston as fast as I can gallop, and I'll get back in quick-sticks. Don't you dare to move from here, Jim. Smoke your pipe, and I'll buy you some more baccy later on—packets of it. You're sure you can stick it here by yourself?"

**"JIM, DON'T STAND THERE GRINNING LIKE AN APE"**
**"JIM, DON'T STAND THERE GRINNING LIKE AN APE"**

"Um," said Jim, settling down on the boards like a contented hen covering chickens.

Still apprehensive, Dick uttered a final caution—perhaps more effective than his previous warning.

"If you do leave here, Jim, I'll lam you when next I catch you."

"Um," said Jim, evidently impressed.

He proved a faithful custodian, being still there, squatting in a cloud of rank tobacco-smoke, when Dick returned with an inspector and two constables, who proceeded solemnly to lift out the curios one by one, and by the light of their lanterns to make a careful note of each.

"I call this a funeral," said Dick. "Can't we bundle them all in the bags and get off to Foxenby? You're cheating Old Man Wykeham out of hours of joy by this game!"

"Sorry, Mr. Forge, but it must be done," said the inspector. "If the head-master misses anything that ought to be here, he'll know the burglars are to blame. Us police has to be particular. We has nasty things said about us sometimes."

In consequence of all this ceremony the moon had climbed much higher before the little party, having left a policeman to watch the cottage, moved laboriously down the hillside in the direction of Moston. Here a formal call had to be made at the police-station to report the thrilling discovery, after which a swift motor-car took Dick and the inspector up to the school.

The head-master had just risen from a frugal dinner, and was again engaged upon a task which had hitherto baffled his intensest efforts—that of piecing together in manuscript the descriptive details of the precious curios which had for so many weeks been missing.

So deeply engrossed was he in this exacting memory test that even the announcement of the inspector's coming conveyed little to his mind. Therefore, when the inspector and Dick came in, each bearing a heavy bag, he gazed at them with a lack-lustre eye, as though he imagined them to be commercial travellers arriving with samples of school books.

The inspector saluted. "Your missing property sir," he said. "Will you examine it, please, and compare it with the list made by me on the spot?"

Crash went the head-master's chair on the floor, and down amongst his manuscript went his glasses. With an almost juvenile bound he reached the bags, satisfied himself at a glance that the recovery was indeed genuine, and then turned to wring the inspector's hand effusively.

The inspector backed away as though he feared being kissed next.

"Don't thank me, sir; you owe it all to Mr. Forge here. It was he who put us on the right track."

In official phrases he gave the Head particulars of the discovery, with results that embarrassed Dick, who had never quite "hit it" with "Old Man Wykeham", and was always more or less ill-at-ease in his presence. This was not surprising, seeing that everybody knew the Head would have preferred Luke Harwood as Captain of the School.

"A thousand thanks, Forge! Oh, bless my soul, boy, where's my handkerchief—I must dab my eyes—I verily believe I am shedding tears of joy, Inspector. Forge, dear lad—I'm the happiest man in England to-day. All my precious curios are here, and with scarcely a scratch on them. What could have possessed the burglars to dump them down under the floor of that disused cottage?"

"Probably their pockets would be stuffed with stolen silver and notes, sir," the inspector suggested, "and, finding us hot on their trail, they decided to hide your coins and things till the hue and cry had died down. They'll come nosing back for 'em, sir, as sure as fate. Then we shall nab them, as we mean to leave officers concealed there day and night."

"It is all very exciting—I feel mentally upside down. Dear me, how very ungrateful you will think me, too. I was forgetting the reward. For the recovery of my collection I offered fifty pounds—a mere bagatelle compared with their value to me. Priceless treasures! My Charles the First slip-top spoons in particular—I fretted badly over those, and here they are, safe and sound. Forge, the reward is yours, and right well deserved, too. Take a seat, dear boy, while I write out your cheque."

"No, no, sir, nothing of the kind!" Dick hastened to say. "If the reward must be paid, it should go to Fluffy Jim, the half-witted village youth. But for him, the collection might not have been found. He took me straight to it."

"That's true, Mr. Wykeham," interposed the inspector; "but Daft Jim would never have thought of taking up the floor-boards. He was merely amusing himself with the music, as he called it. The credit is really Mr. Forge's, sir."

"You have all acted splendidly," the Head said. "There is no need at all for splitting hairs. I am fairly well-to-do, Inspector, as you doubtless know, and the total loss of my invaluable collection would have blighted the hopes of a

lifetime. Forge shall have his fifty pounds (silence, my boy—I insist!), you and your staff shall hear from me later, Inspector, and Jim's parents shall receive a sufficient recognition of his services to enable them to purchase warm clothing and substantial comforts for him.

"It is," he added, after a pause, "the very least I can do in grateful acknowledgment of my amazing good fortune. I am only sorry that I alone should have benefited, and that nobody else's property appears to have been recovered. That's particularly hard lines on you, Forge, who lost so much in cash. May I hope that you will now resume the publication of your bright little house magazine?"

Dick looked hard at the cheque in his hand. It seemed as though he were playing a part in a stage play—that he would awake to find it a dream.

"I should like to start the *Rag* again, sir, but better luck will be needed next time."

The Head laughed joyously. "No more burglaries here, I trust! You'll see to that, won't you, Inspector? And Forge, remember this, if ever you get into difficulties again, be more confiding about them and come to me. I think I can promise you that the *Rooke's House Rag* will never again cease publication for lack of funds."

## CHAPTER XIX

## Roger returns to Brighter Skies

Immediately after breakfast the Head called the boys together in the hall and gave them a graphic account of the recovery of his collection, praising the blushing captain sky-high. Then he gave the school a holiday, and topped it by declaring that "some very special dainties" would be provided for supper that night.

It was a red-letter day all round. Robin Hood and his Merry Men held high revelry in the Forest, and even called a truce with the Squirms so that there might be no shadow on the day's sunshine.

They were not tempted from grace, either, by the red-rag irritation of Peter Mawdster's presence. That sick and sorry youth took advantage of the holiday to slip down home, and, for some reason never publicly explained, he was seen at Foxenby no more. Possibly his doting parents decided to remove him to a less robust and more genteel atmosphere than that which Foxenby afforded. Anyhow, his disappearance had no more effect on the school than the swift death of a midge in a summer thunderstorm.

Dick took his fifty-pound cheque to the head-master's bank and withdrew thirty-five pounds of it, leaving the remainder on deposit in his own name. Then he hunted up "Chuck" Smithies, who was amusing himself by turning over a portfolio of old sporting prints.

"Hallo, sonny! Come to tell me how you ticked off that jelly-fish, Aaron Mawdster, yesterday afternoon? I can see by your face that you wrung the low-down animal's withers for him!"

"Thanks to you, I metaphorically mopped him up," said Dick.

The bookmaker roared with laughter over Dick's unvarnished account of the printing-office interview, in which the captain had seen nothing particularly funny at the time.

"You rattled the hypocrite's teeth with a rasping upper-cut there, lad," said Smithies. "Oh, I'll laugh till I cry! Threatening to expose him as a blackmailer got right through his sanctimonious guard. He'd dread that. You could have bowled him out with it, whether you'd paid him or not."

"I paid him, though. He took all you lent me and some odd shillings besides."

"Exactly what he would do, the dirty blighter! But here, I say, what are you trying on, youngster? Repaying me already?" He stared almost resentfully at the thirty-five pounds which Dick laid before him. "Been picking paper-money off trees, kid, or what is it? Pardon me if I seem dazed, but——"

"Please take it, Smithies. I'd the luck of a lifetime yesterday." Briefly Dick

described his moonlit trip to the hills with Fluffy Jim, and what came of it. "So, you see, I can repay your kind loan with a balance in hand."

What seemed distinctly like a shade of annoyance crossed the bookmaker's face. "Sonny, we parted on good terms yesterday—don't strew tacks under the wheel of friendship to-day. Am I Shylock, that you should plunk down a fiver for a day's interest on thirty pounds? I'll take back what I lent you and not a penny more."

Dick felt rather foolish. "But you said it was a business transaction," he replied, defensively. "I'm most awfully sorry if I've unwittingly hurt your feelings—do please forgive me for being such a clown. I—I only thought it would be rather nice to make you a little friendly acknowledgment of your great kindness."

"Well, you've put it on the wrong footing, youngster, that's all. 'Business transaction' was my camouflage for it. Just a loan to oblige a pal—which it did, thank goodness, in putting you top-side of Aaron Mawdster yesterday. There, now, take no notice of my bluster—I'm only kidding. Take back your fiver and give me instead a little souvenir of the occasion—one I rather fancy."

"Whatever it is, it's yours, Smithies," Dick eagerly agreed.

"A photograph of yourself in football togs—this size—to fit into my portfolio of sporting cracks."

"The honour's mine there," said Dick. He bethought himself of Robin Arkness's autograph-book, and smiled. "You're putting me early into the gallery of Fame! I hate being photographed, Smithies, but you shall have the picture. Mr. Rooke will take it—he's a wizard with a camera."

"That'll suit me down to the ground, sonny. It'll be a nice memento to put beside a photograph of the football cup, which you're sure to win next time.

"For," added the bookmaker inwardly, as Dick left the office, "I'm taking no bets on that replay from Ike Doccan's dirty paw. If he wasn't acting for a few schoolboys who meant Foxenby no good, I'll eat my go-to-meeting suit of clothes."

Dick had swung happily half-way back to school when he observed Robin

Arkness running towards him breathlessly. The Junior waved at him an orange-coloured envelope.

"A telegram for you, Forge," he announced. "I saw you come down here, so I risked bringing it along."

"Jolly decent of you, youngster—thanks," said Dick, trying to behave as though telegrams were an everyday event with him, though his pulse was rapid as he opened the envelope and read its contents.

"Kid, what splendid news you've brought me! Cayton is coming back to school by the midday train, and wants me to meet him. We've just time to celebrate it. Come and have a lemonade or something."

The "something" spread itself out into quite a classy midday feed for Robin, who, having done himself proud at the smiling captain's expense, hurried back to school to scatter envy among his less fortunate comrades. It was then time for the train, which brought with it a paler but much-happier-looking Roger than the anxious prefect who left Foxenby in December.

"Why, Roger, old boy," said Dick, when they had treated themselves to a very fervent handshake, "I expected to see you a limping crock, looking justifiably sorry for yourself, yet you're laughing all across your face and half-way down your back. Does being feverishly ill buck a chap up so much as all that?"

"Dear old Dick, I meant to keep it dark till we were locked in our study to-night, but I simply can't hold it in. It's ripping tidings I've got for you—top-hole!"

"Judging by your beaming countenance, it must be."

"Laddie, it's great! I'm no longer a 'deadhead', financially speaking, in the *Rooke's House Rag* partnership. I can go shares in the cost, whatever it is. I've made money—I'm a professional author!"

"No, never! Get away with your nonsense, Roger!"

"It's sober truth, old Doubting Thomas. I've a savings-bank book in my pocket, showing that twenty guineas is standing to my credit. And every penny of that was made by writing—I've the proofs of the series of sketches in my

pocket, and you and I are going to correct them together to-night!"

He had an enraptured and admiring auditor in Dick as he explained how, determined to do his bit towards making good the loss of the *Rag's* subscription-money, he had conceived the idea of writing a dialect sketch descriptive of the quaint customs and mannerisms of his own village. By great good fortune the simple humour of it had caught the fancy of the first editor to whom he offered it. "Send me eleven more brief sketches in the same vein," wrote the editor, "and I'll pay you twenty guineas for the dozen."

It was, Roger admitted, a staggering commission, and ultimately it overweighted him. What with tramping about in search of "local colour" in the daytime, and then sitting up secretly at nights in order to transfer his thoughts to paper, he broke down, and only just finished the job in time—indeed, he had no recollection of actually posting the series, and was only certain he had done so when, a few days before returning to school, he had received the promised cheque in payment.

"There was absolutely nothing in them, old chap—the simplest stuff you could imagine. I said as much to the editor-chap, who replied that their simplicity was their charm. I just jotted down the fairy-stories of the district, and described the funny folk who told them, and it clicked."

"You're a wise old bird, Roger," said Dick, almost worshipping this revelation of his chum's intellect. "I shall put a special paragraph in the new *Rag* about all this—yes, I shall—I'm editor-in-chief, so you can't stop me. Now, it's *your* turn to listen to *me*, and I think my tale about even beats yours, old lad!"

An opinion which Roger emphatically confirmed when, despite many excited interruptions from him, Dick had completed the yarn.

"Great!" commented Roger. "A thrill from beginning to end. Isn't it strange how things work out? Grand bit of compensation that Fluffy Jim, after spoiling your goal, should put that fifty-pound reward right under your nose. Rough gratitude for your services in snatching him from Juddy Stockgill's clutches, though he only meant to show you his 'cottage musical-box'."

They spent a happy afternoon in their study, exchanging confidences over the fire concerning almost everything that had happened during their enforced separation. One thing, and one thing only, did Dick keep from Roger, and that

was his suspicion that Luke Harwood had had some hand in messing up the final tie. He wanted to bring an unprejudiced mind to that subject when he discussed it with Luke, which he fully intended to do at the first opportunity.

By dusk Roger knew nearly as much about Foxenby's affairs as if illness had not kept him away. He was sympathetic about the misfortune that had overtaken Dick's aunt, but rather thought that he would personally be able to make up for any loss of pocket-money in that direction by writing more sketches for the Press. Which shows how little success is needed to make an amateur author vain.

"The *Rag* must come out again," he said, "and that right speedily. The firm that prints the *Foxonian* shall do it for us this time—they're clean and above reproach."

"Right you are," said Dick. "I'm game. In an hour the fellows will be trooping in to supper which the Old Man is making a toothsome event to-night. On their way they'll pass the notice-board."

And thus it happened that, after a happy day of unexpected liberty, the Foxes were able to read more sympathetically than they would have done a day or two before, the following intimation on the hall notice-board:—

*THE ROOKE'S HOUSE RAG*

> The Editors of the above Magazine have pleasure in informing its readers that its publication will be resumed within the course of a few weeks.
>
> It is hoped to introduce some new features of special interest in the forthcoming number.
>
> Richard Forge, }
> Roger Cayton, } Editors.

## CHAPTER XX

# The Tourist who talked Poetry

In the matter of freedom from irksome boundaries Foxenby was a school to be envied.

