



NID AND NOD

RAIPH HENRY BARBOUR



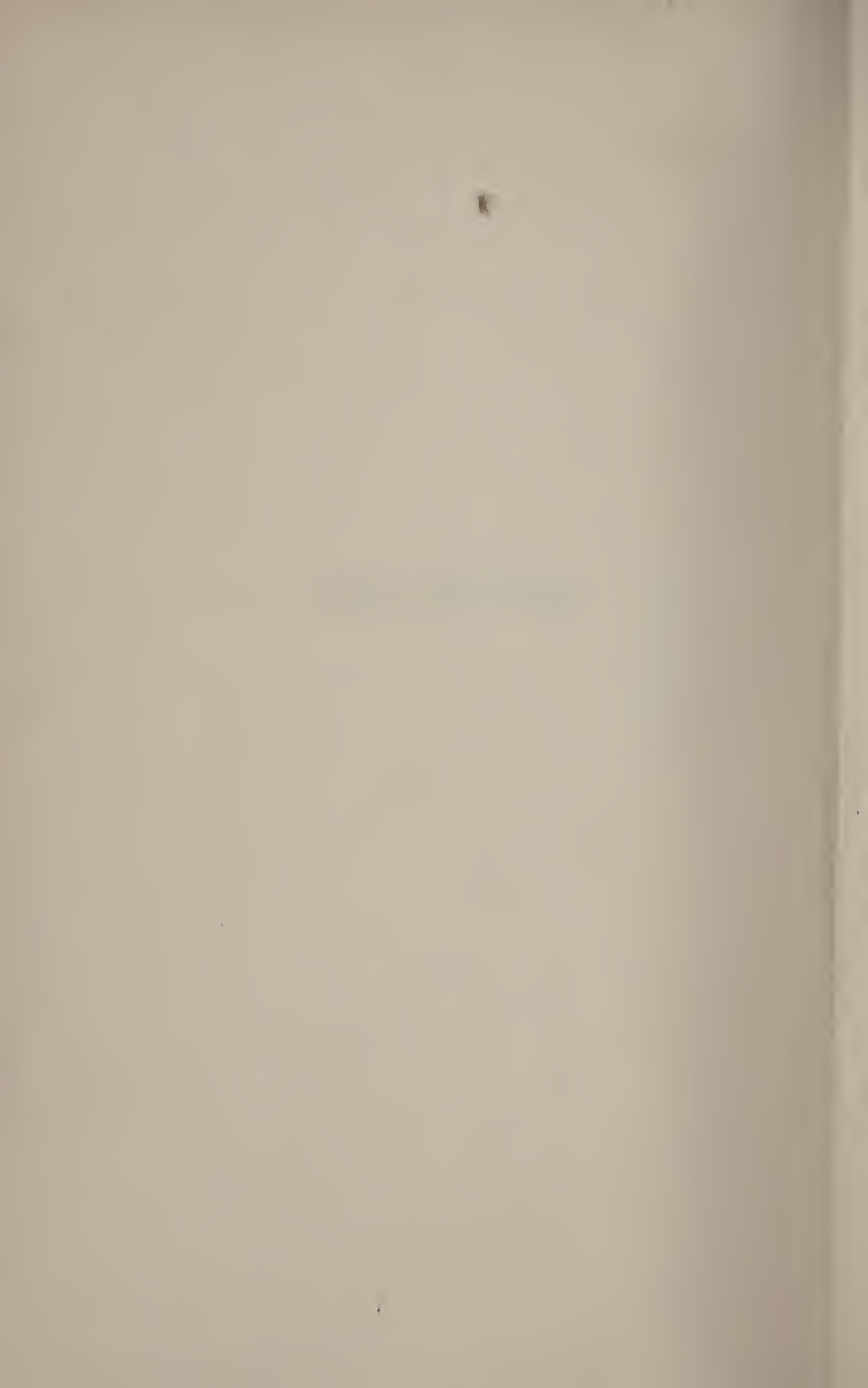
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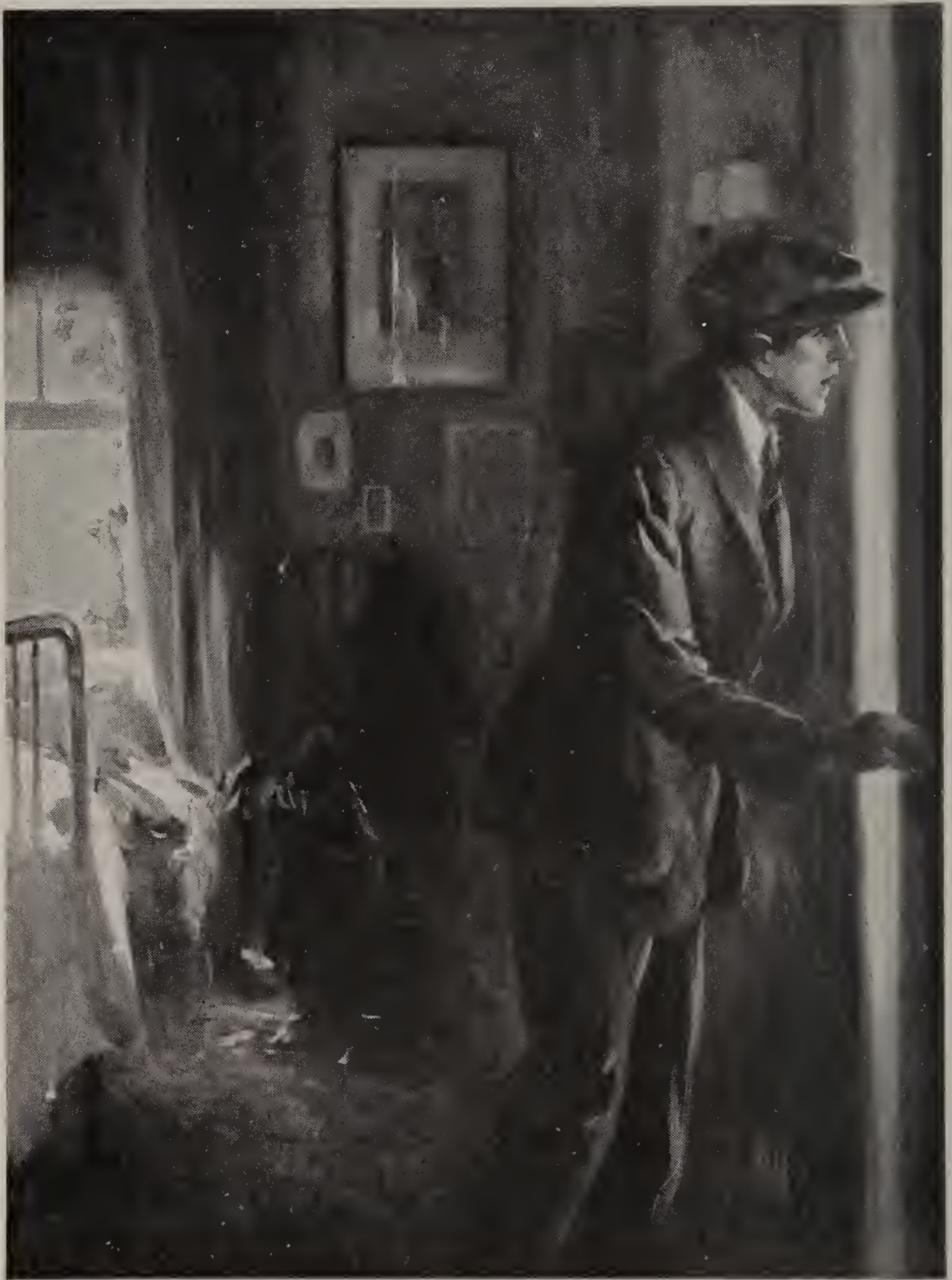
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NID AND NOD





The door was opened and the boy peered into the dim hall

NID AND NOD

BY

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

Author of "THE CRIMSON SWEATER," "HARRY'S ISLAND,"
"TEAM-MATES," "THE TURNER TWINS," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

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NID AND NOD

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CHAPTER I

AT THE LITTLE BLUE SHOP

A BELL tinkled as the door of the little blue shop opened and closed, and continued to tinkle, although decreasingly, as the stout youth who had entered turned unhesitatingly but with a kind of impressive dignity toward where in the dimmer light of the store a recently installed soda-fountain, modest of size but brave with white marble and nickel, gleamed a welcome.

In response to the summons of the bell a girl came through the door that led to the rear of the little building. As she came she fastened a long apron over the dark blue dress and sent an inquiring hand upward to the smooth brown hair. Evidently reassured, she said, "Hello," in a friendly voice and, having established herself behind the counter, looked questioningly at the customer.

“Hello,” responded the boy. “Give me a chocolate sundae with walnuts and a slice of pineapple, please. And you might put a couple of cherries on top. Seen Nod this afternoon?”

The girl shook her head as she deposited a portion of ice-cream in a dish and pressed the nicked disk marked “Chocolate.” “I’ve just this minute got back from school,” she replied. “Aren’t you out early to-day?”

“No recitation last hour,” the youth explained as his eyes followed her movements fascinatedly. “That all the chopped walnuts I get, Polly?”

“It certainly is when you ask for pineapple and cherries, too,” answered the girl firmly. She tucked a small spoon on the side of the alarming concoction, laid a paper napkin in front of the customer, and placed the dish beside it. “Would you like a glass of water?”

The youth paused in raising the first spoonful to his mouth and looked to see if she spoke with sarcasm. Apparently, however, she did not, and so he said, “Yes, please,” or most of it; the last of it was decidedly unintelligible, proceeding as it did from behind a mouthful of ice-cream, choco-

late syrup, and cherry. When the glass of water had been added to the array before him and he had swallowed three spoonfuls of the satisfying medley, the stout youth sighed deeply, and his gaze went roaming to an appealing display of pastry beyond the girl.

“Guess I ’ll have a cream-cake,” he announced. “And one of those tarts, please. What ’s in ’em, Polly?”

“Raspberry jam.”

“Uh-huh. All right. Better make it two, then.”

Polly Deane eyed him severely. “Kewpie Proudtree,” she exclaimed, “you know you ought n’t to eat all this sweet stuff!”

“Oh, what ’s the difference?” demanded the youth morosely. “Gee, a fellow can’t starve all the time! Maybe I won’t go in for football next year, anyway. It ’s a dog’s life. No desserts you can eat, no candy, no—”

“Well, I think that ’s a very funny way for you to talk,” interrupted Polly indignantly. “After the way you played in the Farview game and everything! Why, every one said you were just wonderful, Kewpie!”

Kewpie's gloom was momentarily dissipated, giving place to an expression of gratification. He hastily elevated a portion of ice-cream to his mouth and murmured deprecatingly, "Oh, well, but—"

"And you know perfectly well," continued the girl, "that pastry and sweets make you fat, and Mr. Mulford won't like it a bit, and—"

It was Kewpie's turn to interrupt, and he did it vigorously. "What of it?" he demanded. "I don't have to stay fat, do I? I've got all summer to train down again, have n't I? Gee, Polly, what's the use of starving all the winter and spring just to play football for a couple of months next fall? Other fellows don't do it."

"Why, Kewpie, you know very well that most of them do! You don't see Ned and Laurie eating pastry here every afternoon."

"Huh, that's a lot different. Nod's out for baseball, and Nid's scared to do anything Nod does n't do. Why, gee, if one of those twins broke his leg the other'd go and bust his! I never saw anything so—so disgusting. Say, don't I get those tarts?"

"Well, you certainly won't if you talk like that

about your best friends," answered Polly crisply.

"Oh, well, I did n't say anything," muttered Kewpie, grinning. "Those fellows are different, and you know it. Gee, if I was on the baseball team I 'd let pastry alone, too, I guess. It stands to reason. You understand. But it does n't make any difference to any one what I do. They would n't let me play basket-ball, and when I wanted to try for goal-tend on the hockey-team Scoville said it would n't be fair to the other teams to hide the net entirely. Smart Aleck! Besides, I 'm only a hundred and sixty-one pounds right now."

"That 's more than you were in the fall, I 'm certain," said Polly severely.

"Sure," agreed Kewpie. "Gee, when I came out of the Farview game I was down to a hundred and fifty-one and a half! I guess my normal weight 's about a hundred and sixty-five," he added comfortably. "What about those tarts and the cream-cake?"

"You may have the cream-cake and one tart, and that 's all. I ought n't to let you have either. Laurie says—"

"Huh, he says a lot of things," grunted

Kewpie, setting his teeth into the crisp flakiness of the tart. "And I notice that what he says is mighty important around here, too." Kewpie smiled slyly, and Polly's cheeks warmed slightly. "Anything Nod says or does is all right, I suppose."

"What Laurie says is certainly a lot more important than what you say, Mr. Proudtree," replied Polly warmly, "and—"

"Now, say," begged Kewpie, "I did n't mean to be fresh, honest Polly! Gee, if you 're going to call me 'Mister Proudtree' I won't ever—ever—"

He could n't seem to decide what it was he would n't ever do, and so he thrust the last of the tart into his mouth and looked hurt and reproachful. When Kewpie looked that way no one, least of all the soft-hearted Polly, could remain offended. Polly's haughtiness vanished, and she smiled. Finally she laughed merrily, and Kewpie's face cleared instantly.

"Kewpie," said Polly, "you 're perfectly silly."

"Oh, I 'm just a nut," agreed the-boy cheerfully. "Well, I guess I 'll go over to the field

and see what 's doing. If you see Nod tell him I 'm looking for him, will you?"

Polly looked after him concernedly. Something was wrong with Kewpie. He seemed gloomy and almost—almost reckless! Of late he had rioted in sweets and the stickiest of fountain mixtures, which was not like him. She wondered if he had a secret sorrow, and decided to speak to Laurie and Ned about him.

Polly Deane was rather pretty, with an oval face not guiltless of freckles, brown hair and brown eyes and a nice smile. She was not quite sixteen years old. Polly's mother—known to the boys of Hillman's School as the "Widow"—kept the little blue-painted shop, and Polly, when not attending the Orstead High School, helped her. The shop occupied the front room on the ground floor. Behind it was a combined kitchen, dining and living room, and up-stairs were two sleeping chambers. Mrs. Deane could have afforded a more luxurious home, but she liked her modest business and often declared that she did n't know where she 'd find a place more comfortable.

Polly was aroused from her concern over the recent customer by the abrupt realization that

he had forgotten to pay for his entertainment. She sighed. Kewpie already owed more than the school rules allowed. Just then the door opened to admit a slim, round-faced boy of about Polly's age. He had red-brown hair under his blue school cap, an impertinent nose, and very blue eyes. He wore a suit of gray, with a dark-blue sweater beneath the coat. He wore, also, a cheerful and contagious smile.

"Hello, Polly," was his greeting. "Laurie been in yet?"

"No, no one but Kewpie, Ned. He was looking for Laurie, too. He 's just gone."

"Well, I don't know where the silly hombre 's got to," said the new-comer. "He was in class five minutes ago, and then he disappeared. Thought he 'd be over here. I 'd like a chocolate ice-cream soda, please. Say, don't you hate this kind of weather? No ice and the ground too wet to do anything on. Funny weather you folks have here in the East."

"Oh, it won't be this way long," answered Polly as she filled his order. "The ground will be dry in a day or two, if it does n't rain—or snow again."

“Snow again!” exclaimed the other. “Gee-all-whillikens, does it snow all summer here?”

“Well, sometimes we have a snow in April, Ned, and this is only the twenty-first of March. But when spring does come it ’s beautiful. I just love the spring, don’t you?”

“Reckon so. I like our springs back home, but I don’t know what your Eastern springs are like yet.” He dipped into his soda and nodded approvingly. “Say, Polly, you certainly can mix ’em. Congreve’s has got nothing on you. Talking about spring, back in California—”

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. The new arrival was a slim, round-faced youth of about Polly’s age. He had reddish-brown hair under the funny little blue cap he wore, a somewhat impertinent nose, and very blue eyes. He wore a suit of gray knickers with coat to match and a dark blue sweater beneath the coat. Also, he wore a most cheerful smile. The first arrival turned and, with spoon suspended, viewed him sternly.

“I bid you say where you have been,” he demanded.

The new-comer threw forth his right hand, palm

upward, and poised himself on the toes of his wet shoes like a ballet-dancer.

“In search of you, my noble twin,” he answered promptly. “Hello, Polly!”

“Punk!” growled Ned Turner. “‘Been’ and ‘twin’! My eye!”

“Perfectly allowable rime, old son. What are you having?”

“Chocolate ice-cream soda. Say, what became of you after school? I looked all over for you.”

“Ran up to the room a minute. Thought you ’d wait, you dumb-bell.”

“I did wait. Then I thought you ’d started over here. Whose wheel is that you ’ve got out there?”

“Search me. Elk Thurston’s, I guess. I found it doing nothing in front of West. I’ll take a pineapple and strawberry, please, Polly.”

“Well, you had a nerve! Elk will scalp you.”

Laurie shrugged and accepted his refreshment. “I only borrowed it,” he explained carelessly.

“Here comes the mob.”

The afternoon influx of Hillman’s boys was begun by two tousled-haired juniors demanding “Vanilla sundaes with chopped walnuts, please,

Miss Polly!" and after them the stream became steady for several minutes. Further sustained conversation with Polly being no longer possible, Ned and Laurie took their glasses to the other side of the shop, where Laurie perched himself on the counter and watched the confusion. Ned's eyes presently strayed to the array of pastry behind the further counter, and he sighed wistfully. But as Laurie, who was in training for baseball, might not partake of such things, Ned resolutely removed his gaze from that part of the shop, not without a second sigh, and, turning it to the door, nudged Laurie in the ribs with an elbow.

"Thurston," he breathed.

Laurie looked calmly at the big upper-middle boy who was entering. "Seems put out about something," he murmured.

"Say," demanded "Elk" Thurston in a voice that dominated the noise of talk and laughter and the almost continuous *hiss* of the soda-fountain, "what smart guy swiped my bicycle and rode it over here?"

Elkins Thurston was seventeen, big, dark-complexioned, and domineering, and as the chatter died into comparative silence the smaller boys

questioned each other with uneasy glances. No one, however, confessed, and Elk, pushing his way roughly toward the fountain, complained bitterly. "Well, some fresh Aleck did, and I 'll find out who he was, too, and when I do I 'll teach him to let my things alone!"

"What 's the trouble, Elk?" asked Laurie politely. Ned, nudging him to keep still, found Elk observing him suspiciously.

"You heard, I guess," answered Elk. "Did you have it?"

"Me?" said Ned. "No, I did n't have it."

"I don't mean you; I mean him." Elk pointed an accusing finger at Laurie.

"Me?" asked Laurie. "What was it you lost?"

"Shut up," whispered Ned. "He 'll come over and—"

"My bicycle, that 's what! I 'll bet you swiped it, you fresh kid."

"What 's it look like?" inquired Laurie interestedly.

"Never you mind." Elk strode across, fixing Laurie with angry eyes. "Say, you took it, did n't you?"

“Must have,” said Laurie cheerfully. “Did you want it?”

“Did I—did I want— Say, for two pins I ’d—”

“But, my dear old chap, how was I to know that you ’d be wanting to ride it?” asked Laurie earnestly. “There it was, leaning against the steps, not earning its keep, and you had n’t said a thing to me about wanting it, and so I just simply borrowed it. Honest, Elk, if you ’d so much as hinted to me, never so delicately, that—”

There were titters from the younger members of the much interested audience and even unconcealed laughter from the older boys, and Elk’s dark countenance took on a deeper and more angry red as he thrust it close to Laurie’s.

“That ’ll be about all for you,” he growled. “You ’re one of these funny guys, aren’t you? Must have your little joke, eh? Well, see how you like this one!”

Elk raised his right hand, unclenched but formidable. An expectant hush filled the little store. Polly, with troubled eyes fixed on the drama, deluged a pineapple ice-cream with soda until it dripped on the counter below. Laurie continued to smile.

CHAPTER II

KEWPIE STATES HIS CASE

“**W**HATEVER ’S going on?” asked a pleasant voice from the doorway that led into the room behind the shop. “Is—is anything wrong, Polly? Dear me, child, you ’re running that all over the counter!”

More than two dozen pairs of eyes turned to where Mrs. Deane looked perplexedly about her. She was a sweet-faced little woman whose white hair was contradicted by a plump, unlined countenance and rosy cheeks. Elk’s uplifted arm dropped slowly back. For a short moment the silence continued. Then a veritable Babel of voices arose. “Hello, Mrs. Deane!” “Say, Mrs. Deane, don’t you remember me paying you ten cents last Friday? Miss Polly says I still owe—” “Mrs. Deane, when are you going to have some more of those twirly things with the cream filling?” “Mrs. Deane, will you wait on

me, please? I want—” “Aw, I was ahead of him—”

The Widow Deane beamed and made her way to the rear of the counter, greeting the boys by name. She was fond of all boys, but those of Hillman's School she looked on as peculiarly her own, and she knew the names of nearly every one of them and, to a remarkable extent, their taste in the matter of pastry and beverages. “I could n't imagine what had happened,” she was explaining to Cas Bennett as she filled his order for two apple turnovers. “All of a sudden everything became so still in here! What was it?”

Cas grinned. “Oh, just some of Nod Turner's foolishness,” he replied evasively. “He and Thurston were—were talking.”

They were still talking, for that matter, although their fickle audience no longer heeded. The interruption had quite spoiled Elk's great scene, and after lowering his arm he had not raised it again. Even he realized that you could n't start anything when Mrs. Deane was present. But he was still angry and was explaining to Laurie none too elegantly that vengeance was merely postponed and not canceled. Ned,

maintaining outward neutrality, watched Elk very closely. Ned had an idea, perhaps a mistaken one, that when it came to fistic encounters it was his bounden duty to substitute for Laurie, and he had been on the point of substituting when Mrs. Deane's appearance had called a halt.

Laurie's smile gave place to sudden gravity as he interrupted Elk's flow of eloquence. "That will do," he said. "I'm not afraid of you, Thurston, but it's silly to get so upset over a trifle. Of course I shouldn't have taken your wheel, but I didn't hurt it any, and you've bawled me out quite enough, don't you think? I'll apologize, if you like, and—"

"I don't want your apology," growled Elk. "You're too blamed fresh, Turner, and you talk too much. After this you let everything of mine alone. If you don't, I'll do what I was going to do when the old lady came in. Understand?"

"Perfectly," replied Laurie soberly. "Have a soda?"

"Not with you, you little shrimp!" Elk strode away, fuming, to elbow his way to the fountain.

"What did you have to say that for?" asked Ned. "You had him pretty nearly calmed down,

and then you had to spoil it all by offering him a drink. When he said you talk too much he was dead right!"

"Oh, well, what 's he want to kick up such a fuss for?" asked Laurie cheerfully. "Come on. I 've got to beat it to gym for practice."

They waved a farewell to Polly over the heads and shoulders of the throng about the fountain, but that young lady demanded speech with them and left her duties for a hasty word nearer the door. "I 've just got to see you boys about Kewpie," she announced. "It 's very important. Can't you come back a minute before supper, Ned?"

"Kewpie?" asked Laurie. "What 's wrong with him?"

"I don't know. That 's what I want to talk about. There is n't time now."

"All right, we 'll be back about five thirty," agreed Ned. "By. See you later."

"Wonder what 's up," said Laurie when, having reached School Park, they turned their steps briskly over the slushy pavements toward Hillman's. "Looked perfectly normal last time I saw him."

“Kewpie? Sure, all except his size. That ’s not normal. By the way, he was looking for you, Polly said. Matter of life or death.”

“Huh, I know what he wants. He ’s got it into that crazy head of his that he can pitch, and he wants me to give him a try-out. I sort of half promised I would.”

“Mean he wants to pitch for the nine?” asked Ned incredulously.

“Well, he wants to get on the squad, anyway. Thinks that if I tell Mr. Mulford he ’s sort of good, Pinky will take him on.”

“Would he?”

Laurie shrugged. “I don’t believe. Mulford warned the fellows two weeks back that if they didn’t report for indoor work he didn’t want them later. And he generally keeps his word, Pinky does.”

“Why didn’t Kewpie think of it ’before?” asked Ned.

“Search me, old dear. What ’s troubling me is that he ’s thought of it now. He ’s been pestering the life out of me for a week.”

“What ’s he want you to look him over for? Why doesn’t he ask Cas Bennett or some

one who knows something about pitching?"

"Reckon he knows they would n't bother with him. Thinks because Pinky 's got it into his old bean that he can make a catcher of me that I can spot a Mathewson or a Mays with my eyes shut. I appreciate his faith in me and all that, Ned, and it wounds me sorely that my own kith and kin—meaning you, old dear—have n't the same—er—boundless trust in my ability, but, just between the two of us, I don't know a curve from a drop yet, and if I can stop one with my mitt I 'm as pleased as anything and don't care a continental whether the silly thing stays in said mitt or does n't. Frankly, I 'm plumb convinced that Pinky had a brain-storm when he dragged me in from the outfield and stuck me behind a wire bird-cage!"

"Oh, I guess he knows his business," responded Ned. "Anyhow, you 've got to do your best. If you don't I 'll lick the daylight out of you."

"Don't you mean *into* me?" asked Laurie sweetly. "Seems to me that ought to be the proper phrase. Having, as I understand physiology, no daylight in me, to start with—"

"Oh, shut up! I mean what I say, though. We

agreed when we got here last fall that I was to go in for football and you for baseball. I know I did n't make very good—”

“Shut up yourself! You did so!”

“But that 's the more reason you should. The honor of the Turners is at stake, partner. Don't you forget that!”

“Oh, I 'll do my best,” sighed Laurie, “but I certainly do hold it ag'in Pinky for butting in on my quiet, peaceful life out in the field and talking me into this catching stuff. Gosh, I had no idea the human hand could propel a ball through space, as it were, the way those pitcher guys do! Some time I 'll break a couple of fingers, I suppose, and then I 'll get let out.”

“Oh, no, you won't,” said Ned grimly. “All the big league catchers have two or three broken fingers on each hand. Don't count on that, old son!”

They had crossed Walnut Street now and were stamping the melted snow from their shoes on the drier concrete sidewalk before the school property. Above the top of a privet hedge the upper stories of the school buildings were in sight, West Hall, School Hall, and East Hall facing Summit

Street in order. In the windows of West Hall, a dormitory, gaily hued cushions added color to the monotony of the brick edifice, and here and there an upthrown casement allowed a white sash-curtain to wave lazily in the breeze of a mild March afternoon. As the two boys turned in at the first gate, under the modest sign announcing "Hillman's School—Entrance Only," Laurie broke the short silence.

"What are you doing this afternoon?" he asked.

"I don't know. There is n't much a fellow can do except read."

"Or study," supplemented Laurie virtuously. "Better come along and watch practice a while."

But Ned shook his head. "Not good enough, old-timer. That baseball cage is too stuffy. Guess I'll wander over to the field and see if there 's anything going on."