Moston, certainly, could not be visited at any time without permission, nor were the boys allowed to roam the rocky and dangerous seashore at their own sweet will; but to the north-west of the school there were great stretches of kindly moorland over which they could wander without coming to any harm, and they were given every chance to imbibe the ozone of the hills at week-ends and on holidays.

Shrove Tuesday, with its generous supply of pancakes, usually tended towards languor, and most of the Squirms remained indoors to sleep off their too-liberal helpings. The sound of their snoring, as they sprawled about on the furniture of the common-room, disgusted Robin Arkness.

"Oh, I say, my Merry Men, we can't stick this," he said. "Hear how the pigs grunt."

"It's like being in a farm-yard," remarked Flenton.

"Shall we stir the porkers up with our trusty cross-bows—yclept, these pea-shooters—and then engage them in mortal combat? Nay, in this sottish state they are not worthy foemen. Right about turn, boys. We will hie us up yonder hills for an afternoon's ramble."

"Ay, ay, good Robin," the Merry Men readily agreed.

It was a clear, frosty day, and even the bright sun shine did little to neutralize the sharp nip in the air. It meant moving briskly to keep the blood in circulation; the higher they climbed, the keener blew the breeze.

"Ripping way to get warm, doing the 'Excelsior' stunt up this hillside," said Robin enthusiastically. "See that cottage in front of the fir trees, Men? That's where Forge found Old Man Wykeham's valuables."

"By Jove, let's have a squint inside it," Little John suggested.

"Softly, my faithful henchman! Dost thou not know that this self-same cottage is guarded, night and day, by the myrmidons of the law?"

"But the coppers won't interfere with us. They know we're all from Foxenby, and mean no harm. Come on!"

"Nay hold! Thou art my right-hand man, Little John, and many a time and oft have I had cause to be thankful for the doughty assistance of thy strong right arm. But methinks thou art far from possessing the wisdom of a Socrates."

"Go on, call me a blinking ass and have done with it," said Flenton, rather ruefully.

"No offence, my trusty bowman. Canst thou not see, however, that to enter the cottage boldly will be to bring down on our helpless heads the wrath of the police? They are not in the cottage itself, but hidden amongst the gorse-bushes, ready to pounce on the thieves if they venture inside."

"Oh, pot it, must we go back then?"

"Perish the thought! Never let it be said that Robin Hood and his Merry Men turned their backs on any peril, however dire. We will creep round them with stealthy, noiseless tread, and see if the varlets are doing their duty as nobly as they should, or, like the greedy Squirms, merely sleeping off the effects of pancakes."

The suggestion, though not so much to the Merry Men's liking as Flenton's projected exploration of the cottage, nevertheless held promise of a little mild adventure, and they acted on it. Creeping from bush to bush with scarcely a sound, they came at last in sight of two plain-clothes policemen, dressed as builder's labourers, sitting on some dried bracken-leaves, and looking anything but gay.

Probably they had been forbidden to speak, for they were conversing rather guiltily in low tones, the burden of their complaint being that though they had pipes and tobacco in their pockets they dared not light them.

"This is a daft and perishin' job," said one of them. "I'd like to wring the neck

of Fluffy Jim for stumbling across them pewter pots and coins."

"Nay, that's ungrateful," retorted his mate. "We each got a quid of Old Wykeham's money out of the job."

"Bah! It'll cost me more than any quid to sweat this cold out of my bones. My teeth chatter like a baboon's. Got a drop or two left in your flask, Sam?"

"Drained it dry half-an-hour since, Bill."

"And it'll be two more floggin' hours afore we're relieved from duty. I'm fed up. I'll resign from the Force, pension or no pension, and take to navvyin'."

"No use, Bill. Once a policeman, always a policeman. It's in the blood."

"There's nowt i' my blood just now but icicles, Sam. Where's the use of this night-and-day vigil, anyhow? Although the recovery of the treasure was kept out of the newspapers, it's quite likely the cracksmen will have got wind of it by this, and won't come near."

"Won't they! I reckon they will. What troubles me is how they're goin' to be nabbed when they do. It'll be two policemen against four thieves, mebbe, and they're sure to have the latest thing in quick-firing revolvers."

"Oh, drop that! You make me creepy, Sam, all up t'spine. I've got a wife and childer, and don't want to die just yet."

"Might be better to be shot dead than to peg out o' frost-bite, anyhow. Here, I say, Bill, have a glance down the hill—careful, now! Who's this queer-looking image crawling up towards us?"

"Why, only one o' them tourist cranks that walks round here in all weathers. Got half-a-vanful of tin mugs and spare socks strapped on his back, you'll notice. Loads himself up like a pack-horse and calls it sport."

"He's waddlin' this way. What shall we do if he stops to talk?"

"Talk back, of course; anything for a change."

The perspiring tourist dropped his stick at the sight of the two men and

started back nervously.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. "Pardon me—I didn't notice you. Like me, you are lovers of Nature, and are drinking the sweet nectar of this gorgeous hill-air into your lungs."

Both the plain-clothes men looked as if they'd much prefer to be drinking beer, but they grunted by way of reply. Unabashed, the tourist unstrapped his knapsack, and sat upon it. Then he wiped his brow on a dingy red handkerchief, and stroked an iron-grey beard as he gazed dreamily towards the sea.

"I was told that I must on no account miss the view from the top of the hill—the grandest aspect on the East Coast," he said. "It is, indeed, a joy to look upon it.

> "'This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle....
> This precious stone set in the silver sea',

as Shakespeare truly says. Ah, what a rich and rare delight it is to be alive on such a day as this!"

Sam touched his forehead significantly as he looked at Bill.

"Barmy!" Bill's answering glance seemed to say.

"Ah! New life courses through my all-too-sluggish veins to-day. For ever have I done with the softening influence of the fireside.

> "'Better to hunt in fields for health unbought
> Than fee the doctor for a nauseous draught.'

What do you say, friends? Surely you realize the great boon that is yours in being able to spend so much of your lives in such an enchanted spot?"

This was rubbing it in with a vengeance, and Bill could keep silence no longer.

"You can cart the bloomin' landscape away with you, if you like, sir," he said. "We're dead sick of bein' anchored to it."

"God bless my soul! Just think of that!" cried the tourist.

> "'Breathes there a man with soul so dead
> Who never to himself hath said,
> This is my own, my native land?'

Good fellows, you take my breath away. You have made me feel the need of refreshment. With your indulgence, I will consume a sandwich."

He produced a packet of sandwiches, extracted one and demolished it with evident relish, quoting poetry all the time about the beauties of meat and drink. Two more sandwiches followed the first, and then, unscrewing the top of a flask, he set it to his lips and drank.

And what a thirst he had. What ample accommodation for liquor! Not once did he remove the flask from his mouth until the contents had gurgled down his throat. Even then he seemed reluctant to admit that he had drained the last drop, for he glanced into the recesses of the flask with a wistful and still-thirsty eye.

"Greedy beggar!" muttered Bill to Sam. "Never even offered us a 'wet', and us half-frozen to death!"

Whether the tourist heard this whispered comment or not was problematical, but he seemed suddenly to become aware that two pairs of eyes were fixed upon him yearningly. He jumped up with an apologetic air.

"Please forgive me," he said. "Really, you will think me most impolite. Permit me to offer you a sandwich each. Nay, take two apiece. Don't be afraid of them; they won't bite you."

"Then we'll bite them, thankee, sir," said Sam, proceeding to find the sandwiches a good home within his hungry anatomy.

Between them, the plain-clothes men, urged to do so by the tourist, polished off the sandwiches. Then they drew the backs of their hands across their mouths and sighed.

"Satisfied?" queried the tourist, laughingly.

"Never enjoyed a bit o' grub so much in my life," said Bill.

"Ditto," said Sam. "If any fault could be found, there was a bit too much salt in 'em. Conducive to thirst rather."

"Now, isn't that vexing?" said the tourist. "If only I had thought of you before emptying the flask! There isn't a house of refreshment within miles."

"We couldn't go to it if there was," Bill began, and then bit his lip as Sam violently nudged him to be silent.

"Ah, I have it!" the tourist cried. "Wait a moment till I unstrap my knapsack. I have a little flask in there which I keep in reserve. It contains some rather fine old cognac—an excellent pick-me-up. If I might offer you a draught of that—but perhaps you are teetotal?"

"Not on your dreamy eyes," said Bill, with unconcealed eagerness.

"We'll be glad of a wee reviver, thankee, sir," said the more tactful Sam. "It's a cold job waiting here for the—for the boss."

"You're very truly welcome, gentlemen." So saying, the tourist half-filled the top of the empty flask with some of the contents of the smaller one. "Which of you drinks first?"

Bill's impoliter hand stretched farthest, and it was he who first had the delight of smacking his lips over the spirit. Excellent it must have been, for his countenance glowed.

"Fit for a king, guv'nor," he pronounced it. "It's gingered up every nook and cranny of me."

"Powerful stuff, certainly," the tourist agreed. "I only touch it now and again, when feeling rather fagged. Your turn now, my friend."

Sam, more studious of the correct manner, sipped his cognac appreciatively.

"Better stuff than that never warmed the cockles of a man's heart, sir," he said. "I'm main obliged to you, for sure."

The tourist gazed into his flask with a measuring eye.

"I think I might safely spare another wee drappie," he said. "Feel like another drain, either of you?"

They both declared they did—Bill with emphasis, Sam with faint reluctance.

The tourist obliged them. Then, conveniently blind to the doglike pleading of Bill's enamoured eye, he screwed up the flask and returned it to his knapsack.

"Gives me a Good Samaritan-like feeling to see you both so refreshed," he said. "I must be getting farther on now, though I could stay till sunset in the enraptured contemplation of this ideal view. How sweetly the moon and stars will rise o'er yonder sea.

> "'Silently, one by one, in the infinite meadows of Heaven
> Blossomed the lovely stars,'"

he quoted, with many theatrical gestures.

"You seem to know a wonderful lot of poetry, sir," said Sam, with the inward reservation that this generous stranger was certainly something of a harmless lunatic.

"I could speak verse to you for hours, friend—beautiful stuff from all the greatest poets, living and dead. Will it interest you at all if I recite a page or two from Homer's *Iliad* or from Byron's *Childe Harold*?"

Both Sam and Bill would have preferred a page or two from a sporting paper, but the rich spirit, so unfamiliar to their palates, had made them amiably disposed towards the eccentric tourist, and quite ready to humour his whims.

"Give it mouth, guv'nor," said Bill, settling himself down in the dried bracken again.

"Fire away, sir," said Sam.

And "fire away" the stranger did, spouting yards of rigmarole which the two plain-clothes men tried in vain to follow. To them, it was duller even than the prosiest magisterial speeches they had ever heard in Court. It made them sleepy; they could scarcely refrain from yawning in his face.

Bill kept closing his eyes, and each time he remembered himself it took a still greater effort to open them again. Sam, too, grew drowsier and drowsier. The sound of the reciter's voice appeared to become muffled and distant; was he wound up for the day—would he never stop?

"That'll do, guv'nor," Bill protested at last. "Had—'bout 'nuff of it. Can't keep awake—if you go on—much—longer."

"'Ear, 'ear, Bill," murmured Sam, forgetting to be polite. "Them's my—sentiments—'xactly."

"Old gasbag, I—calls—him," grunted Bill.

Those were the last words either of them spoke that afternoon. Rolling over, almost simultaneously, on the bracken, they lay there in a stupor, breathing heavily, lost to all about them, deaf at last to the droning tones of the reciter.

"Hallo! They've dropped off," said the tourist. His voice held no hint of wounded pride—rather did it seem eloquent of satisfaction. He leaned over the sleepers and shook them violently in turn. Their heads waggled to and fro, but neither took any heed.

"Absolutely doped," the stranger muttered. "Given them an over-dose, perhaps, but that can't be helped. Now for the rest of the performance."

Moving now with remarkable speed for so elderly-looking a man, he drew from his knapsack a couple of flags, one red, one white, and ran with them to the very crest of the hill. Then he made some rapid signals, waited half-a-minute as though for an answer, and semaphored again. Apparently satisfied, he returned to the spot where the two plain-clothes policemen snored, and stood over them, watch in hand.

"The car will be up in two minutes," he said, softly. "Bravo, Cyrus the Poet! Thou hast done thy work well."

## CHAPTER XXI

# The Merry Men win Glory

Mice could have been little quieter than Robin Hood and his Merry Men during the whole of the passages between the two plain-clothes policemen and the talkative stranger.

Almost bursting with mirth at first, they followed Robin's example by stuffing their handkerchiefs into their mouths to stifle their laughter.

The fact that the afternoon was cold for crouching about amongst bushes did not concern them—they had watched football on much colder days. What was an occasional shiver compared with such undiluted amusement as this? How glad they were then that they had taken Robin's advice to conceal themselves, instead of blundering into the empty cottage at Little John's fatheaded suggestion.

Later, agog with excitement, they had something to do to hold their tongues, as it became evident to most of them that the stranger was playing a dirty trick on the two disguised policemen. Robin got out of his pocket a scrap of paper and wrote on it the one word "drugged". This was passed from hand to hand, and all the Merry Men nodded in agreement.

There was need of his strong and quick leadership, too, when the stranger's flag-signalling began. Again using paper as an agent, Robin pencilled a few directions to Flenton, who handed the slip to the three other boys mentioned on it. He and this trio were the sturdiest runners in the Junior school, and their instructions were to steal quietly off by the Bramble Path, known to the Foxes as the easiest descent other than the roadway, and, while taking care not to be seen, reach the police-station as speedily as possible and inform the Chief Constable of the strange things that were happening. The Bramble Path was a narrow sunken track that wound steeply down the hillside through closely-growing brambles and bushes. It afforded a first-rate hidden escape from the neighbourhood of the cottage for the Foxes, who were not without practice in the art of moving silently and taking advantage of cover.

Meanwhile, Robin did some furious thinking. He calculated the chances of a

successful attack upon the sham tourist, but abandoned that idea as melodramatic, not to say dangerous. Moreover, he had been near enough to overhear what the stranger said about the swift coming of a car, and where, he reflected, would be the sense of tackling one offender, when there might be three or four others in league with him?

Robin had the gumption to see that a battle with grown men, most probably armed, on this lonely moorland, would be a very different thing indeed from a wild rough-and-tumble with the Squirms in Foxenby's Forest. This was no cinema rehearsal, but a grimly realistic piece of business, with which no Fourth Form schoolboys had the strength to grapple. Whatever was done, therefore, must be accomplished by silent strategy.

Motioning the Merry Men to remain quietly in their somewhat cramped positions, he waited with fast-beating heart until the throbbing of a motor-engine indicated that the expected car was climbing the hill. Half-a-minute later the car drew up, and two small, thick-set men, each carrying what appeared to be ordinary travelling-bags, hurriedly joined the verse-reciting stranger.

"Why the deuce did you keep us waiting so long?" irritably inquired one of them. "Wasn't the coast clear?"

The "tourist" pointed to the two drugged men on the ground.

"I stumbled across this typical pair of British working-men sitting here as though they'd taken root—waiting for their boss to come, they said. Probably they were going to start pulling the cottage down. I had to win their confidence and dope them, as you see. Of course, it took time."

"Bully for you, Cyrus!" was the admiring admission. "You're sure they're safe?"

"Try them. See this."

The poet turned one of the policemen half over and let him roll back with a thud. The drugged man snored on.

"That's all right. Now let's hurry up with the job before their boss does come, what?"

They all three disappeared into the cottage.

Robin wasted not a moment. Already, by means of another slip of paper, he had arranged with Dave what to do. As swiftly as they dared the pair ran to the waiting and unattended motor-car. Each had his penknife ready. Robin selected a front wheel and Dave a back one. Rapidly they plunged their knives up to the hilt a few times into the tyres.

"That'll settle 'em," whispered Robin, triumphantly. "Now, let's have all the Merry Men creep farther back from the danger-zone. We've got to see this thing through."

A few of the less-adventurous spirits "got the wind up" and made off down the Bramble Path, but Robin was not sorry to see them go, particularly as they were careful to make no noise. In the last resource, if the security of the remainder were threatened, they, too, could make themselves scarce by the same convenient route.

Barely another minute had elapsed before a medley of very hard swearing proceeded from the interior of the cottage. It had not taken long to wrench up the boards, which the police had nailed down again after forge's discovery, and the thieves were doubtless feeling as Mother Hubbard did when she opened the bare cupboard door. These particularly dirty dogs had not even a bone to console themselves with, either!

For reasons dictated by prudence, however, the thieves quickly stopped their angry noise, and came darting out of the cottage in a violent hurry. Into the motor-car they leapt, the bearded reciter proving the sprightliest of the three. It was a self-starting car of a first-class make, and ought to have bounded forward at a touch of the driver's hand. Instead, it tottered jerkily for a few yards, causing the driver to draw up with a frightened oath.

"Punctured, by jingo!" he cried. "One of those confounded gorse-thorns must have jabbed itself into us as we rushed up the incline. Outside, chaps! Quick! Lift off the spare wheel and let's have it fixed. Those fellows behind there may be waking presently."

"Here it is, on this side—the front wheel!" cried the reciter. "All together, boys, and we'll have her on in a jiffy!"

The urgency of the occasion speeded their efforts, and soon they were ready for re-starting. But yet another bitter disappointment awaited them.

"Confound it, the old bus won't get a move on even now!" snarled the driver. "What in thunder's amiss with her?"

They stared at each other in blank dismay for a moment. Then out jumped the driver again, and his voice had a note of dread in it as he called out that the rear wheel was punctured too.

"Impossible!" said the reciter, "an unheard-of thing!"

"See for yourself, idiot!" snapped the driver. "It's no thorn puncture, either. Somebody's shoved a knife into the tyre. Here's a hole—clean cut."

The other two made a rapid examination of the tyre and came to the same conclusion.

"But who the blazes could have done it?" queried the reciter. "Not those two sots behind us. I doped them too well; they're snoring still."

"The repair outfit, quick," the driver commanded. "Willy nilly, we've got to mend this tyre or foot it, and on Shanks' pony we may not be so lucky this time. Somebody—goodness knows who—is aware we are here, and has slashed us up. It's the car or nothing for us, now."

With feverish haste they applied every art of which they were capable to the repair of the tyre. But not all the mechanical skill in the world can perform miracles, and there is no royal road to tyre-mending. Minutes that were precious to the trio slipped by, and, though they encountered no set-back in their task, it nevertheless seemed an endless one. Therefore, their nerves had reached a pitch of high tension when the unmistakable sound of a swiftly-moving car caught their startled ears.

"What's this?" said the driver anxiously. "Who could need to be driving up here, and at dusk, too?"

"You're easily rattled, Dodger," sneered Cyrus the Poet. "Most probably it's the car of a local doctor, called out to some yokel with a stomach-ache."

"I'm not so sure," the driver said. "Things don't look healthy. I vote we hop it. The swag's gone—the car's crocked—it's bad luck to hang around here."

He proved a true prophet. Just as he finished speaking the other car glided swiftly into view, and was upon them before they could stir. Half a dozen men seemed literally to jump out of it upon the shoulders of the trio. They were men, too, of powerful north-country build, almost ox-like in their strength, and the three thieves had about as much chance amongst them as rats in the mouths of trained dogs. They had time to make only the faintest show of fight before they were lifted bodily into the capacious police-car, with hefty constables practically sitting on them to keep them quiet.

The game was up, and they resigned themselves to the inevitable. An inkling of the way in which they had been trapped dawned on them as the car started downhill, for from behind them there came the sound of a boyish cheer, which raised mocking echoes among the hills. And at least one of them—Cyrus the Poet, to wit, whose head was jammed uncomfortably against the door—caught a sight of a posse of schoolboys jumping joyfully down the hill, so that the secret of the slashed tyres, and the sudden police raid, was laid bare to him in the depths of his humiliation.

To the succour of the two drugged men the police-doctor came in his own car, wherein were also Flenton and the three swift-footed heroes who had raced into town at Robin's bidding. All the Merry Men went willingly back to assist in lifting the still-stupefied policemen, and, then, forming fours, they marched down the hill in a singing procession, and entered the school-yard with hoarse but happy shouts of triumph.

Thus, by a chain of fortunate circumstances, it had fallen to the lot of Foxenby's boys themselves to avenge the burglary at the school, and Old Man Wykeham's delight almost choked his utterance as he proudly announced to the assembled Foxes what Robin Arkness and his Merry Men had done. He promised them another special holiday at a reasonable interval after Shrove Tuesday, and made no protest against a particularly boisterous dormitory supper which the Juniors of both Houses arranged in honour of Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

"There'll be a trial now," said Roger to Dick, "and you, Robin Hood, and Fluffy Jim will be the star turns in the witness-box."

"By the ears of the school donkey, I'll be nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Dick. "You're deliberately trying to put the wind up me, Roger, you old fraud!"

"'Pon honour, Dick, I'm as serious as the Judge will be on that solemn occasion. They're bound to subpoena you as a witness. Probably I, too, will have to go."

"You can jolly well be my deputy," said Dick, with emphasis. "I should blush and fidget like a first-form kid reciting 'Casabianca' if they started quizzing me in a public court."

Roger was right, nevertheless. All three had to give evidence at the trial, and Robin Arkness, for one, showed a self-assurance which amused everybody but the prisoners. Nor could Dick have acquitted himself so badly as he feared, for the cracksmen, all of whom had given Scotland Yard trouble before, were sent to ponder over their errors in the cold seclusion of a convict prison, and it was quite possible that the picture of the lonely cottage on the moor would haunt their plank-bed dreams on many a fretful night to come.

## CHAPTER XXII

## Home Truths for Luke Harwood

"My dear Dick," wrote Aunt Bella, in a letter which Dick received a fortnight later, "you were cheery enough, and far-sighted enough, to assure me, when the clouds were blackest and thickest, that the sun would burst through them all. Your sturdy optimism heartened me immensely at the time, and saved me many hours of worry, which, as events have since proved, would have been sheer waste of nervous force.

"In short, my solicitor's brother, being as proud as he is rich, has taken to heart the blow to his family honour, and has insisted on refunding every penny of the money which his unfortunate relative embezzled. I say 'unfortunate' advisedly, because mental specialists have proved beyond doubt that my lawyer was insane during the period of his dishonest actions. He suffered from a form of legal kleptomania, all the stupider because he, too, had money of his own to play with, and had no need to toy with that of his trusting clients.

"In these circumstances I am not a penny out of pocket after all, and everything in the garden may be said to be lovely again. I had not, fortunately, had time to leave my beloved home, and my golf-clubs are in full swing again.

"I need scarcely say I read, with the utmost interest, the racy account you sent

me of your recent adventures (naughty boy, not to have told me of your troubles before). Particularly was I pleased with your graphic character-study of 'Chuck' Smithies, the bookmaker. His trade, as you remark, is a rotten one, but we cannot say the same of his big heart, which is as sound as a bell.

"Purely because he did so much to keep your head above water, I have sent him, anonymously, a few boxes of cigars, which won't, I know, poison him, because my brother Joe smokes the same brand (extravagant man!) and is still very much alive!

"But it is with even greater pleasure that I enclose herewith my donation to the *Rooke's House Rag*, the new issue of which I hope shortly to have the pleasure of laughing over.

"Keep yourself fiddle-fit for the re-played Final, Dick, boy, so that this time your hefty foot may on no account miss the target.

"Your chummy Aunt,
"BELLA."

The donation, of course, was liberal, and it really seemed as though the sun-rays of prosperity were doing their utmost to dazzle Dick's eyes of late.

The financial foundation of the *Rooke's House Rag* was now firm. Its new issue, fresh in style and throbbing with life, infected the school with the light-heartedness of its editors, and did something more to restore the Captain to the popularity which he had previously enjoyed. Boys love the hero of an adventure. His star was in the ascendant again, and as it rose, the star of Luke Harwood sank. Even the Head seemed to be losing interest in Luke, and "Wykeham's Pet Fox" felt that the title no longer fitted him as he roamed about the school, his uneasiness ill-concealed beneath his habitual mask of composure.

For weeks he had succeeded in avoiding close contact with Dick, there being a straight look of inquiry in the Captain's eyes whenever their glances met, which the Editor of the *Foxonian* found disturbing. But he could not for ever succeed in giving Dick a wide berth, and there came a time, shortly after a football practice, when the Captain stood directly in his path, and no one else was about to whom he could hang on for safety.

Making a virtue of necessity, therefore, he favoured Dick with a slow, sweet smile.

"Team seems in wonderful form just now—should make no mistake about the re-play," he commented.

"I'm not so sanguine as you appear to be, Harwood. Much depends on circumstances. We can't, for instance, afford such another nasty little accident as that which occurred in the last match."

"Most unfortunate, as I said in the *Foxonian* at the time," murmured Luke. "Still, who could have foreseen the freakish action of an idiot?"

"Was it a freakish action, do you think? Or did somebody quietly put him up to it?"

"Preposterous, Forge; most absurdly unlikely! No Fox could have whispered anything so stupid and harmful into the Village Idiot's ear."

"No Foxenby *boy* perhaps, but what was to prevent a grown-up fellow trying it on—Ike Doccan, for instance?"

The thrust was skilfully made, and its results exceeded Dick's hopes. Luke flushed to the eyes, only to lose his colour a moment later, looking pale indeed. He quickly regained his apparent serenity of manner, but Dick had seen quite enough in that one frightened look to convince him that it was worth while going on.

"I always believe in taking the bull by the horns, Harwood," he said, "and there's nobody to hear me if anything I say goes wide of the mark. In plain terms, then, why did Doccan egg on Fluffy Jim to spoil my last-minute goal at Walsbridge?"

"Ike Doccan blacks the boys' boots, and I am not accountable for his actions in or out of Holbeck's House," answered Luke. He was, to all appearances, his old calm self again.

"Harwood, you're fencing. In a duel of words I know I stand no show. Therefore, I make no bones about saying that I believe you and your select gang (inclusive of Ike Doccan) backed St. Cuthbert's to beat us in the Final tie."

"Forge, that is a monstrous charge to make—have a care!"

"Furthermore," went on Dick, "I believe that Ike Doccan was acting directly to your orders when he hoisted Fluffy Jim over the ropes to spoil my goal."

"Forge, I swear to you——"

"Shut up a minute—I know what you want to say. You didn't move a hand-stir in the rotten affair—of course not! You were far too crafty a skunk for that, so, after making a convenient guy of the Village Idiot, you hired a minion to do the rest of your dirty work for you. Deny it if you can!"

"It's all your imagination, Forge."

So meek and mild was the tone of this reply that the prefect of Holbeck's House might merely have been denying that he had been guilty of making a pun. Already he was edging furtively away, wishing, no doubt, that there were acres of green fields between him and this hard-eyed Captain of Foxenby.

"In other words," said Dick, "you call me a liar!"

"No, no, Forge!"

"Yes, yes, Harwood! Betting on a school match is bad enough—wagering against your own side is infinitely worse."

"You seem very certain of your facts!"

"I could prove them up to the hilt if necessary. But your shifty eyes are sufficient testimony for me. You can't look me straight in the face! You played your low-down game of bluff cunningly, Harwood, hunting magazine subscriptions for me, 'soft-soaping' my *Rag*, fooling me with your tongue in your cheek! And all the time (how clearly I see it now) you were scheming in secret to pull me down—to jockey me out of the Captaincy and set yourself up in my place."

"You're a liar!" cried Harwood, stung at last into open defiance by this keen home-thrust.

"Thanks," said Dick. "That's more sporting of you. Look out for your eye

now!"

Out shot the Captain's fist, and down to the grass went Harwood, with the marks of Dick's knuckles on his cheek.

"Now, Harwood, lift yourself up and let's have it out once and for all. Don't stay sprawling there—that little tap can't have hurt you. What, aren't you going to fight? Come along, man!"

"I'm having no more, thanks," Harwood replied, in the tremulous voice of a craven. "Fighting's no sort of fun for me. I'm out of condition—you're as hard as nails."

"Well, of all the beastly funks—pooh, Harwood, what a first-class rotter you are! I wish I hadn't gone for you—it's a waste of powder and shot. Luckless Holbeck's to have a worm like you as a prefect! Get up and don't be scared. I wouldn't touch you again with a pole!"

Saved by this contemptuous promise from further violence, Luke rose groggily to his feet, making a great pretence of being badly shaken.

"Drop swinging the lead, Harwood, and listen to me a minute. The date of the re-played Final has been fixed. The game will be at Walsbridge as before. But you won't be there, Harwood. Neither will Doccan, nor any other of your gambling clique. You'll find some excuse for not going, all of you—understand?"

"But how can I promise for anybody save myself, Forge?"