"There won't be. They say the ice has gone to mush. Listen. If you see Kewpie, tell him I died suddenly, will you? And how about Polly? Shall I meet you there?"

"Yes, five thirty we told her. So-long!"

“By, old dear! Here ’s where I go and lose a finger!”

Ned climbed to the second floor of East Hall and made his way along the corridor to No. 16. The door was ajar, and when he had pushed it open he discovered Kewpie Proudtree stretched at length on the window-seat. It was no unusual thing to find Kewpie in possession of No. 16, for he appeared to like it fully as well as his own quarters across the way, if not better. Kewpie laid down the magazine he had been examining and laboriously pulled himself to a sitting posture.

“Hello, Nid,” he greeted. “Where ’s Nod?” It was Kewpie who had tagged those quaint nicknames on the Turner twins, and he never failed to use them.

“Gym,” answered Ned. “Practice.”

“*What!* What time is it? And here I ’ve been wasting my time waiting for him!”

“Too bad about your time! Get your cap, and let ’s go over to the field.”

But Kewpie shook his head sadly, relapsing against the cushions. “I ’m not feeling very well, Nid,” he said plaintively.

Ned looked at him with more interest, wondering if it could be Kewpie's state of health that was concerning Polly Deane. But it was difficult to associate that youth's bulk with illness, and Ned abandoned the idea. "What's wrong with you?" he inquired jeeringly.

"It seems to be my stomach," said Kewpie, laying a sympathetic hand on that portion of his anatomy.

"Does, eh? Well, what have you been eating?"

"Eating? Nothing much. Well, I did have a cream-puff and a tart at the Widow's, but I guess it is n't that."

"Oh, no, of course not, you silly prune! And you probably had a nut sundae with whipped cream and sliced peaches and a lot of other truck on it. Funny you don't feel well, is n't it?"

"I did n't have any whipped cream," said Kewpie indignantly. "It—it makes me bilious."

"Well, come on over to the field. It'll do you good."

"I've been there. There's nothing doing,

Nid. The rink looks like tapioca pudding, and you can go in to your ankles anywhere you walk. Look at my shoes."

"Yes, and look at that window-seat, you crazy galoot! Why don't you wipe your dirty feet on your own cushions?"

"Oh, that 'll come off." Kewpie flicked at the muddy stains with a nonchalant hand. "Say, listen. I've been trying to get hold of Nod all day. How long 's he going to practise?"

"Search me. They keep at it until five or a bit after, I think. What you got on your so-called mind, Kewpie?"

Kewpie hesitated and finally decided to take Ned into his confidence. "Well, it 's like this," he began impressively. "A fellow needs more exercise than he gets along this time of year, Nid. Of course, it 's all right for you fellows who play-basket-ball or hockey, but I could n't get into those things, and there is n't much else to keep you fit. Now—"

"Except pastry at the Widow Deane's, Kewpie."

Kewpie ignored the interruption. "Well, any-

way, I 've been thinking that if I could get into baseball it would be a mighty good thing for me. Sort of keep me in training, you know. I—I 'm likely to put on weight if I don't watch out. You understand."

"What 's your line?" asked Ned innocently. "Short-stop?"

Kewpie grinned. "Pitcher," he said.

"Really? Why, I did n't know you were a baseball pitcher. Ever worked at it much?"

"Sure," said Kewpie. Then his gaze wavered and he hedged a trifle. "Of course, I 've never tried for the team or anything like that, but last spring we had a scrub team here and I pitched on it—generally. I 've got something, too, let me tell you." Kewpie's assurance returned. "All I need is practice, Nid. Why, I can pitch a drop that 's a wonder!"

"Too bad you did n't go out for the team this year," said Ned. "I understand Mr. Mulford won't take any fellows on who did n't report early."

Kewpie's dejection returned and he nodded. "I know," he answered. "That 's why I wanted

to get Nod to—to sort of speak a good word for me. You see, if I can show him I 've got something on the ball and he tells Pinky, why, I guess Pinky would n't want to lose me."

"Why don't you speak to Pinky yourself?"

"Oh, you know how coaches are. They don't believe what you tell 'em half the time; think you 're just stringing 'em to get on the squad."

"And, of course, you would n't do that," said Ned gravely.

"Oh, shut up," answered Kewpie, grinning. "You don't think I can pitch, I 'll bet."

"You win," replied Ned simply.

"All right, then, I 'll show you, by Joshua! You get Nod to catch me, and you 'll see. Honest, you might help a fellow, Nid, instead of joshing him. Why, say, look how I got you on the football team last fall! If I had n't told Joe Stevenson about you being a star half-back—"

"Yes, and you came mighty close to getting your silly dome knocked clean off you," interrupted Ned grimly. "A nice bunch of trouble you got me into!"

"Well, it came out all right, did n't it?" asked Kewpie irrepressibly. "Did n't you win the old

game for us with that kick of yours? Sure, you did! I 'll say so!"

"Never you mind about that, old son. If you expect me to help you get on the baseball team you need n't crack up what you did last fall!"

Kewpie looked momentarily pained, but perhaps he was accustomed to the ingratitude of human nature. Anyway, he arose with careful deliberation from the window-seat, an inquiring palm laid against his stomach, and smiled forgivingly down on Ned. "Well, I 've got to be going back," he announced. "Tell Nod I 'll be in about six, won't you? And—er—say, you don't happen to have a half-dollar you don't need right away, I suppose."

"I might," answered Ned, reaching into a pocket. "Going to bribe your way into baseball, you fat rascal?"

"No, but I went off without paying for the stuff at the Widow's, Nid; clean forgot all about it, and—"

"Kewpie, don't lie, or you won't get this!"

Kewpie grinned. "Well, I did n't exactly *forget* it, maybe, but it—it sort of passed out of my mind at the moment. You understand. I really

ought to go back there and pay it, Nid.”

“That ’s all right. I can save you the trouble. I ’m going down there myself pretty soon. How much is it?”

“Twenty cents,” faltered Kewpie.

“Fine! Then you won’t need the other thirty, old son.”

There was deep reproach in Kewpie’s face as he went out.

CHAPTER III

THE "A. R. K. P." IS FORMED

FEW customers patronized the little blue shop on Pine Street between five and six. Hillman's discouraged the consumption of sweets so close to the school supper-hour, and, while there was no rule against it, the fellows felt themselves more or less on honor to observe the doctor's frequently expressed wish. Neighbors ran in at intervals for a loaf of bread or cake or ten cents' worth of whipped cream, but for the most part, as six o'clock approached, the bell tinkled infrequently. Consequently the conference held this afternoon in the Widow Deane's sitting-room, which was also kitchen and dining-room and parlor, was almost undisturbed. The conference was participated in by four persons, Polly, Ned, Laurie, and Mae Ferrand. Mae's presence had been unforeseen, but as she was Polly's particular chum and, as Laurie phrased it, "one of the bunch," it occasioned no embarrassment. Mae

was about Polly's age and perhaps a bit prettier, although, to quote Laurie again, it all depended on whether you liked light hair or dark. Mae's hair was pure sunshine, and her skin was milk-white and rose-pink; and, which aroused Polly's envy, she never freckled.

As the four had known each other since autumn there was no stiffness apparent in either speech or action. Ned lolled back in the comfortable old patent rocker, with his legs over one arm of it, and Laurie swung his feet from the table, secure in the knowledge that Polly's mother was upstairs. Laurie had a weakness for positions allowing him full liberty for his feet. Polly was talking. She and Mae, arms entwined, occupied the couch between the windows. A shining kettle on the stove hissed cozily, and a big black cat, Towser by name, purred in Ned's lap as he scratched her head.

“There 's something wrong with him,” stated Polly convincingly. “I 've noticed it for quite a while, more than two weeks. He looks dreadfully gloomy and unhappy, and he—he 's absent-minded, too. Just this afternoon he went off

without thinking a thing about paying for a sundae and some cakes he had."

Ned grinned but said nothing. Laurie winked gravely.

"And that 's another thing," continued Polly. "It 's perfectly awful the way he eats sweet things, Laurie. He comes in every day and, if I 'd let him, he 'd make himself sick with cream-puffs and tarts and candy. It just seems as if he did n't care what happened to him, as if he was—was *desperate!* Why, he told me to-day that maybe he would n't play football any more!"

"I guess he was just talking," said Mae.

"I don't think so." Polly shook her head. "He acts funny. Have n't you noticed it, Laurie?"

"Yes, but he always did act funny. He 's a nut."

"No, he is n't; he 's a real nice boy, and you ought n't to talk like that. He 's unhappy, and we ought to help him."

"All right," agreed Laurie cheerfully. "What 'll we do?"

"Well, I suppose that first of all we should find

out what's worrying him," answered Polly thoughtfully. "You—you have to know the disease before you apply the remedy." Polly was plainly rather pleased with that statement, and so was Mae. Mae squeezed her friend's arm in token of appreciation. Laurie allowed that it was a "wise crack" but wanted to know how Polly proposed to make the discovery. "Far as I can see," he added, "Kewpie's much the same as usual, if not more so. Although, to tell the honest gospel truth, I haven't seen an awful lot of him just recently. I've been sort of keeping out of his way because he's after me to see him pitch so's I can ask Pinky to let him on the baseball squad."

"It couldn't be that, do you think?" asked Polly of the room at large. "I mean, you don't suppose he's hurt because you've been avoiding him? He might think that you'd gone back on him, Laurie, and I guess that Kewpie has a very sensitive nature."

Ned snorted. "Kewpie's nature's about as sensitive as a—a whale's!"

"I don't know anything about whales," declared Polly with dignity, "but I do know that

very often folks who don't seem sensitive are actually the very sensitivest of all. And I am quite sure that if Kewpie thought Laurie had—had deserted him—”

“Hey, hold hard, Polly! Gee, I have n't deserted the poor prune. I—I 've been busy lately and—and—well, that 's all there is to it. Gosh, I like Kewpie. He 's all right, is n't he, Ned?”

“Yes. Look here, Miss Chairwoman and Ladies and Gentlemen of the Convention, the only thing that 's wrong with Kewpie is that he does n't know what to do with himself. Ever since he stopped playing football he 's been like a chap who 's lost his job and can't find another one. Of course, at first it was n't so bad, for Christmas vacation was coming. But for the last couple of months he 's just sort of mooned around, getting sore-headed because he could n't make the basket-ball team or the hockey team or anything else. Give the old chap something to do and he 'll snap out of it. He comes over here and fills up on past y and stuff because he has n't anything better tⁱ do and has a sweet tooth, anyway. Laurie aⁱn I have told him often enough that he ought to cut it out, but he says he does n't care

whether he gets on the eleven next fall or not. That 's just guff, of course. If they had spring football practice here he 'd behave himself, but they don't. Only trouble with Kewpie is he 's lost his ambition."

After that long speech Ned subsided further into the rocker. Mae looked across at him admiringly. "I 'm sure Ned 's quite right, Polly," she declared.

"Well, I 'm glad if he is," said Polly with a sigh of relief. "I was dreadfully afraid that he had some—some secret sorrow in his life, like—like a cruel stepmother or—or a father who drank or something. If it 's only what Ned thinks it is, why, everything 's quite easy, because getting on the baseball team will be just the thing for him."

"How 's he going to get there?" asked Laurie suspiciously.

"Why, I thought you said he wanted you to help him!"

"I did, but what he wants and what I aim to do—"

"Kewpie could n't play baseball, Polly," said Ned. "Look at him!"

"But I 've seen stout boys play baseball plenty

of times," Polly protested. "Two years ago we had a first baseman on the high school team who was every bit as fat as Kewpie Proudtree. You remember George Wallen, Mae."

"But it is n't only his fatness, or stoutness, or whatever you like to call it," insisted Laurie. "He is n't built right for baseball. Gee, think of Kewpie trying to beat out a bunt or sliding to second! Besides, hang it, I could n't get him on the team if he really could pitch! Pinky said positively—"

"Is he a pitcher?" asked Polly eagerly.

"No, but he wants people to think he is."

"But that would make it lots easier, Laurie! A pitcher does n't have to run much, and—"

"Why does n't he? Don't you think he has to take his turn at the bat sometimes?"

"But he never hits the ball," replied Polly triumphantly, "and so he does n't need to run!"

"She had you there, partner," laughed Ned.

"Well, just the same," answered Laurie, grinning, "I 'll be hanged if I 'm going to ask Pinky to let Kewpie on the squad just so he won't be lonesome. Pinky would n't listen to me, anyway."

"You don't know," said Polly. "And I think

you really ought to try. Yes, I do! Kewpie 's having a miserable time of it, and he 's ruining himself for football, and it 's our duty to the school to do everything we can so he won't!"

"Say that again," begged Ned, but Polly paid no heed.

"Besides," she went on warmly, "we all pretend to be his friends, and I guess a friend ought to be willing to make some sacrifices for you, and it would n't be very much for Laurie to get him on the baseball team and—"

"But I tell you I can't do it!" wailed Laurie.

"You don't know. You have n't tried. Don't you think he ought to try, Mae?"

"I certainly do," said that young lady decisively.

"Don't you, Ned?" persisted Polly earnestly.

"Not a doubt of it in the world," answered Ned gravely.

Laurie glared indignantly at him, but Ned was looking at Towser. After a brief silence Laurie sighed gloomily.

"All right," he said. "But I can tell you right now that it won't do any good. Mr. Mulford said he would n't take on any fellow who did n't re-

port for early practice, and he means it. Besides, Kewpie 's no more of a pitcher than—than I am!"

"I know, Laurie," said Polly persuasively, "but maybe with practice, and if you showed him—"

Ned chortled. Laurie, although he wanted to smile, kept a straight face.