"You arranged matters to your liking before—it will be just as easy to do it again. For the good of the school, you and your gang have got to be missing. We shall breathe cleaner air in your absence."

"But——" began Harwood, desperately.

"Promise, or take a hiding, whichever you prefer."

"No need to make a scene, Forge; I'll manage it somehow."

Dick laughed scornfully. "I thought you would. Go now, and be quick about

it. I'd rather not be seen within half a mile of you!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

## A Merry Man's Magazine

In the mind of the Captain of Foxenby there lingered pleasantly the riddles he had heard at the Robin Hood concert. Some of them would, he thought, make a bright addition to the fun columns of *The Rooke's House Rag*, but it was necessary first to get the author's permission to print them.

While crossing the yard with Roger he caught sight of Robin Arkness, and gripped that mercurial youngster by the arm.

"Say, kid, you're a dandy riddle-maker. It'll be decent of you if you'll let me put a few of those Foxenby conundrums in the next number of *The Rag*."

Robin coloured, took off his cap, and nervously ran his fingers through his yellow hair.

"They weren't my riddles, Forge," he stammered. "I got 'em from—from somewhere."

"Not from a book," said Forge. "They were slap-bang up-to-date stuff, poking excellent fun at us. Really, now, you don't mind if I publish a few of them, do you?"

There was an awkward silence. Robin cast two or three quick glances at Roger, who frowned back at him and shook his head. In this action he was detected by Dick, who looked from one to the other in dawning comprehension.

"Now I smell a rat!" he exclaimed. "Roger, you sly old fox, how many of those riddles did you write?"

Robin and Roger saw this time that the cat was too far out of the bag to be replaced. Both giggled rather foolishly, while the Captain laughed at them.

"Cut away, Robin," said Roger. "Keep everything squat still. Better to leave them guessing."

Robin pelted away willingly, glad to be relieved of the secret which he and the prefect had shared. The riddles had been so much talked about, and he had been so closely questioned concerning them, that the sudden fame thrust upon him had become embarrassing.

Still, he had enjoyed the sensation for a time, and an idea struck him now which thrilled him suddenly with excitement.

"Why," said Robin to himself, "shouldn't the Merry Men have a jolly old magazine all to themselves? Not a big printed thing, of course, like the *Foxonian* or the *Rag*. Just pocket-size, so that a fellow could slip it inside his Latin grammar and read it in school hours."

No grass ever had the chance to grow long under Robin's feet. At once he called a meeting of the Merry Men in the quietest corner of Rooke's House, and put his proposal before them with infectious enthusiasm.

"Champion!" Little John voted the idea.

"It's a winner, Robin!" said David of Doncaster.

"I'll write a serial for it," said Allan a Dale.

"I'll draw some coloured butterflies," said the Miller.

"Put me down for some pictures of wild animals," said the Tinker. "I live in Regent's Park, outside the Zoo."

"Don't be bashful," observed Dave. "Say *inside* it, Tinker."

Several other Merry Men promised contributions, varying from ghost stories to verses on skylarks and redbreasts. Almost all were full of zeal, and Robin glowed with proud anticipation as he saw, in imagination, his new magazine packed with gems of literature and art.

"What'll you call it, Robin?" asked Little John.

"Why, the *Merry Men's Magazine*, of course," answered Robin. They all agreed that no title could be better.

"How much will you charge for it?" somebody asked.

Ah, that was an important question! It was nearing the middle of the term, and the coins still remaining in some of the Merry Men's pockets were feeling a draught.

"Nixie," said Robin. "There'll be no subscription."

"Oh, come off it, Robin! Printing's dear and paper's dear."

"I can cadge some paper," said Robin. "And printing will cost nothing. We'll print it ourselves."

"I say, this sounds exciting!" said Little John. "With one of those rubber printing-presses, eh, Robin? I love messing about with those."

"I don't," said Dave. "It's all right making up the lines, but what about putting the type back in its place afterwards? That gets skipped."

"Don't worry," said Robin. "When I said 'print', I meant pen-print. The magazine will consist of thirty-six small sheets of paper, pocket-size. Each Merry Man will write or draw his contribution on a sheet of the paper, and hand it back to me within two days. I'll then fasten the sheets together and pass the 'Mag' from boy to boy in the Form. No reader will be allowed to keep it longer than a day. Otherwise, it wouldn't go the rounds before the term-end."

Though some of them may have felt that this was not a very practical scheme they withheld their criticism, accepted sheets of unruled paper from Robin, and went to seek inspiration in the most secluded spot available.

A day or so later contributions started rolling in, and Robin began to realise how much more trouble than joy there is in the life of an editor.

Allan a Dale's serial gave him a topping send-off. It was called "King of the Road", and concerned a highwayman whose adventures had those of Dick

Turpin beaten to a frazzle. This gentleman, proudly calling himself "Helter-skelter Hal", chivied a coachful of fat politicians over a cliff, made a king stand on his head in a snowdrift, held up three stage-coaches simultaneously with two pistols, rescued a maiden in distress by hauling her through a carriage-window and riding with her across a tree that bridged a raging torrent, and then attacked single-handed, and put to flight, a score or more armed footpads who were robbing the Governor of the Bank of England. Not such a bad series of incidents for a first instalment!

So far, so good. The first jar came when Little John, trustiest of Robin's comrades, brought in his contribution. This was a full-page drawing of a football match, supposed to be the final tie for the County Schools' Cup. Little John had written this title beneath it, and he had put goal-posts at each end of the field. But for these descriptive touches it might just as well have pictured a bull-fight, or a cannibal dance round a missionary in a stew-pot.

"I say, old chap, this is a bit fierce," Robin commented, rather blankly. "A wee bit out of perspective, isn't it? These trees, for instance, look as if they were in the middle of the field."

"What trees?" asked Little John, wonderingly. "Those? Here, don't be silly. Those are our forwards and St. Cuthbert's halves having a wrestle for the ball."

"Oh, really," said Robin politely, "I beg your pardon. But why this sheaf of corn behind the goal? Queer place for a wheatsheaf, isn't it?"

"Wheatsheaf be blowed!" cried Little John, indignantly. "Robin, you ought to get some spectacles. That's Fluffy Jim in his paper costume."

"All serene," agreed Robin. "I'll put a cross over his head and write his name underneath the picture, so's everybody will know. Passed for publication. Next gentleman, please!"

The boy who was called Friar Tuck approached him and handed him a sheet of verse.

"What's this?" asked Robin "'Musick in ye Forest'. Why the 'k' in 'music', Friar?"

"That's how they used to spell it in those days," said the Friar.

"But those days aren't these days," said Robin. "Here, get your heads out of the light, you two, while I read the first verse."

Heedless of the self-conscious blushes of the embarrassed poet, he commenced to read:—

"'In ye forest of Ancient Sherwood,
Where the deer so blithely skip,
There strode the doughty Robin Hood
With a horn upon his lip.'

Here, shiver my timbers, this is weird," commented Robin. "What's Robin Hood want with a horn upon his lip? He's not a stag or a bull! Even if he were either, horns grow on foreheads, don't they?"

"You haven't twigged it properly, Robin," explained the Friar. "Read on, and you'll see what it means."

"Three blasts upon his horn he blew,
Each mounting high and higher,
Come forth, my Merry Men, quoth he,
And hear me strike the liar.'

I understand about the horn now, Friar. But who are you making the liar?"

"Not me, I hope," put in Little John. "If so, I'll knock your head off, you bounder."

Friar Tuck took a hasty peep at the manuscript. "Excuse me a moment," he said. "Did I write 'liar' instead of 'lyre'? Slip of the pen. Alter it, Robin."

"No, I'll let it stand; it's funnier," said Robin. "Get your ears back for the next spasm, friends:—

"'And withal Robin danced like fun,
And cried, Hey diddle, diddle,
While Little John his cornet blew
And David scraped his fiddle.'

Here, hold on a bit, Friar. Fiddles they may have had in Robin's time—I'm not

sure of it—but cornets weren't invented. Even if they had been, Flenton couldn't play one."

"This is *that* Little John, not this one," the Friar pleaded. "Cut the cornet out, Robin, and make it what you like."

"Nay," said Robin, "this is your funeral, not mine. Here's the Tinker with his picture. Hope the Royal Academy folk won't be jealous."

The Tinker's gait was almost a swagger. Whatever others might think of his picture, the artist himself was evidently convinced of its dazzling merits.

"Just dashed it off after lunch," he said airily. "Can do you a dozen more like it, if you'll let me have the paper."

"Sorry, Tinker; must leave room for another genius or two," said Robin. "By Jove, these are clinking cows. Could almost fancy I could hear them 'moo'."

"Cows, carrots!" exclaimed the Tinker. "Chuck pulling my leg—no cows there, Robin."

"What are they, then? Buffaloes?"

"Oh, stop kidding, Robin. You know very well those are flamingoes, drawn to the life from the Zoo."

"Right!" said Robin. "We'll mark them with a capital 'F', and put 'Flamingoes' in a footnote. The others describe themselves. These hippopotami, for instance ——"

"Look here, Robin, you're trying to be smart," said the Tinker, in aggrieved tones. "You must surely see those are laughing hyenas."

"Ah, to be sure," agreed Robin. "They're laughing at those sore-eyed zebras in the corner. I see now."

"Oh, this is beyond a joke," growled the angry Tinker. "Can't tell tigers from zebras! Here, let's point them all out to you before you muddle them up any more."

"Later on, old chap," Robin told him, putting the picture in his pocket-book. "Time's scarce now. Here's the Miller with his butterflies. More R.A.'s than authors amongst the Merry Men, evidently."

The Miller's butterflies washed out the rainbow in vivid colouring. They were having a glorious feed in a wonderful garden, the only flaw wherein was that daffodils, roses, hollyhocks and chrysanthemums were all blooming simultaneously. Another minor detail was that some of the butterflies seemed as big as crows, altogether dwarfing the flowers. It was, indeed, a scene of tropical splendour!

"Bravo!" cried Robin, heaving a sigh of relief. "This'll do O.K."

The earlier contributors, with the exception of Allan a Dale, shot a jealous glance at the Miller, grudging him Robin's praise. All unconsciously their leader had deeply wounded their pride.

Too anxiously occupied with his editorial duties to notice the clouds that were gathering, Robin turned next to David of Doncaster, whose contribution proved rather a shocker. It was called "Celebrated Executions—written and illustrated by David Storm."

"I say, Dave, what a hang-dog ruffian you are!" Robin exclaimed, trying to hide his dismay under a laugh. "This makes milk-and-water of the Chamber of Horrors. Charles the First, Anne Boleyn, Sir Walter Raleigh, Lady Jane Grey—heads flying about like tennis balls. As for the hangings, they're positively gruesome. Charles Peace, Palmer the Poisoner, Neil Cream, Mrs. Dyer, and nine or ten more of 'em on the gallows—I shan't sleep to-night if I look at this much longer."

"Won't you put it in, then, Robin?" asked Dave anxiously.

"Oh, rather, Dave!" Robin said. "It shall face the Tinker's frisky Zoo. That'll be a foil for it. Any other gentleman obliging with a contribution before the tea-bell rings?"

There was a slight pause, and then another Merry Man, known to the band as The Tanner, timidly handed in a written attempt.

"Oh, a short story," Robin commented. "That's a change from verse and

pictures, anyhow."

He took it nearer to the lamp and commenced to read aloud. It ran as follows: —

> "'She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell was dead. Her little bird—a poor slight thing the pressure or a finger would have crushed—was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.'

"Why," said Robin, breaking off at this point, "it sounds like something I've read before somewhere."

"I should jolly well think it does," Dave interjected indignantly. "My sister recited that at the Parsonage party last Christmas. It's the 'Death of Little Nell', from Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*."

"You young beggar, you've prigged it!" Robin accused him.

The shamefaced copyist tried to brave it out.

"Well, what if I did?" he asked defiantly. "You only gave us two days' grace, and I got three separate headaches trying to do something funny."

"You should have just sent in your photograph and saved yourself the trouble," said Dave.

Robin pocketed the contribution rather dejectedly, and was relieved when the clanging of the tea-bell saved him from further criticism.

"Meet me round the bonfire in the Forest to-morrow afternoon, my men," he said. "There'll be the usual quantity of venison pasties to give the magazine a start."

On a sharp and invigorating afternoon, when the crackling bonfire was a sheer delight, they feasted right jovially on the contents of Robin's pack. It was a far finer spread than ever he had given them before, and he was the soul of good temper throughout. Finally, when all were satisfied, he drew from his pocket a

sewn-up copy of the magazine.

"List ye, my Merry Men. Right earnestly have ye striven to fill to overflowing the pages of our first number. Yet, by my troth, now that it is done and put together, it likes me not. It is a dud, a frost, a fizzle, a wash-out."

There was a chorus of disappointed cries.

"Why, Robin, what's amiss with it?" asked Little John, in consternation.

"Amiss with it?" echoed Robin. "Look here at the title-page. What saith it? *The Merry Men's Magazine*. What's bound to be expected of a 'mag.' with a name like that? Fun and frolic from first page to last. I turn to page 23. What do I find? An article on famous executions. A bright and cheerful subject! Page 24 introduces us to 'The Deathbed in the Shop'. Page 27 tells us how a party of old Foxes walked into a sandbank and never were seen again. Page 31 contains 'Curious Graveyard Epitaphs'——"

"They were funny ones," put in the compiler of them, protestingly.

"Funny as a boiling lobster," retorted Robin. "How about this one?

> "'The poor boy here was starved at school,
> One meal a day was this school's rule.'

Very funny, I don't think—being starved to death. Then what price this one:

> "'Here lies the body of young Jim Sawner,
> Of him his mother is a mourner.
> To you youths let this be a warner—
> Grim Death lies waiting round the corner.'

That's the sort of stuff undertakers sit up all night reading," said Robin, "but Foxes would drop big ink-blots on it. Then, to finish up, page 34 is a picture called 'Early Christian Martyrs thrown to the Lions'. Fancy them coming early-doors for that! I admit it's a good picture—but where's the merriment come in?"

"You're pretty down on all of us, Robin," said Little John ruefully.

"No, chaps," replied Robin, seriously. "I don't want us to make fools of

ourselves, that's all. I was an ass to start this magazine. If it passed round Foxenby we'd be the laughing-stock of the place. Poke the fire up, Dave—that's the ticket. A lovely blaze. Here's a bit more fuel to keep it going."

With that he suddenly cast the magazine into the heart of the flames, while the others gasped with amazement at the sacrifice.