"Of course," he agreed, "I might do that. Well, I 'll do it, though I 'll feel like a perfect ass when I speak to Pinky about it."

"There," said Polly in triumph. "I knew we could do something if we all put our heads together! And I do hope it will be all right. Kewpie 's really a very dear boy, and he certainly did wonderfully at football last fall and he 's just got to keep on. I do think, though, that we should keep this quite to ourselves, don't you, Ned?"

"Don't just see how we can. If Kewpie gets on the baseball squad he 's almost sure to know something about it. He 's not such a fool as he looks sometimes, Polly."

Polly stared. "I don't see—" she began. Then the twinkle in Ned's eye explained. "Of course I did n't mean that, silly! I meant that

Kewpie should n't know that we—that we 'd been discussing him and that we had—well, conspired, Ned. Don't you see? He might resent it or something."

"I get you! We 'll make a secret society out of it, eh? Association for the Restoration—no, that won't do."

"Advancement," suggested Mae.

"Association for the Reclamation of Kewpie Proudtree!" pronounced Ned. "And the password—"

"Association for the Degradation of Laurence Turner, you mean," said Laurie dejectedly. "And there is n't any password, because he won't pass!"

"All right," agreed Ned. "But the dues are twenty cents. Here you are, Polly. You 've got 'treasurer' written all over you."

"But—but what is it?" asked Polly, refusing to accept the two dimes that Ned proffered.

"Madam, I am settling the debt of none other than our distinguished and rattle-brained friend Kewpie. At his request. It seems he—er—he neglected to settle for the entertainment you pro-

vided him this afternoon, and, torn by remorse—”

“Oh, I knew he forgot!” exclaimed Polly gladly.

“He would,” said Laurie pessimistically. “He has a perfectly remarkable forgetory. I guess he ’s the champion long-distance forgetter—”

“Don’t be horrid,” begged Polly. “With so much on his mind, it ’s no wonder he—”

“On his *what?*” exclaimed Laurie. “Ned, did you get that? Kewpie has so much on his mind! Honest, Polly, when Kewpie takes his cap off he has n’t—”

The kettle caused a diversion by boiling over just then, and the conference broke up.

Kewpie awaited Laurie in No. 16, and as the twins entered he broke into speech. “Say, Nod, when—”

“To-morrow morning. Half-past ten. Back of the gym,” replied Laurie promptly. Kewpie stared, puzzled.

“What?” he demanded suspiciously.

Laurie performed an exaggerated parody of a pitcher winding up and delivering a ball. Then, assuming the rôle of catcher, he leaped high off

his feet and pulled down a wild one that would undoubtedly have smashed the upper pane of the further window had it got by him.

“Honest?” cried Kewpie. “Me and you?”

“No, you and me.”

“But—how did you know what I was going to ask?”

Laurie viewed him sadly. “Kewpie,” he replied, “it ’s a mighty good thing you decided to be a pitcher. That ’s the only position that does n’t call for any brain!”

CHAPTER IV

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

LAURIE folded Kewpie's sweater and placed it on the ground a few yards from the gymnasium wall. "There 's your plate," he announced. "See if you can put 'em over the middle button, Kewpie."

Kewpie tightened his belt, thumped a worn baseball into a blackened glove, and rather ostentatiously dug a hole in the moist turf with his heel. Laurie grinned. Here on the south side of the building the sun shone warmly and the ground was fairly dry. Behind Laurie about four yards away, was a wire fence which, if Kewpie retained ordinary control of the ball, would make life easier for Ned, who sat in the embrasure of a basement window. Laurie pulled his mitten on and waited. Kewpie was at last satisfied with the hole he had dug and fitted his toe into it. Then he looked speculatively at the folded sweater and wrapped his fingers about the ball.

“What ’s this going to be, Kewpie?” asked Ned. “A drop?”

“Straight ball. Just warming up.” Kewpie let go, and the ball struck the fence and bounded back. Laurie sighed and went after it.

“I ’m not as young as I was, Kewpie,” he said, “and anything more than ten feet on either side of me is likely to get away. See if you can put ’em somewhere near the plate.”

Kewpie laughed. “That one got away from me, Nod.”

“Me, too,” said Laurie. “Let her come. Shoot her in!”

Kewpie’s next offering was a good deal better, and Laurie didn’t have to move to get it. Kewpie sent four or five more balls within reasonable distance of the sweater. There was no speed in them, nor were they other than perfectly straight offerings. Still, as Laurie reflected encouragingly, it was something to be able to do that much. He was not quite sure he could do it himself the first few times.

“All right, old son,” he called. “Speed ’em up now.”

But speed did not seem to be included in

Kewpie's budget of tricks. The first attempt sent the ball over Laurie's head and likewise over the fence. While Ned, sighing, went after it, Laurie indulged in gentle sarcasms. Kewpie thumped his glove with a bare fist and smiled genially. Then the ball came back, and Kewpie began again. Laurie picked the ball from the trampled turf between his feet and viewed Kewpie questioningly.

"Did n't you have some drop on that?" he queried.

"Sure," answered Kewpie. "Here 's another. You watch it."

Laurie did watch it. And it did drop. A faint, new-born respect for Kewpie as a pitcher was reflected in his voice as he said: "That 's not so poor, old thing. Where 'd you learn it?"

But Kewpie was throwing his chest out now, a purely unnecessary thing for Kewpie to do, and strutting a bit. "Never you mind," he answered. "I told you I had something, and you would n't believe me."

"That 's all right," remarked Ned, "but you 've got to know more than just how to pitch

a drop if you 're going to put Nate Beedle out of business."

"That 's not half so worse," commented Laurie after the next ball had performed a very creditable drop, "but let 's see something else, old son. How about a curve just for variety?"

"We-ell," said Kewpie, "I haven't got curves down so well, but—" He spent a long moment fingering the ball and finally sent it off with a decidedly round-arm delivery. Laurie caught it by leaping far to the left.

"What was that supposed to be?" he asked politely.

"In-shoot," said Kewpie, but his tone lacked conviction.

"Huh," returned Laurie, "you ain't so well in your in-shoot. Better see a doctor about it. Try an out, old son."

But Kewpie's out was n't any better, and, at the end of about twenty minutes, by which time Ned was the only member of the trio not bathed in perspiration, it had been shown conclusively that Kewpie's one and only claim to pitching fame rested on a not very remarkable drop-ball. Laurie picked up Kewpie's sweater and returned

it to him gravely. "Better put that on," he said with vast concern. "It would be awful if you got cold in that arm of yours."

Kewpie struggled with the garment, breathing heavily, and when he had conquered it he turned expectantly to Laurie. "Well, what do you say?" he asked.

"What do you want me to say?" Laurie stared frowningly at his mitten.

"Why, you know what I asked you," said Kewpie. "I—you—"

"But, great jumpin' Jupiter, Kewpie, I can't ask Pinky to put you on the squad just because you can pitch a sort of a drop! You haven't an ounce of speed; you can't curve 'em—"

"Well, but I have n't had any work!" protested the other. "Gee, I guess Nate Beedle could n't do much better the first time he pitched!"

"But Nate knows *how*, you simple fish! All the work in the world won't make you any better if—"

"Practice makes perfect, don't it?" interrupted Kewpie indignantly.

"Maybe. Maybe not. If you don't know any-

thing about pitching you can practise from now until—”

“But I do know, I tell you. All I need is practice. I ’ve got a book that tells—”

“Book be blowed!” exploded Laurie. “You can’t learn pitching by taking a correspondence-course, you fat-head!”

“Quit your arguing, you two,” said Ned. “Laurie ’s quite right, Kewpie. He can’t recommend you to Mr. Mulford until you ’ve got more to show than you ’ve shown just now. But I don’t see what ’s to prevent you from learning more tricks or what ’s to prevent Laurie from helping you if he can. Seems to me the thing to do is for you two to get together every day for a while.” Ned was looking meaningly at his brother. “Maybe Kewpie ’s got it in him, Laurie. You can’t tell yet, eh?”

“Eh? Oh, no, I suppose not. No, you can’t tell. Maybe with practice—”

“Right-o,” agreed Ned. “That ’s it; practice, Kewpie. Now you and Laurie fix it up between you to get together for half an hour every morning, savvy? Maybe after a week or so—”

“All right,” agreed Kewpie, beaming. “Gee, in a week I ’ll be speeding them over like—like anything!”

Laurie looked at him pityingly. “You—you poor prune!” he sighed. Ned surreptitiously kicked him on a shin and quickly drowned Kewpie’s hurt protest with, “There! That ’s fine! Come on, Laurie, it ’s nearly eleven.”

“All right,” answered Laurie, rubbing the shin. “See you later, Kewpie, and we ’ll fix up a time for practice.” Out of ear-shot of the more leisurely Kewpie, Laurie turned bitterly on his brother. “It ’s all right for you,” he complained, “but that poor fish does n’t know any more about pitching than I know about—about my Latin this morning! It ’s all right for you, but—”

“You said that before,” interrupted Ned unfeelingly. “Look here, old-timer, did we or did n’t we agree to help Kewpie? Are you or are n’t you a member of the Association for the Reclamation—”

“Sure, I ’m a member! And I ’m the goat, too, it seems like! I have to do all the dirty work while you stand around and bark up my shins! How do you get that way? You can catch a ball

if you try. Suppose you take Kewpie on some of the time and see how you like it!"

"I would in an instant," responded Ned, "if you 'd let me, but you would n't."

"I would n't!" echoed Laurie incredulously as he followed the other up-stairs to No. 16. "Say, you ain't so well! You just try me!"

But Ned shook his head, smiling gently. "Just now, old son, you 're not quite yourself. When your better nature asserts itself you 'll—"

"Oh, dry up," growled Laurie. "Throw me my Latin. There goes the bell!"

Kewpie took his ball back to No. 15, pulled a small paper-bound book entitled "How to Pitch" from a table drawer, and curled himself on the window-seat. Presently, as he turned the pages slowly, his usually placid countenance became troubled. Reaching for the ball, he wound his fingers about it, his eyes ever and anon traveling to the book. Finally he arose, gathered the pillows from the two beds, and set them upright against the closet door, side by side. Then he moved an arm-chair out of the way and, having fitted his fingers around the scuffed baseball as indicated in Diagram 6, let fly. Naturally, the

distance was much too short to show whether or not he had held the ball correctly, but Kewpie was an optimist by nature. Several times he followed the instructions accompanying Diagram 6, not always landing the ball against the pillows, however, and then gave his attention to Diagram 7. He was very busy striving to diagnose its requirements when "Hop" entered.

Hop's real name was Thurman Kendrick, and he had the honor of being Kewpie's room-mate. They were both football players and of an age, but there the likeness ceased. Hop was rather small and slim, with dark hair and an earnest countenance, a description that did n't fit Kewpie at all. Hop was Hillman's most likely candidate for next year's quarter-back. Fortunately, the two boys worked together quite as smoothly on the gridiron as center and quarter as they did on the campus as room-mates. Or you may put it the other way around if you like, the idea being that they were the very best of chums off the field and on. But even a chum may have to assert authority once in a while, and Hop asserted it now.

"What do you think you're doing, Kew-

pie?" he demanded in puzzlement. "Practising? Well, you pick those pillows up and put that ball down or I 'll paddle you! Look here, did you get a cut in English?"

Kewpie looked blank. "Gee, no! What time of day is it? Well, what do you know about that? I just naturally—"

"You 'll just naturally get the dickens from Johnny, you silly chump," responded Hop dryly as he dumped his books on the table. "What did you do? forget the time?"

"N-no, I—I guess I got sort of interested in this pitching business, Hop. Say, you ought to have seen me pitching drops to Nod a while back! Boy, I 'll say I made 'em eat out of my hand!"

"And you 'll be eating off the mantel if I catch you missing any more recitations! Honest, Kewpie, you have n't got the sense of a duck. Besides, what the dickens do you want to get into baseball for? Is n't football good enough?"

"Sure, but I can't play football now, can I? How do you suppose I 'm going to keep myself in condition for it if I don't have some exercise?"

"I don't have much trouble."

“Of course you don’t, but you ’re not cursed with fat, Hop. It ’s a terrible thing to be cursed with fat,” he said sadly.

“It ’s a terrible thing to be cursed with a fat head,” replied Hop severely. “You ’ve got about as much chance of getting on the baseball team as I have of—of—” But Hop could n’t think of a satisfactory simile and so changed the subject. “Say, what ’s Nod Turner been doing to Elk Thurston?”

“I don’t know. I heard something about Elk’s bicycle, but—”

“Well, Elk ’s as sore as a pup about something, and— For goodness’ sake, put that ball away before you break something! How the dickens did I ever get hitched up with an idiot like you, anyway, I ’d like to know!”

“Providence was watching over you, old chap,” answered Kewpie cheerfully. “As unworthy as you are—”

“Dry up,” laughed Hop, “and see if you can keep still long enough for me to find out why Johnny gave me only eighty-four on this theme.”

“Johnny has an awful crust,” said Kewpie sympathetically. “Wonder what he marked

mine. Didn't think to ask for it, did you?"

"I did not. *Shut up!*"

Laurie dropped around to the Widow Deane's about five thirty that afternoon. It was getting to be something of a habit with him. Over a glass of root-beer he narrated to Polly the events of the morning. "He 's a perfect duffer at pitching," he summed up finally, "and I guess I won't ever have to trouble Pinky about him."

"But perhaps he will learn," said Polly hopefully. "And, anyway, he 's—he 's a changed mortal already, Laurie!"

"He 's a what?"

"I mean he 's different already. He was in this afternoon, and he had just a plain soda and only one cream-puff, and he was just as jolly as anything. Why, you would n't know him for the same boy!"

Somehow these glad tidings did n't appear to endow Laurie with any great feeling of uplift. He said, "Huh," and took another sip of his root-beer. Polly went on earnestly.

"I suppose it 's just having something to interest him, something to live for, that 's changed him. Why, even if nothing actually came of it,

Laurie, we 've already done him a lot of good."

"Great," said Laurie. "I guess he 's got all the good that 's coming to him, then. He will never make a baseball pitcher."

"But you must n't tell him that, even if you believe it," said Polly earnestly. "You must encourage him, you know. We all must."

Laurie grinned. "I 've already told him he 's no good. I guess I told him so several times. But he does n't believe it, so there 's no harm done."

"Oh, you should n't have," exclaimed Polly. "Don't you see, if he 's to be—be taken out of himself, Laurie, he must—must have faith?"

"Oh, he 's got it, all right. I 'm the one who has n't. He thinks he 's the coming scholastic wonder of the diamond, I guess. Of course, I 'm perfectly willing to help the chap and keep him from killing himself off with cream-puffs, and that sort of thing, Polly, but you 've got to own up that it 's a bit tough on me. Think of putting in half an hour every day with Kewpie! Gee, I 've got troubles of my own, too. That silly Elk Thurston's got it in for me, after that trifling affair of yesterday, and there 's no working in the

same cage with him. It would n't be so bad if we were n't both trying for the same job."

"Do you mean that Elkins Thurston is a catcher, too?"

"He is if I am," answered Laurie smiling. "More, I guess, for he did some catching last spring with the second. Still, at that, he is n't so much better. We're both pretty bad yet, Polly."

"What does he do that—that you don't like, Laurie?"

"Oh, just acts ugly and nags whenever he gets a chance. If he keeps it up I'll crown him with a bat some fine day!"

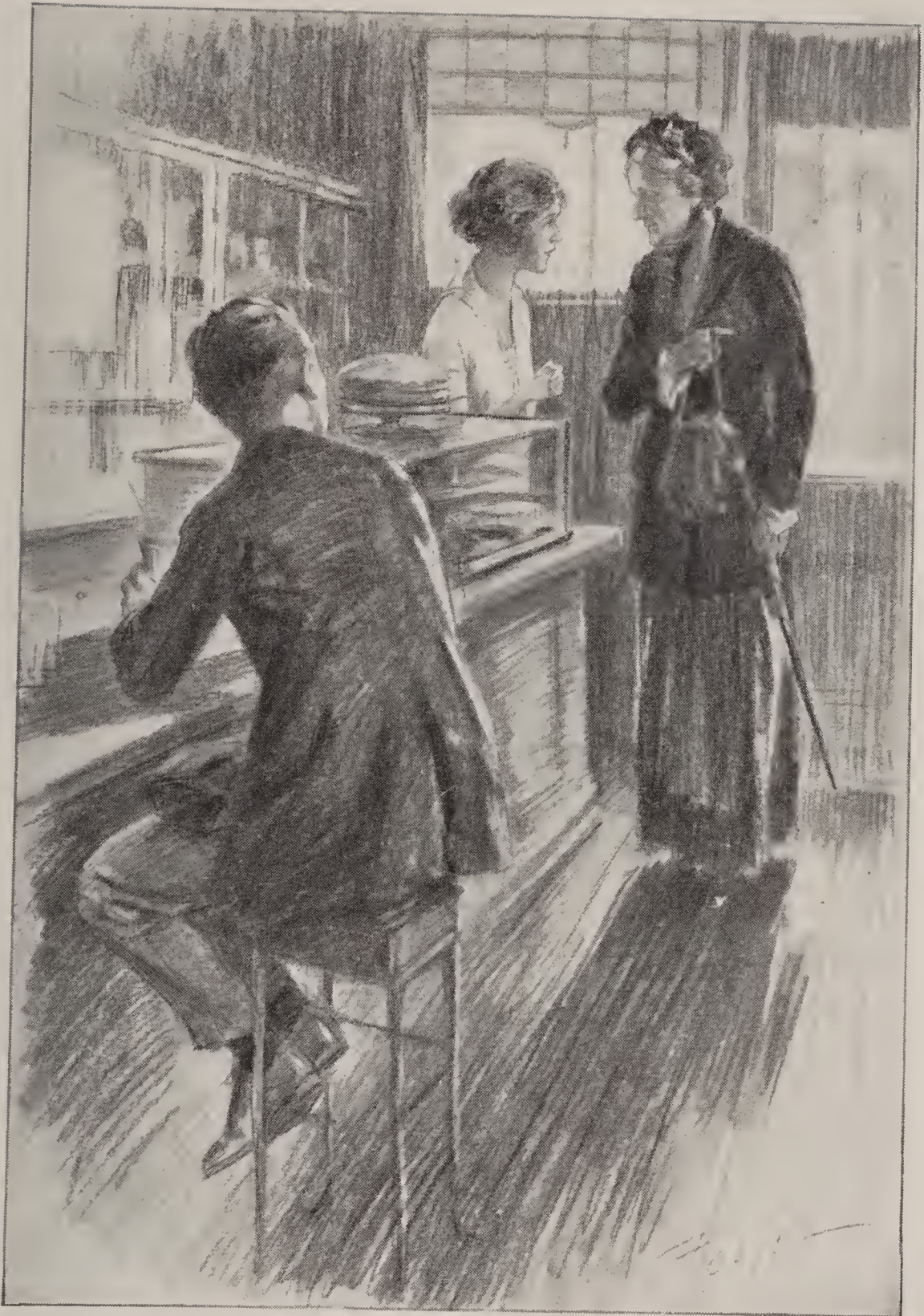
"You must n't get into any fuss with him," said Polly decidedly. "He's a lot bigger than you and—"

"Huh, that's why I mean to use a bat!"

"Besides, you should n't have taken his bicycle. You see, Laurie, you really started the trouble yourself."

"Yes, I suppose I did, but he should n't be so touchy. Anyway, I don't intend—"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door and the tinkling of the bell. A frail-looking little



A pleasant-faced little lady in a queer, old-fashioned dress

woman in a queer old-fashioned dress and a funny little flat bonnet entered and Polly went to attend to her. The two talked together across the opposite counter in low tones, and, just to show that he was not trying to overhear them, Laurie whistled softly. After a minute or two the little woman went out and Polly rejoined Laurie.

“I feel so sorry for her,” said Polly with a sigh.

“What ’s the matter?” asked Laurie. “Who is she?”

“That ’s Miss Comfort.” Polly seemed surprised that Laurie didn’t know it. “She lives on the next corner, in the little white house that faces the park. She makes most of our cakes and pies. Don’t you remember—”

“Of course,” agreed Laurie, “but that ’s the first time I ever saw her, I guess. But why are you sorry for her?”

“Because she ’s got to get out of that house, and she has n’t any place to go. And she must be almost seventy years old, Laurie. Just think of it!”

“Well, but are n’t there any other houses in

Orstead? Seems to me I saw one just the other day over on Washington Street that had a 'To Rent' sign in front."

"Yes, but that 's the old Cummings house, and it has sixteen rooms and rents for goodness knows what! You see, Miss Comfort had the use of the house she was in as long as her sister lived. Her sister was married and lived out West somewhere; Ohio or Iowa, I think. Well, she died last December, and now some lawyer has written her that she must vacate on the first of next month."

"Didn't give her much time, and that 's a fact," commented Laurie sympathetically.

"Oh, she 's known for quite a while, but the trouble is she has n't a cent of money."

"Phew!" whistled Laurie. "How come?"

"I guess she never did have any. That house belonged to her mother, and she died a long time ago and left a funny will that let Miss Comfort stay there until her sister died. She 's been getting along pretty well by making cakes and things and selling them. She makes the best cake in town, and every one buys of her. But I guess she 's never made more than enough money to just live on. I know that winter before last,

when coal was so high, she shut up all the rooms except the kitchen and lived there with just the stove for warmth. And goodness knows when she 's had a new dress. I declare she 's worn that one she had on just now ever since I 've been in Orstead, Laurie!"

"Gee, that 's tough luck for the old girl," said Laurie. "Must be some place for her, though."

"There 's only one place I know of," said Polly sadly, "and that 's the poor-farm. Of course, she 'll be well taken care of, and they 'll let her go on making cake and selling it, but she hates it dreadfully."

"I should think she might! At her age! Gee!"

"Mama and I thought of having her here, but there 's only the two rooms up-stairs, and while it would be all right for a while it would n't do as a—a permanent arrangement."

"But is n't there any one else who could give her a home? Some one who has more room? What about the folks in her church?"

"Well, of course there 's been talk of helping her, and I 'm certain quite a lot of folks will give money, but I don't believe she 'd take it, Laurie.

And even if she got quite a lot, even a hundred dollars, it would n't pay house-rent very long, would it?"

"A hundred dollars!" snorted Laurie. "Say, they must be a lot of pikers. Why—"

"Why, no, Laurie, they 're not. You see, they 're not very well off themselves, and the congregation is n't a large one at all. A hundred dollars would be quite a lot of money to them."

"So the poor old lady 's got to go to the poor-farm, eh?" mused Laurie, frowning.

"I 'm afraid so," sighed Polly. "She 's never talked to me about it, but mama said this morning that she guessed Miss Comfort had about reconciled herself. And just now she came in to apologize for not sending two cakes she had promised for this afternoon. I guess the poor dear 's too worried and upset to make them."

"Yes, I guess so," Laurie agreed. "I call that tough luck. 'Miss Comfort.' Gee, I 'll bet she has n't really known what comfort is, Polly!"

"Not since her mother died, probably. But she 's always been just as cheerful and happy as any one could be until just lately. She 's a perfect dear, Laurie, and I could cry when I think

of her having to go to that po-poor-farm!"

Dismayed by the catch in Polly's voice, and horribly afraid that she was really going to cry, Laurie suddenly recalled the fact that he must get back to school. "Well, I—I suppose there is n't anything any one can do," he murmured awkwardly. "Maybe the poor-farm won't be so bad. I suppose it's the idea of it that sort of gets her, eh? Well, I must be trundling along, Polly."

Laurie gave a farewell suck at his straw, which resulted in only a gurgling sound at the bottom of his glass, and dropped off the counter.

"Well, see you to-morrow," he announced cheerfully. "Good night, Polly."

"Good night," said Polly. "But you did n't need to run away. I had n't any intention of cr-crying!"

CHAPTER V

LAURIE TO THE RESCUE

LAURIE'S rush to get back to school did not prevent him from pausing when, having turned the corner into Summit Street and proceeded half-way along the block, he caught sight of Bob Starling in the back garden of the Coventry place. The Coventry place, which consisted of a big square house set at the Walnut Street end of a broad and deep plot of land facing the school property, had been rented by Bob's father, who was the engineer in charge of the big new railroad bridge in course of construction near Orstead. Bob was entered at Hillman's School as a day-student. He was sixteen years old, a slim but well built chap with a very attractive countenance. Bob's mission in life, as he believed, was to play a great deal of tennis and play it better than any one else. In that mission he very nearly succeeded. It was tennis that was ac-

countable for his presence just now in the back yard, as Laurie well knew.

“How soon are you going to start work?” called Laurie.

“Hello, Nod! Come on in!”

“Can’t. Nearly six. What are you doing?”

“Just looking around,” replied Bob, drawing near. “I ’ve got the stakes all set. Gosh, if the ground would dry up so they could begin to dig I ’d have the old court ready in a week.”

“I guess so.” Laurie nodded. “Well, a few more days like this will do the trick. Say, remember how we planned to make a pergola out of that old lumber that came out of the arbor you pulled down?”

“Yes, and we ’ll do it as soon as the court ’s made. Dad ’s got me twenty loads of the finest cinders you ever saw.”

“Good work! Reckon you ’ll be giving tennis teas in another month, Bob.”

“Before that if the weather behaves. Been over to the Widow’s?” Bob grinned faintly.

“Yes.” Laurie’s reply sounded a trifle defiant.

“How ’s Polly? Have n’t seen her for days.”

“Oh, she ’s holding up bravely under your ne-

glect," answered Laurie. Then, having avoided Bob's playful punch, he added, "she 's sort of broke up, though, over Miss Comfort."

"Who? Oh, the old dame that makes cake. Yes, my aunt was saying something about her at dinner yesterday. They 're putting her out of her house or something, are n't they?"

Laurie nodded. "It 's a blamed shame, too," he said indignantly. "Why, say, Bob, she 's over seventy! And one of the nicest old ladies in town, too. Always cheerful and happy and—and sunny, you know. One of the—er—well, a fine character, Bob."

"Gosh, I did n't know you were so well acquainted with her, Nod!"

"Well, I don't know her so very well personally," replied Laurie, "but Polly says—"

"Oh!" chuckled Bob.

Laurie scowled. "I don't see anything very funny in it," he protested. "A perfectly corking old lady like Miss Comfort having to go to the poor-farm! At her age! Almost eighty!"

"Hold on! She was seventy a minute ago! Who says she 's going to the poor-farm?"

"Pol—everybody! I call it a rotten shame!"

“Why, yes, so do I,” agreed Bob, “but I don’t see why you are so het up about it.”

“You don’t, eh? Well, if she was *your* mother—”

“She could n’t be, Nod; she is n’t married. And I don’t believe she ’s yours, either, no matter what you say.”

“I did n’t say she was,” replied Laurie a trifle irritably. “I only said—I was just trying to make you see— Gee, you have n’t any heart at all!”