Thus perished the first and last number of the *Merry Men's Magazine*, and neither the editor of the Foxonian nor the co-editors of *Rooke's House Rag* ever knew how near they had come to the sudden eclipse of their greatness.

## CHAPTER XXIV

## The Three-cornered Tournament

Never had the Squirms, as a body, succeeded in scoring points over the Merry Men. Duffers at football and cricket, which they only played because both were compulsory, slackers in the gymnasium, and too flabby to shine in athletic sports, their chief recreations were indoor ones which did not fret their fat, such as chess, draughts, and dominoes.

At these three games they frequently played to pass away the long winter evenings, while other boys indulged in gymnastics and boxing. Consequently, quite a number of them became, through constant practice, fairly proficient in table games—certainly far cleverer at them than other Foxes of their own age, who seldom cared to play with them.

"I've got a rattling good idea for taking the starch out of Robin and his gang," Osbody announced to a little group of Squirms. "Their beastly heads are swollen to the size of balloons over the flukey way they nabbed the burglars. Odious to see them swanking about, isn't it, chaps?"

"Makes me sick," agreed Grain.

"Positively nauseating to hear Old Man Wykeham puffing 'em up sky-high," said Niblo. "Special holiday in their honour, indeed!"

"I vote we all stick in the class-room and swot that day, just to show our contempt for it," suggested Vinns, a boy with a rather uncanny gift for mathematics—the only Squirm who had ever distinguished himself in a scholastic way.

"Swot yourself, Professor Vinns," snorted Grain. "I'd swop all my school-books for a penny bag of popcorn. Time to wonder how to spend the holiday when it comes. Just now, I'm waiting to hear 'Body's plan for wiping Arkness's eye."

"It's this," said Osbody. "Half the Merry Men (as they have the cheek to call themselves) scarcely know one end of a chess-board from another. Dominoes are just slabs of wood to them. Draughts make them shiver."

"Granting all that," said Niblo, "I don't see what you're driving at."

"Well, we all want to take Robin's conceited 'crush' down a peg, I guess?"

"Rather! Aching for the chance."

"Then it's yours for the asking. Not to make a song of it, I've written something on a sheet of paper which, if you're all agreeable, I shall send to Arkness to-night. Listen, and I'll read it."

He smoothed out a sheet of foolscap, cleared his throat, and began:

"We, the Foxenby Junior Games Club, hereby challenge Robin Hood and his Merry Men to a three-cornered tournament, viz: Games of Chess, Draughts, and Dominoes, to be played in the Holbeck House Games-room on Friday evening next."

"Oh, great gingerbreads, that's ripping!" said Niblo.

"Best idea ever!" said Vinns.

"Humph!" grunted Grain. "Must be grass-green, both of you, if you fancy they'll rise to a bait like that."

Osbody looked annoyed. Grain's habit of throwing cold water on everything he suggested was always a thorn in the flesh of the leader of the Squirms.

"See nothing to sneer about, Grain," he snapped. "Why shouldn't they bite?"

"They'll make paper pellets of the challenge," Grain persisted. "What asses they would be to play us on our own pitch, so to speak, at games they don't stand an earthly in. Fancy Arkness bringing his men like lambs to the slaughter! He's too fly for that!"

"I agree," said Niblo, with a sigh of disappointment. "It won't come off, 'Body, old man. Better make paper boats of the challenge than give Robin the chance to be sarcastic about it."

"Yes," said Vinns. "He's confoundedly clever at writing skits."

But Osbody stubbornly declined to be talked out of his venture. "Stow your jaw, everybody," he said. "This challenge is going, whatever you say. I'm positive it's the only way of taking a rise out of Arkness and his Shrubbery hooligans."

"It'll come back like a boomerang," growled Grain.

"Well, if it does, only my head will suffer, for I shall sign it," said Osbody. "Here, younker," he broke off, collaring a First-form boy who was trying to slip past, "take this paper to Robin Arkness, in Rooke's House. Look alive, now."

Five minutes later Robin was reading out the challenge to a group of Merry Men in the "gym". Its arrival quite knocked the steam out of a ding-dong glove-fight between Little John and Friar Tuck, old rivals in pugilism. They ceased banging each other and gathered round Robin with the rest.

"What a beastly lot of one-eyed badgers," exclaimed David of Doncaster.

"Rather!" agreed Will Scarlet. "Licked at everything that matters, they want to draw us into chimney-corner and parish-tea games."

"No jolly fear," said Little John. "Chess always gives me a headache."

"Same here," said the Miller.

"I always end by building castles with my dominoes," said the Tinker.

"Draughts strikes me as a sort of girl's game," another Merry Man put in.

"Allan a Dale's the only man we have who can play all three games decently," the Tanner declared.

"Good idea," said Dave. "Set Allan on playing Osbody, and we'll all stand round to watch."

Shy Allan hastily declined the honour, whereupon Robin, having waited for the hubbub to subside, gave his opinion.

"Cheek in chunks, but artful—particularly artful," he said. "We don't want to play the Squirms at games. We don't want to sit in the same room with them. We'd rather play snakes-and-ladders with the Tinker's flamingoes at the Zoo."

"We would indeed!" cried Will Scarlet. "Send him a snorting answer, Robin."

"Refuse the challenge, do you mean?" queried Robin.

"I should say so, thumbs down."

Robin shook his head sadly. "We can't," he groaned. "If we did, they'd never afterwards cease yapping at us. Oh, yes, I can see you staring at me, but what would you say, chaps, if Osbody put up his dukes to me in the Shrubbery and sang out 'Come on'?"

"We'd tell you to go for him, Robin, like old steam."

"Just so. It would be a challenge, and you'd expect me to take it. If he said, 'I'll race you up the Moston Church-side to the steeple', daft though that would be, I'd have to climb with him. Twig what I mean, boys? The Merry Men's reputation is at stake. We cannot refuse."

Many of them decidedly differed from this opinion. Why, they argued, should they give the Squirms the chance of scalping them in a tournament of Osbody's own choosing? But Robin was not to be shaken.

"I'll put that right, chaps," he said. "Give me two minutes while I answer the

challenge."

He scribbled furiously for a time and then read out the following:

"We, the Merry Men, accept the challenge of the Foxenby Junior Games Club to play them at Chess, Draughts, and Dominoes on Friday evening next IF they will agree to play us at football on the following Wednesday afternoon.

"(Signed) *Robin Hood*."

"Good!" exclaimed David of Doncaster. "That's a facer for them, Robin."

"You've turned their flanks," commented Will Scarlet. "The mere thought of meeting us at footer will make them goggle-eyed."

"It'll wash out the Games Tournament, hurrah!" cried Little John, intensely relieved.

"Don't be too cocksure of that, fellows," said Robin, gloomily. "I hope it will, but we've got to be ready for anything."

He found a messenger to carry the answer to Osbody, whose face lengthened somewhat as he read it aloud to his cronies.

"There, you've let us in for it now!" cried Grain, angrily. "Didn't I warn you the boomerang would come back? Fancy having to play 'em at football! The bare idea gives me a stitch in my side."

It was a turning of the tables which the Squirms had not even remotely anticipated, and they followed Grain's lead in heaping reproaches on Osbody's head. But he, too, had a will of his own, combined with a gift of leadership almost equal to that of Robin.

"Chaps," he said, "have I ever failed you as a leader of this band? We have had some pretty rough times—when did I ever show funk?"

They were compelled to admit that he had stood by them through thick and thin.

"Very well, then," said Osbody. "Either I'm to have the pleasure of leading you to victory once in a while, or the whole bag-o'-tricks goes overboard. Football or no football afterwards, we're playing this games' tournament on Friday evening."

Grain's crafty eyes lit up with sudden hope. "Nobody's indispensable," he said, significantly.

Osbody shot a fiery glance at his rival. "Let the fellows choose!" he snapped. "I'll have my way, or go."

If Grain had any serious hopes of stepping into Osbody's shoes at that moment, his disappointment must have been intense. Fully twenty of the Squirms were present, and they crowded round Osbody with assurances of loyalty that did them credit.

"You're right, 'Body," said "Professor" Vinns. "Revenge is sweet, and for once we'll have it."

"So we will," said Niblo. "At chess, draughts, and dominoes we'll make crawling worms of them. They shall taste the dust beneath our feet."

"Just as we shall taste the mud beneath *their* boots when the football match comes off," sneered Grain, savagely.

"Rats to the old football match!" said Niblo. "If necessary, we will play two goalkeepers to hold the score down. Friday comes before Wednesday, and thrice-armed is he who gets his blow in first."

In the few remaining days before the tournament some of the Merry Men tried desperately hard to rub up their knowledge of indoor games. Allan a Dale, bashful and slow-spoken as a rule, became almost as loud-voiced as a drill-sergeant in his efforts to teach chess and draughts to his chums.

Lovers of the open-air as they were, their thoughts were continually wandering from the chequered board. Robin alone made satisfactory progress. It was up to him, he believed, to set his men a good example, though all his

eloquence failed to keep Little John longer at the chess-board than fifteen minutes at a time.

"I shall just move the pieces anyhow and trust to luck," Little John said.

"Then your opponent will wipe the floor with you."

"If he does," said Little John, grimly, "let him look out for himself when I meet him on the football-field, that's all."

Generally speaking, it was this thought of out-door revenge which sustained the dejected Merry Men when they took their seats for the tournament on Friday evening.

Osbody had arranged the order of things most craftily. First came dominoes, as the game in which there was only a slight element of skill. It was natural that the Merry Men would score a few points at dominoes, though three-fourths of them were well-beaten, Robin and Allan being amongst the losers.

The Squirms were openly exultant. Even Osbody had difficulty in repressing a triumphant smile.

"Draughts next," announced the leader of the Squirms. "Any particular fancy about pairing off, Arkness?"

"I'll play you," said Robin. "The other fellows can sort themselves out as they like."

Osbody whispered something to Vinns, who casually dropped into a chair opposite Allan a Dale. This was a pre-arranged plan, for "Professor" Vinns was as weirdly clever at board-games as he was at mathematics, and all Allan a Dale's skill proved powerless to prevent him winning. Their game lasted longest, but the result was never in doubt. Allan, the hope of the Merry Men, was cornered and beaten.

No sum of subtraction was needed to reckon the tally in favour of the Squirms. They had won every game but two drawn ones, Osbody having failed to beat Robin, and Grain having found in Will Scarlet an opponent too tough to knock out.

"Something like an evening's sport," commented Osbody.

"Most enjoyable," murmured Niblo.

These happy meetings ought to become a permanent feature," said "Professor" Vinns, beaming over his glasses at his crestfallen opponent.

"I beg to differ," said Robin. "Not in an atmosphere like this, anyhow. Phew! I can scarcely breathe! I vote we have all the windows open, chaps; the place is like a furnace."

Some of the Merry Men ran at once to the window-cords, but Osbody violently protested.

"Windows open be hanged!" he cried. "It's freezing outside. There's a sea-breeze that cuts like a knife. We should all get our deaths of cold."

"Rubbish!" retorted Robin. "Fresh air never harmed anyone. Better to shiver than be baked alive. I feel like a bread-loaf in an oven."

"I can't help that," snapped Osbody. "I hate to sit in a draught. What do you other fellows say?"

The Squirms unanimously agreed with their leader. It would, they said, be like courting almost certain death from influenza or pneumonia to open the windows on such a night.

"Well," said Robin, "it comes to this: we want air and you want suffocation. What's the polite rule in these cases? The visiting team is given the choice. Are you for ventilation, my Merry Men?"

"Ay, ay, Robin!" the Merry Men cried, with one voice.

"Fresh-air fiends!" snorted Grain.

"We shan't agree," said Osbody.

"Right you are," cried Robin easily. "There's only one thing to do, then. We'll leave the tournament as it is, and call it a draw."

The Squirms stared at one another in blank consternation. To be robbed of their sweeping victory in this freakish fashion was a misfortune not to be borne.

"Tommy-rot!" exclaimed Osbody. "We haven't played a single chess-game yet."

"Funkpots!" sneered Grain. "You're afraid to see it through."

For answer Robin pulled down the upper part of a big window and his Merry Men followed his lead, flooding the over-heated room with sweet night air.

"There, that's better!" cried Robin. "Carry on with the chess."

The Squirms were outmanoeuvred. They had either to abandon full and complete victory or finish the tournament in a torrent of air which swept their score-cards to the floor. So, with sinking hearts, and the sourest of faces, they turned up their coat-collars and decided to "stick it".

At chess most of the Merry Men went down like ninepins, some of them having difficulty in distinguishing knights from bishops.

Once again the Squirms swept the board. Allan a Dale and Robin, by dint of mental gymnastics which made their heads swim, wrung draws from Vinns and Osbody respectively; but these partial successes only threw the general rout of the Merry Men into stronger relief. Just as they had expected, they were decisively and ignominiously thrashed.

Immediately the Squirms became a Mutual Admiration Society. Hands were wrung and shoulders were slapped, and in every way the Merry Men were made to feel that they were very small potatoes indeed. In unutterable disgust at such exceedingly bad taste, they trooped to the door.

"Here, aren't you going to give three cheers for the winners?" Osbody called after them.

With eyes that blazed contemptuously Robin flung round on him.

"No, we're not," he said. "This wasn't a tournament from the start. It was like a rabbit-coursing match, where they blind and starve the rabbits before they let the dogs loose."

"Rubbish!" Osbody scoffed. "It was man to man. We met on even terms!"

"All serene," answered Robin. "Hope you'll think the same when we're dry-rubbing you next Wednesday!"

He hurried his Merry Men out of the room, and then, as a parting shot, popped his head round the door to shout—

"Hot water-bottles and babies' comforters, this way! All dirty Squirms with stiff necks should grease 'em with goose-fat. Like cures like!"

## CHAPTER XXV

## The Merry Men Score Goals

In football garb the Squirms, on the whole, looked unimpressive. They had bulk, but it was beef without brawn. Some of them had so outgrown their togs that their arms stuck out sideways, in a grotesque semi-circular fashion. Others had fat faces, too, which turned unhealthily blue in the wind.

"What a mug's game it is," grumbled Grain. "We're prize idiots to appear at all."

"Couldn't honourably do otherwise," retorted Osbody.

"Honour be hanged! We're not heroes of a sporting novel. Look at the crowd of Foxes round the ropes. They've come to laugh at us!"

"Perhaps they'll cheer us before we've finished."