“Oh, don’t be an ass,” laughed Bob. “I have n’t said anything against the poor old soul. I ’m mighty sorry for her, just as sorry as you are, but I can’t do anything about it, can I?”

“No, but you need n’t laugh at her!”

“I was n’t laughing at her, you nut! I—”

“Besides,” continued Laurie, “if every one took your attitude about—about things, saying, ‘I can’t help it, can I?’ I ’d like to know what sort of a world this would be.”

“Well, hang it, I can’t!” said Bob emphatically, getting a trifle riled at his friend’s unreasonableness. “Neither can you. So why stand there and—”

“How do you know I can’t?” demanded Laurie with much hauteur. “I have n’t said I could n’t. In fact, I—I ’m going to!”

“You are?” exclaimed Bob incredulously. “How, Nod?”

The note of respect in Bob’s voice dispelled Laurie’s annoyance perceptibly. “I don’t know—yet,” he answered. But there was something in his voice, or maybe in the emphasis put on the final word, or possibly in his manner, that caused Bob to think that he did know. “Oh, come on and tell me, Nod,” he asked. “Let me in on it. Maybe I can help, eh? Gosh, I ’ll say it ’s fierce to use a fine old lady like that! Are you going to get up a subscription or a—I know! A benefit, eh?”

Laurie shook his head, glancing at his watch as he did so. “I can’t tell you anything about it—yet,” he replied. “But maybe—as soon as I get the details settled—I ’ve got to do a lot of thinking, you know, Bob.”

“Sure! Well, listen, let me in on it, will you? I ’d love to do something, you know. I always thought Miss Comfort was a mighty fine old girl—I mean lady, Nod!”

“She is,” said Laurie almost reverentially.

“Sure,” agreed Bob solemnly.

“Well, I ’ll see you to-morrow. Keep it to yourself, though. I don’t want my plans all spoiled by—by a lot of silly talk.”

“I ’ll say you don’t! Good night, Nod.”

When he had reached the corner it began to dawn on Laurie that, as Elk had told him yesterday, he talked too much! “Got myself into a nice mess,” he thought ruefully. “Suppose I ’ve got to go ahead and bluff it out with Bob now. Wonder what got into me. No—no discretion, that ’s my trouble. I ain’t so well in my circumspection, I guess. Better see a doctor about it! Oh, well—”

The next morning Laurie and Kewpie took advantage of an empty period soon after breakfast and again sought the south side of the gymnasium building. To-day Kewpie sought to demonstrate an out-shoot. He was not very successful, although Laurie had to acknowledge that now and then the ball did deviate slightly from the straight line. Sometimes it deviated to such purpose that he could n’t reach it at all, but Kewpie made no claims at such times. He said

the ball slipped. In the end, Kewpie went back to his famous drop and managed to elicit faint applause from Laurie.

Laurie could n't get his heart into the business this morning. Despite his efforts to forget it, that idiotic boast to Bob Starling kept returning to his mind to bother him. Either he must confess to Bob that he had n't meant a word of what he had said or he must think up some scheme of, at least, pretending to seek aid for Miss Comfort. He liked Bob a whole lot and he valued Bob's opinion of him, and he hated to confess that he had just let his tongue run away with him. On the other hand, there was n't a thing he could do that would be of any practical help to Miss Comfort. He would just have to bluff, he concluded: make believe that he was doing a lot of heavy thinking and finally just let the thing peter out. Quite unjustly Laurie experienced a feeling of mild distaste for Miss Comfort.

In the middle of the forenoon, Bob, meeting him in the corridor, would have stopped him, but Laurie pushed by with a great display of haste, briefly replying in the negative to Bob's mysteriously whispered inquiry: "Anything new,

Nod?" After that, not having yet decided on any sort of a scheme to present to the other, Laurie avoided Bob as though the latter had measles.

At practice in the baseball cage he gave so much thought to the matter of saving his face with Bob that he made very poor work of catching and batting. He was, in fact, so detached from what was going on that even Elk Thurston's gibes fell on deaf ears. Mr. Mulford, the coach, got after him many times that afternoon.

When practice was over Laurie fairly dawdled about the showers and dressing-room, and it was nearly half-past five when he finally set out for the Widow Deane's, making his way there by a roundabout route that took him nowhere in sight of the Coventry place. He expected to find Ned there before him, but the little shop was deserted save for a small child buying penny candy and Mrs. Deane, who was waiting on the customer. Polly, said Mrs. Deane, had gone to Mae Ferrand's. Laurie disconsolately ordered a root-beer and, overcoming an inclination to sit on the counter, listened to Mrs. Deane's unexciting budget of news. He was not very attentive, although Mrs. Deane never suspected the fact, and she

might have shown some surprise when he broke into her account of Polly's concern over Antoinette, the rabbit who lived in a box in the back yard, because Antoinette had n't been eating well for several days, by asking suddenly:

“Mrs. Deane, is it straight about Miss Comfort having to go to the poor-farm?”

“Oh, dear, I'm afraid so.” Mrs. Deane sighed. “Isn't it a pity? I—we did want to take her in here with us, Laurie, but I suppose we simply could n't do it.”

“Well, look; what about this brother of hers?”

“Brother? Why, she has n't any—”

“Eh! Oh, brother-in-law, I meant; the fellow who married her sister out in Ohio.”

“Iowa,” Mrs. Deane corrected. “Why, I just don't know. When she got word from the lawyers that she must vacate the house she wrote to him, but she says he never took any notice of her letter.”

“Did n't she write again? Maybe he did n't get it.”

“Why, no, she did n't. She's sort of—well, I suppose you might say proud, but I'd almost call

it touchy. She just would n't write another letter, although I advised her to."

"Well, what 's he want the house for?" asked Laurie, frowning. "Is he coming here to live in it, or what?"

Mrs. Deane shook her head. "I don't know, but I did hear that Mr. Sparks had told some one that they were going to tear it down and put up a two-family house there."

"He 's the banker, is n't he? Well, I think it 's mighty funny that this brother-in-law chap does n't write to her. She ought to get after him again. Or some one ought to do it for her, if she won't. It does n't seem to me, Mrs. Deane, that any man would want to turn his own sister-in-law into the poor-house. Maybe he does n't really know how she 's fixed."

"Well, maybe so, Laurie. I 'm sure I 'd like to think so. But letters don't often go astray, and I 'm afraid this Mr. Goupil—"

"Is that his name? I 'll say he 's a goop! How does he spell it?"

"G-o-u-p-i-l, Goupil. A. G. Goupil, I think she said. He 's quite wealthy, or, anyway, I gathered

so from what she let fall. Makes some sort of machinery. The Goupil Machinery Company is the name. I don't suppose it would hurt him the least tiny bit to let poor Miss Comfort stay right where she is, but sometimes it does seem that the more money folks have the less feeling they've got. I don't know as I'd ought to say that, either, for—"

"Do you know what place in Iowa he lives?"

"Why, I did know, Laurie, but I don't recall it now. It was a sort of funny name, though I've heard it lots of times."

"Was it—was it—" Laurie realized blankly that he could n't remember the name of a single town or city in Iowa. Mrs. Deane watched him expectantly. Laurie concentrated hard and, at last, "Was it Omaha?" he asked. Then, as Mrs. Deane shook her head, "anyway," he added, "that 's in Nebraska, come to think of it."

"It seems to me," mused Mrs. Deane, "that it was a—a sort of Indian name, like—like—"

"Sioux City!" shouted Laurie.

"That 's it," agreed Mrs. Deane, quite pleased. "I don't see how you ever thought of it. Sioux City, Iowa; yes, that was it."

Laurie was writing on the back of a piece of paper with his fountain-pen. "Look here, Mrs. Deane," he said eagerly, "why don't we write to this Goop ourselves, if she won't? Or why don't we telegraph him? That would be better, because folks always pay more attention to telegrams than they do to letters. Only"—Laurie's face clouded a trifle—"I wonder how much it costs to Sioux City."

"Why—why—," began Mrs. Deane a little breathlessly, "do you think it would be quite right? You see, Laurie, maybe I'd ought to consider what she told me as confidential. I'm not sure she would like it a bit, she's so sort of touch—proud."

"Well, you stay out of it, then," said Laurie resolutely. "I'll attend to it myself, and if there's any blame, why, I'll take it. But I certainly do think that some one ought to—ought to do something, Mrs. Deane. Don't you?"

"Well, I suppose they ought, Laurie, maybe. But perhaps it's taking a good deal on yourself—I mean—"

"She needn't know anything about it unless Goop comes across with an answer, and what she

does n't know is n't going to hurt her. You leave it to me, and don't say anything about it to Miss Comfort. I'll send this Goop guy a telegram that'll wake him up. He ain't so well in his goop. He ought to see—"

"Hello!"

That was Polly, to the accompaniment of the tinkling bell in the next room.

"Don't tell Polly!" hissed Laurie, and Polly's mother somewhat blankly nodded agreement.

"We've been talking about Miss Comfort," announced Laurie as Polly joined them.

"Oh, is there anything new, mama? Has she heard from the lawyers again?"

"Not that I know of," answered Mrs. Deane. "I have n't seen her yet. She said she'd bring over those cream-puffs and the layer-cake, but she has n't."

"Shall I run over and ask about them?"

"N-no, I don't think you'd better, dear. I dare say she's just too upset to get things baked. I know myself how contrary ovens will act when you can't give your whole mind to them. Maybe she'll be over in a little while."

Miss Comfort remained the subject of conver-

sation for another ten minutes, and then Laurie, suddenly realizing that it was alarmingly close to dinner-time, winked meaningly at Mrs. Deane, said good night, and bolted. This time he made no attempt to avoid Bob Starling. Bob, however, was not in sight as Laurie sped by the big house.

“I ’ll telephone him to come over after dinner,” reflected Laurie. “I sort of promised to let him in on it. Besides, I ’ll bet it costs a lot to telegraph to Iowa!”

CHAPTER VI

LAURIE TALKS TOO MUCH

BUT Laurie did n't have to telephone to Bob. Bob was waiting in No. 16 when the twins returned from supper. There had been no opportunity to take Ned into his confidence in dining-hall, and, since Laurie would n't have thought of embarking on even the most inconsequential enterprise without his brother's aid, the first step, as he now saw it, was to put Ned in possession of the facts. So, closing and locking the door in the manner of a conspirator, Laurie faced the eager Bob and the mystified Ned and began the recital of the pathetic story of Miss Comfort. And, as Laurie told it, it certainly was pathetic. Having found, as he believed, a way of making good his boast to Bob the day before, he set out determinedly to win his hearers to the cause. He not only wanted moral aid and counsel but pecuniary assistance in the matter of that telegram to Sioux City! So he made a very moving story of

it, picturing Miss Comfort as a penniless and hard-working little woman battling heroically against the tides of adversity with unfaltering courage, Mr. Goupil as a monster of cruelty, and Mr. Goupil's lawyer as a fiend in human form. Miss Comfort's age was now given as "over eighty," an estimate that caused Bob to gasp. Laurie even attempted to dwell on the horrors of existence for a well bred lady like Miss Comfort on the poor-farm. But, never having had close acquaintance with such an institution, he had to confine himself to generalities and dark insinuations, and, discovering that his audience was not as much impressed as he meant them to be, he wisely switched back to Miss Comfort herself and told how in the winter, too poverty-stricken to buy coal for the furnace, she lived in the kitchen, while her brother-in-law, rolling in riches, gave her no thought.

Ned, who, at the beginning of the narrative, had worn a smile of careless, tolerant amusement, was soon frowning troubledly. Then indignation swelled within him, and he glowered darkly upon Laurie as though the latter was all to blame for Miss Comfort's plight. Bob appeared moved al-

most to tears. As an orator Laurie did himself proud on that occasion. By the time he had finished he was almost as much moved as his hearers.

There had been, of course, interruptions, but they had been few, and Laurie had waved them aside. Now, at the end, both Ned and Bob wanted many things explained to them. Thanks, however, to his talk that afternoon with Mrs. Deane and, later, with Polly, Laurie was in a position to answer all questions promptly and lucidly. When, as infrequently occurred, his knowledge was insufficient, he answered just the same. He grudgingly struck off ten years from Miss Comfort's age at Bob's behest, but to all other statements he clung tenaciously.

"Another thing I don't understand," said Ned, "is why some of the folks she knows don't give her a home. There must be lots of people in Orstead who would be glad to take her in."

"What good would that do?" asked Laurie. "They might give her a room to sleep in, but how would she live? You know perfectly well that they wouldn't be willing to let her use their kitchen to make her cakes and things in. And if

she does n't make cake and sell it she can't buy food or clothes—”

Laurie paused, suddenly remembering that he had neglected to mention the pathetic fact that Miss Comfort had worn the same dress for years and years. He wished he had n't forgotten that, and he wondered if it was too late now to bring it in.

“Well, I 'll say it 's mighty hard luck for the poor woman,” said Ned finally, “but I 'm blessed if I can see what any of *us* can do. If you 've got any silly idea in your head that Bob and I are going to buy a house for Miss Comfort to spend the rest of her days in—”

“Don't be an ass,” begged Laurie.

“All right, but why the locked door, then? And why all the—the talk about it?”

“Nod 's got a scheme,” said Bob, and he beamed trustfully at Laurie.

Ned grunted suspiciously. “Bet you it calls for money,” he said.

“It does n't,” replied Laurie. “At least, only a few pennies. The price of a telegram to Sioux City, Iowa, and, divided among the three of us, that won't amount to anything, I guess.”

“Sioux City, Iowa?” exclaimed Ned. “What for? Why not send it to New York? It would n’t cost nearly so much.”

“Because, you blithering idiot,” responded Laurie, “this Goop fellow does n’t live in New York. He lives in Sioux City.”

“Mean you ’re going to telegraph to him?” asked Bob excitedly. “What are you going to say?”

“Count me out,” said Ned. “This is n’t our affair at all, and you ’ll get yourself in trouble if you butt in on it.”

Laurie viewed his brother disappointedly and sighed. Now he would have to start all over again! “Gee,” he said sadly, “I thought you had a heart, Ned.”

“I have,” answered Ned. “And I ’ve got some common sense, too.”

“Sure, but now listen, will you? I talked it all over with Mrs. Deane and Polly, and they agreed that—well, Mrs. Deane did, anyhow—that if Miss Comfort would n’t write to her brother-in-law some one ought to do it for her. And—”

“Glad Polly had some sense, if you had n’t,” said Ned,

“Polly was n’t there then. Now, listen, will you?”

“Yes, let him tell you, Ned,” begged Bob.

“Gosh, I *am* listening! But I don’t hear anything but piffle, and—”

“It is n’t piffle, you stubborn chump. *Some one* ’s got to do something, have n’t they? You don’t want to see that poor old lady dumped right out on the sidewalk, do you? At her age? Nearly—” Laurie stifled “ninety” and substituted “eighty.” “Gee, I supposed you ’d be *glad* to help, instead of—of throwing obstacles in the way. Gee, supposing she was your aunt or—or something—”

“She is n’t,” said Ned briefly.

“Well, she might be. If she was—”

“I guess she ’s *somebody*’s aunt,” said Bob feelingly.

“Oh, shut up! I ’d like to help her, of course, you idiots, but I don’t see where we have any right to butt in and—”

“That ’s what I ’m trying to explain to you,” interrupted Ned. “If you ’ll just listen a minute—”

Ten minutes later Ned capitulated. Two min-

utes after that the three boys were busy concocting a telegram to send to Mr. Goupil in Sioux City, Iowa. It was decided that each should compose what he considered the proper message and that they would subsequently write a fourth draft comprised of the best points of each. So they each set to work with pencil and paper and furrowed brows, and for several minutes all was very still in No. 16, East Hall. Having given the matter some previous thought, Laurie naturally finished first. Then Bob's composition was laid on the desk, and finally, considerably later, Ned's.

Laurie read them aloud, Bob's first. Bob's was as follows:

"A. G. Goupil,

"Goupil Machinery Co.,

"Sioux City, Iowa.

"What 's the big idea turning your sister-in-law into street at her age? You ought to be ashamed."

"Gee," laughed Laurie, "you don't mind how many words you use, do you?"

"You do it in less," challenged Bob indignantly.

“I have. Here ’s Ned’s:

“Sister-in-law to be turned out of home unless you come to rescue immediately.”

“Sounds as though you meant your own sister-in-law,” commented Laurie. “That ’s not bad, though.”

“Sounds all right to me,” said Ned. “Let ’s hear yours.”

“Is Miss Comfort being evicted from house by your order? Public opinion in arms. Answer.”

“Huh,” said Ned, “public opinion can’t be ‘in arms,’ you silly chump.”

“That ’s only two words less than mine,” said Bob.

“Well, we ’ll see if we can’t get it into ten,” replied Laurie untroubledly. “Now then!” He took up his pencil again. “We might say ‘Comfort’ instead of ‘Miss Comfort,’ but it does n’t sound quite respectful.”

“Leave out ‘from house,’ ” suggested Bob. “He will understand that she is n’t being evicted from the stable!”

“That ’s so! ‘Is Miss Comfort being evicted

by your order? Public opinion—er—’ ”

“ ‘Against it,’ ” offered Ned.

“ ‘Opposed,’ ” said Bob.

“I ’ve got it!” exclaimed Laurie, erasing and starting a new draft. “How ’s this? ‘Have you authorized eviction aged sister-in-law? Orstead indignant. Answer immediately.’ That ought to fetch him! Only ten words, too!”

“How about sister-in-law?” asked Bob. “Will they call it one word or three?”

“One, of course. Or ‘aged relative’ might do just as well. ‘Orstead indignant’ will give him a jolt, I ’ll bet!”

“What are you going to sign it?” asked Ned anxiously.

Laurie had n’t thought of that. Bob suggested “Friend,” but Ned reminded him that if they expected to get a reply they ’d have to give more of an address than that. Laurie took a deep breath and leaped the Rubicon. He signed “Laurence S. Turner” boldly and drew a heavy mark under it for emphasis. Ned shook his head doubtfully, but Bob was thrilled.

“He will probably think you ’re one of the town’s leading citizens,” he chuckled.

“Well, so I am,” answered Laurie, “in this affair. Now we ’ll go down and get it off at night-rates.”

“Say,” said Ned, “we ’re a set of dumb-bells! We could have sent a night-letter of fifty words for the same price.”

“That ’s so,” admitted Laurie. “I think a night-letter costs a little more, though, does n’t it? Anyway, this is more—more succinct. It sounds more businesslike. What do you think?”

They agreed that it did, and presently, a fresh copy of the message in his pocket, Laurie led the way from the room, followed by the others. The languid youth who accepted the telegram at the office appeared to hesitate over “sister-in-law,” but he made no objection to its inclusion as one word, and he brightened perceptibly as the sense of the message percolated in his mind. He looked curiously at the three boys, re-read the message, and then shook his head incredulously.

“Sick ’em, Prince,” he murmured.

The cost of the telegram was less than Laurie had dared hope it would be, and in the first moment of relief he magnanimously offered to pay a

full half. Fortunately for his purse, though, the others insisted on sharing equally, and, the second moment having now arrived, Laurie allowed them to do it.

Returning to school, Ned was preyed on by doubts. Now that the telegram was an accomplished fact, he spoke dismally of the laws concerning libel. When Laurie refused to be concerned he wanted to know what they were to do if Mr. Goupil wired back that he had authorized Miss Comfort's eviction. Laurie was n't prepared to answer that question. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he replied with dignity.

As a matter of fact, Laurie did n't intend to do anything in such a case. He had saved his face, and that was sufficient. After this he meant to refrain from too much talking and keep out of affairs that did n't concern him. Unfortunately, as he was to discover, it is frequently easier to start than it is to stop, and to make good resolutions than to follow them!

As he secretly considered the episode ended, Laurie would have put Miss Comfort and Mr. A. G. Goupil completely out of his mind for the rest

of the evening if Ned had n't insisted on speculating as to the effect of the telegram on the addressee. Ned just could n't seem to let the subject alone. Laurie became very much bored, and when Ned, later, came out with the brilliant suggestion of having Miss Comfort added to the school faculty as professor of pastry Laurie threw a book at him.

The following morning Kewpie was absolutely exasperating when they met beside the gymnasium. He had brought his precious book with him and insisted on pausing between pitches to study diagrams and directions, occasioning long waits and leaving Laurie with nothing to do save indulge in feeble sarcasms that affected Kewpie no whit. Kewpie was struggling with what he earnestly told Laurie was an out-drop. Laurie sarcastically replied that Kewpie was at liberty to call it anything he pleased, out-drop, floater, in-shoot, or fade-away; they all looked the same to him when Kewpie pitched 'em! Kewpie looked almost hurt, and Laurie recalled Polly's injunction not to discourage the aspirant for pitching honors, and so presently told Kewpie that one of his offerings "looked pretty good."

After that Kewpie cheered up a lot and pitched a ball high over the back-stop.

All that day Laurie looked for a telegram. It was, he thought, inconceivable that the Goop guy, as he privately called Mr. A. G. Goupil, should delay in answering such a communication, and when, after school was over for the day, no telegram had been delivered at East Hall, he hurried down to the telegraph office and made inquiries. The man in charge, who was not the one who had been on duty the evening before, went to a deal of trouble before informing Laurie that no message had been received. Going back, Laurie pondered. It might mean that Mr. Goupil had chosen to communicate with his lawyer instead of him, Laurie. Or it might mean that Mr. Goupil was taking time to consider the matter. Laurie dismissed the business from his mind, and, although well ahead of time, went over to the gymnasium and leisurely donned his baseball togs. There had been talk of getting out on the field to-day, but the turf was still a little too soft.

In the baseball cage four other early arrivals were on hand; Nate Beedle, Hillman's first-choice pitcher, Captain Dave Brewster, third baseman,

Gordon Simkins, in-field candidate, and Elkins Thurston. The last two were passing, while Beedle and Brewster sat on the floor with their backs against the wire.

“Hello, Nod!” greeted Nate. “Hear you’ve started a kindergarten for pitchers, sonny.”

Nate was a nice chap, and Nod didn’t mind being “ragged” by him a bit. “Yes, that’s so,” Laurie agreed. “Want to join?”

The others laughed; all save Elk. Elk, tossing the ball back to Simkins, sneered, “The way I got it, Proudtree’s trying to teach Turner how to catch!”

“Fact is,” replied Laurie, “it’s sort of mutual. Kewpie’s improving his pitching, and I’m improving my catching.”

“Can he pitch at all?” asked Dave Brewster.

“Kewpie? Well, he has n’t much just now, but—”

“But you’re teaching him the trick, eh?” jeered Elk. “Say, Nate, you’d better watch out or you’ll lose your job.”

Nate laughed good-naturedly. “That’s right. I’ll say one thing, though. If Kewpie could pitch the way he can play center I’d be worried.

Does he think he can get on the squad, Nod?"

"Guess he 'd like to."

"He 's got a swell chance," said Elk.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Laurie. "They took you on."

"Is that so? Don't get fresh, youngster. I suppose you think you 've got such a pull with Pinky that he 'll take on any fellow you recommend. Say, Nate, can't you just see Proudtree running bases?" And Elk laughed vociferously.

Laurie, just at present inclined to resent anything that Elk said, merely on general principles, found cause for added resentment now. Kewpie was both friend and pupil, and consequently disparagement of Kewpie was disparagement of him. Simpkins's remark that Kewpie had shown pretty good speed on the football field was cut into by Laurie with:

"He is n't out to become a sprinter, Elk. He 's going to be a pitcher. You don't expect a pitcher to be much of a hand on the bases. As for his chance of getting on the squad, well, when I get through with him I guess he can have a place if he wants it."

"When you— Oh, my sainted aunt!" cried

Elk. "When you get through with him! What do you know about pitching, I'd like to know? You're a swell teacher, you are! You never caught behind the plate until two or three weeks ago."

"What of it? That does n't prevent me from knowing a natural-born pitcher when I see him. And if—"

"Natural-born pitcher! Kewpie Proudtree? Don't make me laugh! I'll bet he can't pitch a straight ball!"

"Can't, eh? Listen, Elk. Kewpie's a better pitcher right now than you are a catcher. If he was n't I would n't bother with him."

"Oh, piffle! He can't pitch and you can't teach him, kid. And as for catching, if I dropped every ball that comes over I would n't be shooting my mouth off, you fresh guy!"

"I get my glove on 'em, and that's more than you do, Elk, old son. And if you think I don't know what I'm talking about when I say that Kewpie's got the making of a pitcher, why, you just keep your eyes open."

"Sure! You're going to have him on the squad next week, I suppose!"

“No, not next week, but I ’ll tell you one thing. He will be pitching for this team before the season ’s over!”

“*What!*” It was a chorus of blank incredulity. Then there was laughter, through which struggled Nate’s voice saying, “Nod, you ’re as crazy as a coot!” The burst of merriment acted on Laurie somewhat like a wet sponge on the face of a sleeper. He awoke suddenly to the enormity of his assertion, and caution urged him to prompt retraction, or, at least, compromise. But there was Elk Thurston grinning and sneering, his very attitude a challenge. Laurie swallowed hard and summoned a smile of careless ease to his countenance.

“You heard what I said,” he remarked calmly.

Then Coach Mulford came in, and the die was cast. Laurie waved a nonchalant hand to Dave Brewster. In appearance he looked as care-free and untroubled as any person there, but to himself he was saying bitterly, “There, you poor fish, you ’ve been and gone and done it again!”

CHAPTER VII

POLLY APPROVES

PRACTICE over, Laurie set out to find Ned. He was very low in his mind, was Laurie, and he wanted comfort in the worst way. But Ned was n't in the room. The door of No. 15, across the corridor, was half ajar, and through it issued the voice of Kewpie. "That you, Nid?" inquired Kewpie. "Say, come in here. I 've—"

"No!" replied Laurie emphatically as he hurried toward the stairs. Kewpie Proudtree was the last person in the whole world he wanted to hold converse with just then. In fact, he was n't sure that he would be able to control himself in Kewpie's presence. Murder, he reflected gloomily, had been committed for less cause than he had!

He set out toward the Widow Deane's, going the long way around, since he had no heart for Bob Starling's questions and surmises regarding Mr. A. G. Goupil. He had so thoroughly for-

gotten that flinty-hearted person that he had not even looked on the table in No. 16 to see if the telegram had arrived, and only the thought of encountering Bob had reminded him of it. Turning into Garden Street, he heard some one call: "Oh, Ned! Oo-ee!" It was no new thing to be mistaken for Ned. During the first two months, or thereabouts, of their stay at Hillman's, he and Ned had been daily, hourly, almost constantly mistaken one for the other, and even to this moment such mistakes were not uncommon, which, considering the fact that the twins were as alike as two peas, was not unnatural. He was n't Ned, but he turned to see who was calling. It proved to be Mae Ferrand. She was on the opposite side of the street waving to him. Laurie crossed with little enthusiasm.

"Hello," he said. "I 'm looking for him, too, Mae."

"Oh, it 's Laurie!" she exclaimed. "I do wish you boys would n't dress just alike!"