"Rubbish! We're all as soft as putty. Given football a miss whenever possible. Hated the muddy misery of it. The Merry Men will tie us into every kind of knot."

"Shut up, fusspot!" said Osbody, with spirit. "It's rotten bad form to cry 'stinking fish'."

"Rather!" agreed Niblo. "Where's the sense of piling up imaginary goals against your own side, Grain? Grouse when they're actually scored, not before."

"You're living in a fool's paradise," retorted Grain. "Go on kidding yourselves that you're an International side. All I can say is, that you don't jolly well look it. More like a row of plucked turkeys outside a poulterer's shop."

His bitter comments were interrupted by the arrival of the Merry Men, looking fit as fiddles in their white shirts and blue knickers. Rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, full of vim and confidence, they formed a striking contrast to their shivering opponents. Judging by appearances, there would only be one team in the picture that afternoon.

Osbody, as captain, met Arkness in the centre of the field. "Who's to referee?" he inquired. "I forgot to ask about that."

"That's all right," Robin answered cheerily. "Thought we'd have a good 'un while we were about it. I've asked Forge to take the whistle."

"You never dared!" cried Osbody, evidently taken aback.

"Why not? Forge doesn't bite. What better 'ref.' could we have? He'll see fair play to the last kick."

"Who said there was going to be any play that wasn't fair?" asked Osbody, ungraciously.

"Not I, you thin-skinned beggar. All I meant was that Forge knows the rules backwards way. He'll hold the scales even and favour neither side."

"That's as may be," remarked Grain. He had come up behind them with his customary cheek to butt into the conversation. "Some people know how to wangle things. Even school-captains swallow butter occasionally."

Robin looked at Grain with cold contempt. "Here comes Forge," he said. "Time to start. If you'll ask your men to stand back, Osbody, we'll toss for ends."

A cordial cheer greeted Forge, who concealed an amused smile with difficulty as he saw, through the corner of his eye, the long faces the Squirms were pulling at his appearance. Doubtless they would have preferred a milder and shorter-sighted referee.

Dick shook hands with both captains in a manner of becoming gravity. It might have been a First League match, so seriously did he take it.

"Good afternoon, chaps," he said. "Ideal afternoon for footer. Winning the toss won't help either of you much. Hope we'll have a pleasant game."

The news that Dick was refereeing quickly spread. It was a totally unexpected honour for a junior match. Usually the captain was too busy leather-hunting himself to take any notice of scratch games. That he had decided to referee this contest between the Merry Men and the Squirms excited curiosity, resulting in a rapid thickening of the ring of spectators round the ropes.

It was all very depressing to the Squirms. They had hoped against hope that the crowd of onlookers would be small, having a lively fear that they were bound to make fools of themselves. The advent of the captain as referee had turned the limelight full on them, and more than half Foxenby would now be present to deride their floundering efforts at football.

"Arkness did it on purpose, the crafty bounder," they told one another. "This is his revenge for the tournament licking. Nice figures of fun we'll look after a bit."

"Buck up, chaps, and put all in," Osbody counselled them. "We're eleven against eleven, after all. Use your weight and knock some of the steam out of them at the start."

With Niblo in goal, and himself at left full-back, the captain of the Squirms really made a gallant attempt to save his side from immediate humiliation. Doing the work of three players, he nipped in time after time to throw the Merry Men's scoring schemes awry. His only mistake in the first fifteen minutes was to bring Robin down somewhat roughly when a goal seemed certain. Forge took a charitable view of the foul and merely awarded an ordinary free kick. This Niblo, who was playing a surprisingly good game, fisted away with convincing force.

"We're doing top-hole, chaps," Osbody told the Squirms. "Get farther down the field, you forwards, and chance your luck more."

Grain could play decently enough at centre-forward when he liked, but was lazy by nature and a confirmed grumbler.

"Talking's easy," he sneered. "Fat lot of attacking you'd do yourself if you'd two sugar babies instead of players at each side of you."

"Try a gallop on your own anyhow, Grain. You're big enough."

"I see. Plenty for them to kick at, you mean. Hadn't you better get back towards goal, 'Body, before the squibs go off?"

Truly, Osbody had been caught napping. The ball had been restarted while he was talking, and Dave and Robin had lured the other full-back into a booby-trap. He zigzagged in bewilderment towards Niblo, whose toes he trod on, with the result that the hampered goalkeeper had the mortification of seeing the ball lobbed past him for the first goal of the match.

"You clumsy clown!" he cried to the faulty fullback. "Either keep off my toes or get off the field. You gave them that goal!"

Bad temper is the worst opponent a goalkeeper can have. While he remained cool Niblo had kept goal excellently well; now that he was hot and cross he could do nothing right. Robin beat him again with quite a simple shot; Dave bagged a couple more in as many minutes, and the thrashing which the Squirms themselves had expected began in real earnest. Niblo's sole occupation seemed to be that of picking the ball from the back of the net and booting it savagely back to the centre of the field.

Osbody wiped his forehead in miserable perplexity. "Nine goals to nil," he said. "This is sheer slaughter, Niblo. Steady, old man, steady!"

"Right, 'Body, old son," answered Niblo. "I lost my head, but they're all on top of me. Can't you go to your old place and draw them off me a bit?"

"Good idea, Niblo. I'll feel more at home at centre-half, putting a spoke in Arkness's wheel."

Grain watched the change with cynical approval. "Time you came to give me a hand," he said. "The Professor's no more use behind me than a draughty keyhole."

"Have a pot at goal whenever you can, Grain. We must get a chalk or two, or it'll be 'thirty—nil' on the hall notice-board."

Between them they managed to get a move on, juggling the ball into the Merry Men's penalty-area by deft touches which won applause. Osbody was then in a splendid scoring position, and ought to have shot without hesitation. Probably wishing, however, to put Grain in a better temper, he unselfishly gave his grumbling colleague the ball, saying to him: "Let fly first time, Grain."

It was what is known as a gift-goal. The Merry Men's custodian had slipped and fallen, and Grain had only to lift the ball gently into the net. But the excitement of the moment must have unnerved him, for instead of shooting he trod on the ball, which flew up and hit him in the face.

The next moment, to the accompaniment of a loud roar of laughter, he had sprawled full length in the mud.

There was mud on this particular patch of the field, too. It was facetiously called the "Nigger Pond", because on most days a pool of black water was present there.

If Grain had been in the habit of practising more he would have remembered this patch and kept clear of it. But now he was wholly in it from head to foot, sending a fountain of black drops over Osbody also, and (what was worse still from his captain's standpoint) spoiling all chance of a score by accidentally fisting the ball over the goal-line.

When, at last, he managed to raise himself dolefully to his feet, who was there on the field who could have refrained from grinning at him? Black he was, but not in any way comely. His appearance was that of a golliwog too tightly stuffed with sawdust—an irresistibly comical sight.

The spectators exploded with mirth; the Squirms laughed even louder than the Merry Men; Forge himself could not keep a straight face, and laughed aloud with the rest. Only Grain failed to see the broad humour of the thing.

"Keep it up, you blinking idiots!" he snorted, as he flung the mud from his blazing eyes. "Pretty cads you all are to make game of a fellow's misery."

"Cut off and change, Grain," Dick advised him.

"So I will, and I shan't come back," whined Grain.

"Nonsense," Dick returned. "Take it in good part, youngster. Your side needs you. Play the game."

Grain ran off sulkily, and at half-time, when the Merry Men had a dozen goals to their credit, he had washed off the mud and made himself presentable in a clean costume from the emergency kit.

"That's right, kid," Dick said to him. "You're going in again. Better luck next time."

Grain grunted something in an off-hand manner—a piece of surly cheek which Dick tactfully ignored. But the captain of the school decided to keep a watchful eye on this unmannerly young Squirm, whose ways were far from being ways of pleasantness.

The bulk of the crowd had melted away at half-time, the game being too one-sided to hold their attention. It was just target practice for the Merry Men's forwards and halves, and runaway victories quickly pall on unbiassed spectators.

But it gradually became evident that the play was becoming too warm for some of the combatants. Cries of "Stop that, you dirty cad!" were audible at intervals, and Dick had at last to push himself unceremoniously between two sparring opponents, one of whom was painfully hopping up and down on a bruised leg.

"That'll do, Storm—that's enough, Grain," said Dick. "This is a football-field, not a rat-pit."

"I was nowhere near the ball when he hacked me," pleaded Dave.

"Rot!" said Grain. "You fell over my foot. I'm as much hurt as you."

"Better temper, please," said Dick, restarting the game. But this time he paid

less heed to the play in general than to the movements of Grain in particular. Very soon he saw something which confirmed his suspicions. Pretending to head a ball which was nowhere near him, Grain scraped some skin off Arkness's knees with his boot, while striking the back of his hand against Tom Jaye's nose, causing that organ to bleed a little.

Dick promptly blew his whistle and ran to the scene. "Free kick against you, Grain," he announced. "Don't be more like a windmill than you can help. It's dangerous!"

Grain smiled in a supercilious sort of way, and, folding his arms like a gladiator, contemptuously watched Dave take the free kick. To show how utterly a word in season was lost on him, the next minute he literally jumped, knees up, into Allan a Dale's back, sending that lightly-built and altogether harmless Merry Man somersaulting over the ropes.

"Here, stop rotting, you lout!" cried Robin, his blood boiling.

Grain's immediate answer was an uplifted fist and a vicious blow at Robin's face.

Robin saved his beauty, not to mention a considerable amount of sticking-plaster, by ducking swiftly and taking the hard smack on his shoulder. There were cries of indignant disgust from players and spectators alike.

"How's that for dirty play, referee?" somebody shouted.

Dick needed no such reminder of his duty. Like an avenging force he fell upon Grain and gripped the Squirm's arm.

"Clear off the field, Grain!" he commanded. "Out of it. March!"

"Ridiculous," protested Grain. "I only charged a man off the ball."

"You might have snapped his backbone like a carrot. Make yourself scarce and don't argue."

But Grain *did* argue. To the awed amazement of both Squirms and Merry Men, he fired a lot of audacious back-talk at the grimly-silent captain.

"You can't send me off, Forge," he declared. "Haven't power to. This isn't a league match or a cup-tie. You weren't asked to referee—at least, not by our side. I've done no harm; why should I go?"

"Never mind the why and the wherefore," snapped the captain. "Take yourself off."

Grain looked round at the frightened faces watching him, and had a mind to show them what a devil-may-care fellow he was.

"Shan't!" he answered, with a stupidly defiant laugh.

He was asking for trouble there, and did not seek in vain. Round the back of his neck Forge's fingers fastened like a vice. He next felt himself lifted over the ropes as though he were no more than a bag of shavings, and at a furious and undignified speed he was hustled to the gate of the football-field and pitched into the lane.

**HE NEXT FELT HIMSELF LIFTED OVER THE ROPES**
**HE NEXT FELT HIMSELF LIFTED OVER THE ROPES**

"Stay there till the dust-cart picks you up, you vermin," said Dick, with withering scorn.

After that the game was better and brighter. Nobody said anything, but everybody felt that a spirit of mischief had been erased from the match. Osbody fell back to defend again, and he and Niblo put up so stout a defence that the Merry Men could only score twice more before Dick's whistle blew for time.

Still, twenty-three goals to none represented a terrible drubbing for the Squirms, and one that made their tournament victory seem a very feeble triumph indeed.

Yet nobody seemed the least inclined to rub the licking in. The Squirms, with one conspicuous exception, had played a clean game, and kept their tempers in humiliating circumstances. Just, then, as they were trooping dejectedly from the field, they were electrified by hearing Robin's familiar treble calling out:

"Three cheers for Osbody's team, you fellows—hip, hip, hooray!"

Forge turned to listen in smiling approval as the Merry Men whole-heartedly gave three cheers. Osbody blushed like a girl and gazed apprehensively round at the Squirms, wondering how they would take this totally unexpected outburst. Then, swinging his arm round his head, he cried to them:

"Three cheers for the winners, you chaps."

What matter that the Squirms' cheers were but throaty croaks compared with the full-voiced hurrahs of the Merry Men? They did their best in an unaccustomed part, plainly realizing that their honourable foes had treated them in a thoroughly sporting spirit. Not to have responded in a similar vein would have disgraced them in Foxenby's eyes.

Glancing at one another sheepishly, they made haste to leave the field, but were overtaken by Dick Forge, who accommodated his pace to theirs.

"You chaps look down in the mouth," the captain said, briskly. "Don't be. You've no need. There's quite decent footer in some of you. All you require is practice. You've played particularly well, Osbody. Ditto you, Niblo."

The two leading Squirms flushed with unconcealed delight at this compliment from Foxenby's greatest footballer.

"But—but they made all sorts of rings round us, Forge," Osbody stammered.

"True. Served you right. You loafed about indoors, getting flabbier than jellyfish, while Arkness and Co. hardened themselves outside. I am pretty keen on footer, as you know, boys. When a Fox has legs to stand on I like to see him chasing a ball with them, even if he never catches up with it. Now, tell me, are you chaps game to stick together and practise footer every week, for the honour of Foxenby?"

A quick little catching of breath was audible here and there. What could the Squirms do when the great captain of Foxenby was pleading with them thus? His whole heart was in his voice—his deadly earnestness could not be mistaken. The meanest boy amongst them knew how passionately Forge loved Foxenby, and his pure devotion to its interests was infectious.

"Why, of course, Forge, we'll practise like the very dickens—won't we, you chaps?" said Osbody, turning on them a pair of eyes that shone with new

resolution.

"Rather!" they answered, in somewhat tremulous chorus.

"Good biz," commented Forge, as he turned aside into Rooke's House. "It bucks me up no end to hear you say so."

## CHAPTER XXVI

## Two from Eleven leaves Nine

Nominations for the School Captaincy had to be sent in a fortnight before the actual election took place. Great fun had always been extracted from the annual event, particularly in the Junior School. Consequently there was blank consternation, particularly in Holbeck's House, when the school librarian gave it out that only one nomination paper had been sent in.

"There must be some mistake—a ghastly bloomer," said Broome, of Holbeck's House. "Papers mislaid, no doubt. Why, I signed Harwood's nomination paper myself."

"So did I," said Lake.

"And I," agreed Atack.

"Come, Mr. Librarian, stop rotting," Broome said. "Practical joking in a matter of this kind shows bad taste."

"Have a square look at me, chaps," said the librarian. "Do I look like a jester in cap and bells?"

"More like an ink-bottle with a quill stuck out of it," said Lake.

"Exactly. Then don't accuse me of mucking up my job. Richard Forge alone

has been nominated for the Captaincy, and will therefore be elected unopposed."

"What's that?" queried Robin Arkness, always to the fore when anything was afoot. "Dick Forge Captain of Foxenby again? Luke Harwood not nominated? Jolly good job for Harwood, then. He'd have got the slugging of a lifetime if he'd stood."

"Hop it, cheeky, or you'll get my boot-toe," was Lake's threat.

"Jealous!" Robin taunted him. Then off flew the leader of the Merry Men to acquaint his comrades of the glorious tidings that Forge was captain for another year—an occurrence which they celebrated by carrying paper banners round the school-yard and heartily boo-ing any boy of Holbeck's House whom they suspected of being Luke Harwood's partizan.

"Rather a staggerer, Luke not letting himself be nominated," said Roger to Dick. "He didn't stand an earthly, of course, but still——"

"Think I can explain his shyness on this occasion," Dick answered. Whereupon he confided to his chum what had taken place between him and Luke in the deserted football-field.

"All going to prove how accurate was your opinion of his character, and how far astray was mine," Dick concluded. "But we'll be decent to a fallen enemy, Roger, old boy."

"Of course," Roger agreed. "No kicking a man when he's down. I heard a rumour that he'd decided to leave Foxenby this Easter. *Sic transit gloria*!"

It was the morning of the replayed cup-tie at Walsbridge, so they had every good reason for dismissing Luke Harwood from their minds. Luke, indeed, did not buy a railway-ticket for Walsbridge, nor were any of his cronies on the platform. Another notable absentee was Fluffy Jim, whose parents had taken him to the Stores that day to fit his awkward limbs, if possible, into clothes that Mr. Wykeham's reward had ensured for him.

"So we start under better conditions to-day," laughed Roger. "No blue-and-white Guy Fawkes this time to kick away your goal."

"If the Octopus lets me get near enough to score one," Dick reminded him.

"Keep your big toe out of the way of his seven-league boots, anyhow," was Roger's timely warning.

Reaching Walsbridge by rail from Moston was rather a depressing experience. It entailed a long wait at a draughty junction, where refreshment was difficult to obtain. Footballers who train at the seaside develop healthy appetites, and the grub provided on this occasion didn't satisfy some members of the team, who fared forth to forage for more.

"Don't dawdle, Clowes—come back quickly, Broome," Dick counselled them. "No rotting about to-day, remember!"

"We could eat the town up and then be back half-an-hour before this clockwork hearse of a train started," Broome said.

"Better be on the hungry side than gorge," said Dick, anxiously. "Stick to beef-sandwiches—no pickles or fried potatoes, mind!"

Not caring to seem fussy about diet, but fearing the effect of too much indifferent food, Dick watched the pair leave with some concern. Then he and Roger strolled about the platform, deriving amusement from the vocal rivalry of the Merry Men and the Squirms, who tried which could first shiver the glass roof of the junction with their shrill football slogans.

"We're handicapped by this changing business, Roger," Dick said. "St. Cuthbert's get a through train to Walsbridge, and can start after luncheon, warm and well-fed. It's quite on the cards that those ravenous beggars, Broome and Clowes, will come back bilious from greasy grub."

"If they come back at all," commented Roger, glancing grimly at the clock.

"My hat, it's five minutes off train-time!" Dick exclaimed. "Confound the slackers, they're cutting it fine. Here, Arkness, slip into the street and see if you can spot Broome and Clowes. Signal them up, smart!"

Such an errand could have been trusted to no one quicker than Robin. He vanished like a streak, only to return three minutes later with a furiously-shaking head.

"No sign of 'em, Forge," he panted.

A pretty pickle, truly! Supporters aboard the train, guard fidgeting with his green flag, and two of the team's most important members missing. Was the replay, then, to be as persistently dogged by misfortune as the first final had been?

"Guard, can't you hold her up a bit?" Dick pleaded. "Give us a minute or two longer. We're two men short."

"Sorry, lad, but Ah might near as weel chuck myself under t'train. This company's pride is punctuality. They'd sack me if I spoilt t'record. Ready, there? Right away!"

He bundled Dick and Roger into the saloon carriage reserved for the team, and waved the train into motion. Gradually it gathered speed, and then a frantic shout arose from the watching Foxonians as Broome and Clowes came rushing at top speed past the booking-office.

"Hi, they're here—stop the train!"

Trains have been stopped, I believe, on less particular lines when important passengers have been a few seconds late. And who more important, the Foxes doubtless thought, than two of the men who were to fight St. Cuthbert's for the County Schools' Cup? But their hopeful cries changed into dismayed indignation as they realized that the old file of a guard had no intention of pulling up for Broome and Clowes—"No, not if they was royal princes," he vowed. Had he even extended a helping hand, the nimble Broome could have just boarded the guard's van. But the old man remained stubborn, and the team started on the last lap of its journey to Walsbridge minus two of its best men.

"Take a motor-car," Robin Arkness called back, "and charge it to me."

"Silly ass!" Osbody said. "There isn't anything better than a clothes-horse to ride in this benighted hole. We've lost the match!"

"Skittles!" cried Robin. "You Holbeck chaps make me sick. Just because two out of three of your rotten representatives think feeding their ugly faces more urgent than football, you fancy it's 'tails down' with Foxenby. Forge'll find substitutes for both, that's a cert. He's never been stuck fast yet."

But Robin's confidence would have been shaken could he have peered into the saloon and seen the worried look on the captain's face.

It might be true, as Robin declared, that Dick had never been stuck fast before, but on this occasion he did indeed feel that he was up against one of the toughest football problems of his life. For the reserve centre-half was Luke Harwood, and the reserve inside-left was Greenfoot, both members of the little gambling-gang whom Dick himself had warned off the Walsbridge field.

"Well," said Ennis, "Harwood's been aching for a chance all the season, and is not such a wash-out at centre-half. His opportunity's come at last."

"Jiggered if I fancy Greenfoot as a cup-tie forward," said Lyon. "He'll be a new broom, but not such a sweeping one as Broome."

"Where are those two, by the way?" asked Lake. "Can't remember to have seen 'em at the station."

"Come to mention it, neither can I," rejoined Ennis, and most of the other members said the same.

Dick knew it was time to take the bull by the horns, and he did so with characteristic candour.

"Neither Harwood nor Greenfoot can play this afternoon," he said, "for the simple reason that they haven't come."

"Not come!" exclaimed Lyon. "But what in thunder's the good of a trained reserve if it's left playing marbles in the school-yard?"

"Really, Forge, this is a staggerer!" Lake put in. "Surely you should have seen to it that those two came along to-day."

"There were reasons why they shouldn't," said Dick curtly. "I take full responsibility. It was I who told them to stay behind. Don't ask me why, for I prefer not to tell."

They stared at him strangely. Only Roger understood, and he itched to give the team the good and proper reason for the absence of Harwood's gang. If the team knew that the missing reserves were infected by the gambling-taint they would, Roger was certain, emphatically approve the captain's action in leaving them behind. Without this knowledge, they could be pardoned for thinking the captain's action high-handed.

Nobody spoke for a time. Some turned angrily red, others looked sulky, all seemed more or less resentful. But Dick did not spare himself. As usual, he went the whole hog by saying:

"They're absent, chaps, and even if they'd been here they wouldn't have played. I shouldn't have let them."

"Oh, but I say, Forge, you're not the whole committee," exclaimed Lake.

There being a slight murmur of approval at this, Roger deemed it his duty to break a lance in defence of his chum.

"You fellows are forgetting," he said, "that, by the rules of Foxenby, the football captain is in entire command on the day of the match. If reserves are needed, he chooses them himself to suit the occasion."

"Clever," sneered Lake. "You'll be called to the Bar if you're not careful, Cayton."

But none could deny that Roger's reading of the rules was correct. If the captain chose to discuss matters with the rest of the team, it was purely an act of grace on his part. He could, if he wished, mentally complete his team without consulting anybody. Being neither an autocrat nor a fool, he preferred to seek their advice before coming to a decision.

"We've some spare shirts and knickers in the bag," he said. "Can anybody

suggest a decent centre-half?"

Three names were mentioned, and thrice Dick shook his head.

"You can't fit a round peg in a square hole," he remarked. "I must have somebody who's played centre-half before."

"Ditto at inside-left, I suppose?" asked Lyon.

"Precisely, Lyon."

"Then I'm jiggered if you'll find anybody," said Lyon, in despair. "We shall have to field nine men and chance it."

Dick looked calmly round at the ring of dissatisfied faces. "Any other fellow got a proposal to make?" he inquired.

There were several negatives, some surly, some peevish.

"Very well," said Dick. "I must settle this little dilemma in my own way. The centre-half of the second eleven is young Osbody. The second-string inside-left is Robin Arkness. Both are sturdy kids, and will fill out the costumes fairly well. So to-day they play."

The speech of a Hyde Park "tub-thumper" could scarcely have met with more open ridicule than this. There was laughter of a sarcastic description; some even professed to believe that the captain was joking. Even Roger caught his breath a little in surprise. Osbody and Arkness were such striplings, after all. The wily Cuthbertian cracks would surely toy with them.

Unmoved by criticism, even smiling a little, Dick took from his pocket the list of the team and calmly wrote in the names of the unpopular substitutes he had chosen. Replacing the list, he turned to gaze out of the window at the landscape, whistling softly to himself.

## CHAPTER XXVII

# A Gift-goal for St. Cuthbert's

The directors of the Walsbridge Football Club had been badly "caught out". They ran hither and thither in perspiring helplessness, wondering vainly how to deal with the crowd, which swamped all their turnstiles, and leaned its weight in threatening bulk against the creaking wooden gates. Such a throng to see a schoolboys' match had never entered into their calculations. Their turnstile men couldn't take the money fast enough.

An urgent telephone message brought extra police, and the directors themselves took off their coats and took on the admission-money at the same time. Thus they packed the ground, with the result that every tree and house-roof in the neighbourhood was speedily black with the excluded spectators.

Such a multitude would have cheered the hearts of an adult club, but it was more than a little unnerving to some of the schoolboy players. Particularly awe-struck were Arkness and Osbody, who had brought spring-rattles and tin trumpets with them, intending to make a cheerful din under the blue sky of a spring day. Instead, they were bidden to the captain's presence, and coolly told to slip their quaking limbs into the shirts and knickers made ready for them.

"Oh, I say, it's not the first of April, Forge," Robin ventured to say, pathetically. "You—you're pulling our legs, aren't you?"

"I shall faint straight away," chattered Osbody, looking white enough to justify what he said.

"Buck up, youngsters," said Dick. "Don't get stage-fright. You'll fall into your stride after a bit."

"But—but it's so—so awfully unexpected," Robin stammered. "W-W-Why are we p-p-playing, Forge?"

"Because I wish you to, kid," answered Dick. "Isn't that enough?"

Robin pulled himself together and somehow conjured up a smile.

"It's enough for me," he replied. "I'll stick it out till I'm carried off the field on a shutter."

"You'll both be as right as rain," said Dick encouragingly. "I'll look after you, so don't worry."

His reassuring manner masked nervousness, nevertheless. The fellows were inclined to take offence at the watering down of the team by the inclusion of Juniors, and Dick was amazed to find them saying nasty and disheartening things to Osbody and Arkness.

"Give the youngsters a chance, chaps," he said. "Be sportsmen!"

None of them cared to continue baiting the kids after that, for Dick had a straight way with him which made defiance of his will an uncomfortable business. Ennis, who had said nothing at all, had the good grace to go on the opposite tack by cheering the youngsters up, an example which Lyon and some others followed, and the team generally felt lighter in heart when a better feeling prevailed. To start divided amongst themselves would be like making a present of the match to St. Cuthbert's.

Outside the dressing-room Dick was hailed by "Chuck" Smithies, very quietly dressed, for him, in navy blue, and quite obviously relishing an excellent cigar.

"One of the clinking brand which came from your sporting aunt, sonny," he said. "Oh, I guessed it was she! Is she here? No? Sorry—I'd have liked to thank her personally. I don't usually attend these games, laddie, but I determined to come here with clean hands. Haven't booked a single bet on the match. What a crowd! No village idiot or tomfool mascot about on this occasion, I trust? Good! Then go in and chew their ears off."

"Chewing the ears off" St. Cuthbert's would have been easier if they had left Bessingham out of the team. But the Octopus was there again in all his might, heart-and-soul in the game from the kick-off, bringing Fox after Fox within uncomfortable range of his long legs, and brushing aside Robin Arkness's plucky attentions as he would have swept a fly from his forehead.

The great crowd made delighted noises as Bessingham coolly broke up every attack, and they laughed good-naturedly at Osbody's ludicrous attempts to get

somewhere near the ball. The wily Cuthbertian forwards made rings round the lad, who, in desperation, lunged blindly at the ball, and kicked it the wrong way. Taken by surprise, Lyon tried to intercept it, but only succeeded in turning it out of the reach of Ennis, who had the mortification of watching it bob into the goal at the top corner. Lyon and Osbody between them had scored for St. Cuthbert's in the first ten minutes of the game, and that one luckless goal might all too probably settle the ownership of the Cup.

Thus early, then, had Dick's insistence on his own way brought humiliation to Foxenby. Clowes would never have made such a glaring error as to kick towards his own goal on a still afternoon like this. Clowes would never have let the Cuthbertians cross the half-way line, of course. But then, Clowes didn't happen to be there. He had preferred the fleshpots of Egypt to the County Schools' Cup, and to blame the captain for his absence was short-sighted and unfair.

Blame him they did, all the same. Why had he left Harwood at home? Furthermore, with reserve players to choose from who were bigger and brawnier by far, why did the obstinate beggar insist on including two scuttling Juniors, both of whom were trembling like leaves now under the hypnotic influence of the Octopus?

Fortunate beyond words was it that Lyon proved himself, for the remainder of that scrappy half, almost as great a full-back as the Octopus. He was unjust to himself to take bitter blame for putting the ball through his own goal, but the remembrance of that smarting reverse spurred him into a dazzling exhibition of defensive play. The Cuthbertian forwards could never get round him. He was full-back and centre-half combined, kicking and heading with splendid accuracy, keeping Ennis's hands idle for half-an-hour, smothering every shot in the locker of St. Cuthbert's helpless forward-line.

"They'd never have scored in a blue moon if Osbody hadn't managed it for them," groaned Lake, at half-time.

Dick levelled a straight look at the grumbling forward. "Remember the proverb about people in glass-houses, Lake," he answered. "We haven't shown much scoring form ourselves."

As though to pile on misfortune, Clowes and Broome turned up by a later train—full of useless apologies, of course, but seemingly rather glad of the

important difference which their absence from the side had made.

"I think, Forge, if you were to put it fairly to the Octopus, he would consent to us going on instead of Arkness and Osbody," said Broome.

"Don't make childish suggestions, Broome," said Dick. "And please don't flatter yourselves, either of you, that I'd take you on if I could. Better a willing pair of Juniors than a couple of slacking Seniors."

Having sent this well-deserved shaft home, Dick took Arkness and Osbody quietly aside, and spoke to them also for their good, but in a very different way.

"Do you know," he said, "I think we're all three a jolly sight more polite to Bessingham than we need be. We rot round him too much, and help him to become the darling of the crowd. Has it struck either of you that St. Cuthbert's are playing a deal worse, on the whole, than they did last time, when you two were spectators?"

"Why, yes," agreed Robin. "They peppered Ennis with shots then—he's a looker-on to-day."

"Exactly, kid. Now there's a golden chance for you two to come right into the limelight if you'll only take a friendly tip from me. I want you to forget you're footballers, and to try to fancy that you're nurses spoon-feeding me and Meynard—he'll catch forward passes up with his raking stride, never fear. Stop thinking for yourselves—become feeding-machines pure and simple. Are you game?"

"Rather!" the two Juniors cried, in delighted agreement.

"That's good. You two are keen rivals, I know, but you both rather admire each other, and I want you to realize this afternoon that you're pulling together in a great cause—for the honour and glory of Foxenby, to wit. Come, now, shake hands on it!"

Out shot the hand of Robin Hood, and the leader of the Squirms grasped it eagerly.

"Bravo!" cried the captain, as he turned to lead his men on to the field again. "Follow me, boys. We're all going out to the very last ounce this half!"

# CHAPTER XXVIII

## The Winning of the Cup

The big crowd was strangely quiet at the recommencement of play. It had come together with great expectations, promising itself a lot of corking thrills, for the magic of the previous duel between Forge and the Octopus had never lost its charm. Everyone knew that the champions of Foxenby and St. Cuthbert's must be keyed up to their very highest pitch, and wondered whether, in the time that had elapsed since the last match either of the captains had developed any new wiles by which to obtain a superiority over his rival. The game was bound to be a great one for the spectators.

But on this occasion the scoring of St. Cuthbert's gift-goal seemed to have robbed the game of interest. The spectators apparently took it for granted that the Cup would become St. Cuthbert's, for Bessingham alone would see to it that no equalizer was scored. Foxenby (silly beggars) had "mucked up" any chance they had by shoving two weedy nippers into the team. St. Cuthbert's, even if they failed to score again, had only to play out time to win, opposed to a disheartened side that couldn't raise a gallop. Thus the crowd argued, wishing by now that it could have its money back and go home.

Well, there is no game so full of sensational surprises as football, and it fell out that the second half was in vivid and delightful contrast to the first. The ball hadn't been in motion two minutes before everybody noticed that something different was happening.

Of fancy work there was none—gallery play was to be scrapped, evidently. Twice in quick succession Meynard got away on the left wing, and put across two fine centres which Forge and Lake nearly made into goals, one shot striking the cross-bar and the other glancing off the goalkeeper for a corner. Though Meynard dropped this flag-kick on to the net by trying to make too sure a thing of it, St. Cuthbert's were visibly rattled by these narrow escapes.

"That outside-left of yours has got a rare turn of speed," remarked a Cuthbertian to Lyon. "He needs watching."

So they started watching him, forgetting that while two men are playing policeman to one, his pal goes unmarked and free.

This was where Robin's smaller size came in. What could a little chap like that do, anyhow? St. Cuthbert's had ceased to reckon him. So, cottoning to a significant glance from his captain, Robin stood with apparent listlessness behind the Cuthbertians who were worrying Meynard, snapped a chance, scraped the ball from their heels, and passed it back to Dick, who promptly swung it out to Lake. Lake dribbled till Bessingham came thundering down, and then ballooned the ball back to Dick, who nearly made a hole in the goalie's chest with a drive so fierce that the crowd bellowed joyfully.

In this vigorous little scene the Octopus played second fiddle, and probably he was more surprised than anybody to be left out of the movement. Having, with the rest of his side, held Robin and Osbody cheaply in the first half, some fifteen minutes went by before it struck him that the improvement in the play of the two Juniors was having an effect on the run of the game. And by the time he and his colleagues woke up to the change the mischief had been done—Foxenby had scored an equalizing goal.

Funniest goal of the season it might possibly be called—either a side-splitting fluke, or a piece of football wizardry never before attempted. Only Robin Arkness could say in which class to place it, for it was that bright-faced youngster who, with his back to St. Cuthbert's goal, and just outside the penalty-area, screwed the ball over his head into the top angle of the sticks, from whence it rebounded into play again. Robin span round and met it with his forehead, and it flew into the net like a cannon-ball at close quarters, making the astonished goalkeeper look and feel like a ventriloquist's dummy.

The great roar of cheering which greeted this extraordinary goal might have turned Robin's head if he had known for certain that it was still on his shoulders. But his delighted team-mates, swooping down upon him to smother him with congratulations, saw him sink to the ground in a dazed fashion, with both hands clasping the nape of his neck, which Robin quite thought, as he confessed afterwards, to be broken.

"Buck up, kid," said Lyon. "My stars, what a goal! The crowd's crazy about it. Hear 'em yelling!"

Robin looked with unseeing eyes at the admiring sympathizers grouped round him. Friendly fingers rubbed him back to a dim idea of his surroundings, but for the remainder of the game he was rather a wan and woebegone passenger. He struggled on, but when "time" was called, and the referee ordered the teams to go straight on for an extra fifteen minutes' play each way, Dick and Lyon made a chair of their arms and carried the small hero to the dressing-room, feeling proud, for his sake, of the sympathetic cheers which accompanied his exit.

"Give my neck a bit of a rub, Forge, and I'll carry on," said Robin, in a faint voice.

"No, you won't, kid," said Forge, gently pinching his ear. "You'll rest your head against this cushion—so—and sip the warm stuff that's offered you."

"But—but you'll only have ten men without me," stammered Robin. He made a feeble attempt to rise, while two kind hands held him firmly in his place.

"That's all in the game, younker. Don't dare to get out of this chair till we return. You've done your bit already by scoring that fine equalizer."

"I—I—oh, Forge, I didn't score it. It bounced off me!"

The captain smilingly patted his arm. "Keep that dark, nipper," he advised. "Never mind how it happened. The score is all that matters!"

To face extra time with a strong sun in their eyes and a man short was quite on a par with Foxenby's usual luck. Shrill-voiced enthusiasts urged them to play the one-back game, but Dick's idea of football sportsmanship made such advice a waste of breath. He let Lyon, Ennis, and Lebberston hold the fort for a furious fifteen minutes; the only quarter-of-an-hour of the match in which the St. Cuthbert's forwards ever made workmanlike attempts to score. Ennis battered away a dozen or more stinging shots, and the sorely tried teams, keyed up to a high pitch of excitement by the roaring of the crowd, commenced the last fifteen minutes at a pitilessly exhausting pace.

The Octopus, usually so silent, shouted out directions to his halves and

forwards—tried, in fact, to lift them on to victory by the sheer force of example.

Twice he attempted to catch Ennis napping by shooting for goal himself, but the sun was no longer bothering Ennis, who cleared with vigour. It was the second of these big clearances which fell at the feet of Osbody, and that loyal young gentleman, slavishly obeying instructions, parted with his prize at once to Dick, past whom the Octopus had rushed in his praise-worthy endeavour to score.

"Offside!" yelled half-a-dozen Cuthbertian players in chorus. "Offside, sir!" they repeated, as the referee made no sign. "Whistle there, please!"

It is this insistence on teaching the referee his business which costs so many teams dear. While Cuthbertians called reproachfully to the referee, Dick galloped on unchallenged, with painful memories of the earlier final tie serving to speed his footsteps.

No half-witted "mascot" in blue-and-white paper costume to cut across his path this time! But he had still to pass Bessingham's partner, and that less-resourceful full-back, angered by the referee's disregard of what St. Cuthbert's considered a clear case of offside, permitted his fury to outweigh his discretion. Making no attempt to get the ball, he took a tigerish spring at Dick and passionately kicked him off his feet a full yard within the penalty-area.

"Steady, you rotter!" Dick could not help saying.

Never was there a more flagrant case for punishment, and the referee inflicted it immediately. His arm shot out towards the penalty-mark, and a few moments later he was firmly devoting himself to the hard task of persuading the sore-headed Cuthbertians, still pleading "offside", to form up behind the goal-line till the spot-kick was taken.

"Get behind, boys," snapped Bessingham. "Bawling won't alter it. Keep cool!"

Penalty-kicks are thrilling things at most times, but the situation now was so "nervy" that Dick almost wished that the duties of captaincy could be passed on to someone else. The difficulty was that Broome had always hitherto taken penalty-kicks with success, and Broome was mixing uselessly with the crowd to-day.

Who, then, was to take the all-important kick? Lyon, perhaps? But the only goal of Lyon's career had been scored that day against his own side. Meynard or Lake? Both these wingers had shown a disposition to funk on big occasions, and could not be depended on. That kick was more precious to Foxenby than the Koh-i-noor diamond would have been, and must not be left to a chance lunge from an inexperienced boot.

"The responsibility is clearly mine," Dick thought, as he rubbed his bruised shins. "No use shuffling it. I will take the kick myself."

What a moment of trial that was for the captain of Foxenby!

The goalkeeper danced about to put him off his shot, and the thud of his boots could be heard in the breathless silence of the crowd. Dick had an instinctive contempt for all forms of parade, and the custodian's ludicrous antics, intended to upset him, actually helped to steady his nerves. Drawing back one pace only, he suddenly let fly, and a low shot flashed under the goalie's feet as that too-animated Cuthbertian was actually jumping in the air.

"It's in!" yelled Lyon, at the top of his voice. "Hurrah!"

Justice at last—poetic justice! Dick Forge had scored his long-deferred goal, and it was not in St. Cuthbert's power to draw level in the few minutes that remained for play. Far from seeming likely to, they were penned up in their own quarters for the rest of the time, a spent force, beaten and knowing it. To Foxenby, finishing with ten men only, had gone the hard-earned spoils of victory.

The referee's whistle blew for time—a shrill blast that was sweeter than concert-music to Foxes everywhere. Then "snap" went the frayed ropes, and the frantic crowd swarmed over the field to become closer acquainted with the heroes of the match.

But Bessingham and Lyon, two stalwart young giants, forestalled them there. Tackling Dick, in Rugby fashion, before he could escape, they hoisted him on to their shoulders and carried him to the pavilion, where Lady Maingay stood smilingly ready to present him with the County Schools' Cup. Meanwhile, his arms grew hot in their sockets through the grabbing enthusiasts who sought the honour of shaking a victor's hand. Now and again a well-known face bobbed up in the crowd to gladden him with smiling appreciation. Roger Cayton, featherweight though he was, somehow got near enough to wave before his eyes

the latest issue of the *Rooke's House Rag*. Dick understood the inner meaning of the sign, and the chums exchanged joyous looks. What happy days of co-editorship there would be in the sunny days to come!

It was a crowded hour of glory for the Merry Men and the Squirms too. Sufficiently revived by this time, Robin was hauled out of the dressing-room and borne shoulder-high to the presentation ceremony. The Squirms carried Osbody in the same way, and the presence of the eager-faced youngsters was enjoyed by the officials as a pleasant bit of by-play.

"Put me down, you chumps!" stormed Robin. "You're shaking my teeth loose. I *didn't* score that equalizer. It just hit my thick head and buzzed back."

"Shut up about that, Robin," cried Little John. "No need to tell everybody you fluked it. You scored, and that's enough!"

"Rather!" said David of Doncaster. "Hold him right up, Merry Men, where everybody can see him. Good old Robin!"

Lady Maingay, as wholeheartedly a supporter of St. Cuthbert's as she was of Foxenby, made a tactful speech that flattered both victors and vanquished. Then she handed the bulged Cup (a veteran of twenty seasons, older than any player who had battled for it that day) to Foxenby's captain, who found making a speech even harder than scoring a goal had been.

"Your ladyship—ladies and gentlemen—I am a duffer at talking," he began, "but I am not afraid to say that I'm the proudest chap in the county to-day." (Cries of "Bravo, Forge!" "Played, sir!") "There never was a straw to choose between us and St. Cuthbert's, but both sides couldn't win. If old Bessingham could have cut himself into two parts (laughter) and had been a forward as well as a full-back, we never should have won. Bessingham is a marvel. Bessingham is a brick. Three cheers for the Octopus and his wonderful team, you Foxes!"

Say, you should have heard the Foxes, yell then! The crowd joined in to a man, for everybody loved the Octopus, even those whose skin had been scraped off by his flying boots. They called on him for a speech now, and the reception he got when he drew up his lanky form to make it was every bit as deafening as the din that greeted Dick.

"Your ladyship, and ladies and gentlemen, I'm glad the match ended as it

did," he said. ("Good old Bessingham—real old sport!") "Foxenby won the Cup last year fair and square, and it was no wish of mine that we should play again. To-day they whacked us beyond question. ('Well said, Bess.') Old Forge was the 'daddy' of us all (laughter), long streets and terraces ahead of any player on the field. ('Excepting you, Bess!') No, not excepting me—good old Forge had me skinned a mile at the finish. (Lots more laughter.) How did he win the match? By turning two raw nippers into footballers almost as Foxy as himself (great cheering from the Merry Men and the Squirms). He outwitted us—made children of us. Give him two Cups, gentlemen—he's won this one twice! Cuthbertians, three cheers for Forge, the better captain of the better team."

So Dick got another rousing cheer on top of the first one, and Foxes and Cuthbertians talk to this day of how Forge and the Octopus clasped hands over the Cup and were forthwith "horsed" in triumph all the way from the football-field to the railway-station, so that people who did not know either imagined them to be victorious colleagues on the same side.

"I'll have my revenge on you yet, my honourable opponent," said Bessingham, on parting. "We shall meet in conflict again."

"In the final of the English Cup, I hope," laughed Dick, in reply. "Till then, old friend, au revoir!"

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