"We don't," said Laurie somberly. "He 's wearing brown stockings, and I 'm wearing green." He looked down at them. "Sort of green, anyway."

“Just as though any one could tell you by that,” laughed Mae. “Are you going to Polly’s?”

Laurie acknowledged that he was, and they went on together. “Is n’t it too bad about that poor, dear little Miss Comfort?” asked Mae. “Polly told you, did n’t she?”

Laurie nodded. “Yes,” he answered. “Yes, it is too bad. At her age, too. Eighty-something, is n’t she?”

“Why, no, of course not! The idea! She can’t be a day over sixty-five.”

“Oh!” Laurie sounded a trifle disappointed. “Well, that ’s different, is n’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” agreed Mae without, however, quite getting his point of view, “but it does n’t make it much easier for her, I guess.”

“N-no.” Laurie was acquiring something close to distaste for the subject. “Well, something may turn up,” he added vaguely, “before the first of the month.”

“I hope so,” said Mae. But she did n’t sound hopeful. Laurie was glad when she changed the subject with her next remark, although he could have chosen a more welcome one: “Polly says

that the—the conspiracy is working just beautifully, Laurie. She says that Kewpie Proudtree is quite like another boy the last day or two. Is he doing any better with his pitching?”

Laurie turned and regarded her balefully. “Better? No, and he never will,” he answered disgustedly. “Why that poor prune could n’t pitch ball if—if—” He stopped, suddenly recalling his statements made in the cage a scant hour and a half since. He felt rather confused. Mae nodded sympathetically.

“Well, I think it ’s darling of you to take so much trouble with him,” she said. “Sometimes I think that friendship means so much more with boys than it does with girls.”

“Friendship!” blurted Laurie.

“Why, yes, don’t you call it friendship? Every one knows what great pals you and Kewpie have been all winter. I think it ’s perfectly lovely!”

“Huh,” growled Laurie.

“For goodness’ sake, what is the matter with you to-day?” asked Mae concernedly. “You ’re—you ’re awfully funny!”

Laurie summoned a mirthless and hollow laugh.

“I ’m all right,” he replied, “only I—I ’ve got a lot of things to think of just now, and—”

Further explanation was spared him, for just then they reached the shop and Laurie opened the door with a sigh of relief. Ned was there, and so were Polly and Mrs. Deane. Laurie morosely declined the offer of a soda, slung himself to a counter, met the surprised and mildly disapproving gaze of the Widow, and got down again. The talk, interrupted by their arrival, began once more. Of course it was about Miss Comfort. (Mrs. Deane had been to see her that forenoon.) She had n’t heard again from the lawyer or from her brother-in-law, and she had begun to pack her things. Laurie felt Ned’s gaze on him and turned. Ned’s look was inquiring. Laurie did n’t know what he meant by it, and frowned his perplexity. Ned worked around to him and whispered in his ear.

“Did it come? Did you get it?” he asked.

“Get what?”

“Shut up! The telegram, you chump!”

“Oh! No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think*—” began Ned in impatient sibilation.

“What are you two whispering about?” inquired Polly.

“Oh, nothing,” answered Ned airily.

“Ned Turner, don’t tell fibs,” said Polly severely. “There ’s something going on that we don’t know about, Mae. Mama ’s in on it, too. I can tell. She can no more hide a secret than she can fly. And I don’t think,” ended Polly with deep pathos, “that it ’s very nice of you to have a secret from Mae and me.”

Ned looked concerned and apologetic. He viewed Laurie inquiringly. “Shall we tell them?” he asked. Laurie shrugged.

“I don’t care,” he answered moodily.

“Oh, of course, if you don’t *want* us to know,” began Polly very haughtily. Laurie managed a most winning smile.

“Of course I do,” he assured her. “I—I was going to tell you, anyhow.”

Polly didn’t look wholly convinced, but, “Well?” she said. “Go on and tell, then.” Laurie waved toward Ned.

“Let him do it,” he said.

So Ned confessed about the telegram to Mr. Goupil, taking rather more credit to himself than,

perhaps, the facts warranted—something that might have brought a protest from Laurie had that youth been any longer interested in what to him seemed now a closed incident. Polly exclaimed applaudingly; Mae clapped her hands; and Mrs. Deane, proud of the fact that for once in her life she had managed, if only for a few short hours, to keep something secret from her daughter, beamed. Then praise was fairly lavished on Laurie and Ned, the former receiving the lion's share, since the brilliant idea had been born in his stupendous brain. Laurie looked decidedly bored, and the feminine portion of the assembly credited his expression to modesty.

“Oh, Laurie,” exclaimed Polly, “I think you 're perfectly wonderful! Don't you, Mae?”

Mae was enthusiastically affirmative.

“It was just the one absolutely practical thing to do,” continued Polly. “And I don't see how Mr. Gou—Gou—whatever his name is—will dare to go on with his disgusting plan, do you? If that telegram doesn't make him perfectly ashamed of himself, it—it—well, it ought to!”

“Sort of funny, though,” said Ned, “that he has n’t answered before this. If he does n’t answer at all—well, do you think we ought to send him another, Laurie?”

Laurie shook his head. “No good,” he said briefly.

“Oh, but he will answer it,” declared Polly. “Why, he’d simply *have* to! His own self-respect would—would demand it!”

“Of course!” agreed Mae. “Maybe there ’s a telegram waiting for you now, Laurie.”

“That ’s so.” Laurie spoke with more animation. “Let ’s go and see, Ned.”

“I did n’t say anything about it to Miss Comfort,” observed Mrs. Deane in the tone of one asking commendation.

“Oh, no, you must n’t,” said Polly. “If—if nothing came of it, after all, she’d be *too* disappointed. Laurie, if Mr. Whatshisname still insists on—on things going ahead as they are going, what will you do then?”

“Me?” Laurie regarded her unemotionally. Then he shrugged. “Why, I guess that would settle it, would n’t it? Isn’t anything more I *could* do, is there? Or any of us?”

“Oh, Laurie!” exclaimed Mae in vast disappointment. Polly, though, only laughed.

“Don’t be silly, Mae,” she said. “Of course he ’s only fooling. You ought to know Laurie well enough to know that he is n’t going to give up as easily as all that. I ’ll just bet you anything he knows this very minute what he means to do. Only he does n’t want to tell us yet.”

“I don’t, either,” protested Laurie vehemently. “Look here, this is n’t any affair of mine, and—and—”

“Just what I told him,” said Mrs. Deane agreeably. “I think he ’s been very nice to take such an interest and so much trouble, but I ’m sure he can’t be expected to do any more, Polly.”

Polly smiled serenely. She shared the smile between her mother and a disquieted Laurie. Then she slipped an arm around Mae and gave her a squeeze. “We know, don’t we, Mae?” she asked.

Laurie stared helplessly for a moment. Then he seized Ned by the arm and dragged him toward the door. “Come on,” he said despairingly. “Come on home!”

“Say,” demanded Ned, once they were on the street, “what in the world’s the matter with you?”

“Matter with me?” repeated Laurie a trifle wildly. “The matter with me is that I talk too blamed much! That’s the matter with me! The matter with me—”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Ned soothingly, “yes, yes, old-timer. But what’s the present difficulty? Of course they don’t really expect us to find a home for Miss Comfort, if that’s what’s biting you.”

“Well, I should hope not! But—but, listen, Neddie. Do you think Kewpie knows enough about pitching to ever amount to a hill of beans? Do you think that, if he practised like anything all spring, he could—could get on the team?”

“Why, no, of course not,” replied Ned calmly. “Have n’t you said so yourself a dozen times?”

“Yes. Yes, and now I’ve gone and said he could!”

“Who could? Could what?”

“Kewpie. Be a pitcher and get on the team.”

“Are you plumb loco?” asked Ned in astonishment.

“No.” Laurie shook his head mournfully. “No, it isn’t that. I—I just talk too blamed much.”

“Well, who have you been talking to now? Get it off your chest, partner.”

So Laurie told him. The narrative lasted until they had reached their room, and after, and when, at last, Laurie ended his doleful tale Ned looked at him in silence for a long, long moment. Finally, “You half-portion of nothing!” breathed Ned pityingly. “You—you poor fish!”

“Well, what could I do?” asked Laurie. “I was n’t going to let Elk make me look like a fool.”

“Huh! What do you think you look like now?”

Laurie began to prepare for supper without replying. He acted as if chastened and worried. Ned watched him for a minute in frowning perplexity. At last the frown vanished. “Well, what are you going to do?” he asked.

Laurie shrugged. “How do I know? I did think that maybe somehow or other Kewpie could learn to pitch, but I guess you ’re right about him. He never could.”

“No, but he ’s got to!” was Ned’s astounding

answer. "We 've got to see that he does, Laurie. You 've said you were going to make a pitcher of him—"

"I did n't actually say *I* was going to do it."

"Well, some one. You 've said he was going to pitch on the team this season. You might as well have said that I was going to be made President. But you said it and, by heck, you 've got to make good or perish in the attempt. The honor of the Turners—"

"Looks to me like the honor of the Turners is going to get an awful jolt," murmured Laurie despondently. "Making a pitcher out of Kewpie—Gee, Ned, the fellow who made a purse out of a pig's ear had a snap!"

"It 's got to be done," reiterated Ned firmly. "After supper we 'll decide how. Hold on, though! We don't actually have to have him a real pitcher, son. All we have to do is to get him on the team just once, even if it's only for two minutes, don't you see?" Ned's tone was triumphant.

"Yes, but how can we do that if he does n't know how to pitch? I don't see that that 's going to make it any easier."

“Maybe, maybe not. Anyhow, it helps. There might be some way of faking him on there. Well, we ’ve got nearly three months to do it in, Laurie, so cheer up. Let ’s go and eat. A truce to all trouble! The bell rings for supper—”

“Of cold meat as chewy as Indian rupper!” completed Laurie.

“Quitter!” laughed Ned, pushing him through the door.

CHAPTER VIII

KEWPIE AGREES

“**K** EWPIE!”
“Yeah?”

“Come on over here!” It was Laurie calling from the doorway of No. 16. The door across the corridor opened, and the somewhat sleepy countenance of Kewpie peered forth inquiringly. The hour was 9:40.

“What do you want?” asked Kewpie. “I ’m just going to bed. I ’m tired, Nod.”

“You come over here,” was the stern, inexorable answer. “Ned and I want to talk to you.”

“Well, gosh, I tell you I ’m sleepy,” muttered Kewpie, but he crossed the hall and followed Laurie into No. 16. Kewpie was chastely clad in a suit of out-size pajamas, which were white with a broad blue stripe at short intervals. Kewpie in night attire looked about half again as large as he did when more or less confined in street costume. Laurie thrust the visitor into the

arm-chair. Kewpie subsided with a long sigh and blinked wonderingly, first at Nid and then at the determined Nod. Then he placed a large and pudgy hand in the neighborhood of his face and yawned cavernously.

“What ’s the matter with you fellows?” he inquired. “What are you looking at me like that for?”

“Kewpie,” said Ned, “do you honestly think you can ever learn to pitch?”

“What!” Kewpie woke up a trifle. “I can pitch right now. Who says I can’t?”

“I do,” said Laurie emphatically. “You can pitch now just about as well as a toad can fly. What we want to know is whether, if you practise hard and keep at it, you can learn.”

Kewpie looked hurt. “Say, what ’s the matter with my drop-ball?” he asked indignantly. “I suppose you think you could hit that, eh? Well, I ’d like to see you try it.”

“Cut out the bunk, Kewpie,” said Ned sternly. “We ’re talking business now. You know plauguey well you would n’t last ten seconds against a batter, the way you ’re pitching now. Laurie says you ’ve got a fair drop, when you get it right,

and that 's all you have got. You have n't— have n't— What is it he has n't got, Laurie?"

"He has n't got anything except that drop. He can't pitch a straight ball with any speed—"

"I don't want to. Any one can hit the fast ones."

"And he has n't a curve to his name. About all he has got is a colossal nerve."

"Nerve yourself," replied Kewpie. "I don't pretend to be a Joe Bush, or—or—"

"Can you learn?" demanded Ned. "If Laurie and I help every way we know how, if you study that book of yours, if you practise hard every day for—for two months, say, will you be able to pitch decently at the end of that time?"

Kewpie was plainly puzzled by this sudden and intense interest in him; puzzled and a trifle suspicious. "What do you want to know for?" he asked slowly.

"Never mind. Answer the question." Ned was very stern.

"Sure, I 'd be able to pitch after two months. Bet you I 'd have everything there is."

"All right," replied Ned. "Here 's the dope. Laurie and Elk Thurston and Nate Beedle and

two or three more were talking in the gym this afternoon, and Elk said you were no good and never would be able to pitch, and—”

“Elk!” interrupted Kewpie contemptuously. “He ’s just a big blow-hard, a bluff, a—”

“Never mind that. Laurie said you *could* pitch and that before the season was over you ’d be pitching on the nine. Get that?”

Kewpie nodded, glancing from one to the other of the twins, but he seemed at a loss for words. Finally, though, he asked awedly, “Gosh, Nod, did you tell ’em that?”

“Yes, like a blamed idiot I did! I guess I had a brain-storm or something. Well, never mind that now. What do *you* say?”

“Me?” Kewpie cleared his throat. “Well, now, look here, I never told you I could pitch on the team, did I?”

“If you did n’t you might just as well have,” answered Laurie impatiently. “You ’ve been cracking yourself up for a month. Now, what Ned and I want to know—”

“Well, but hold on! How would I get to pitch, with Nate Beedle and two or three others there? Gosh, those sharks have been at it for years!”

“Never you mind how,” said Ned sharply. “That ’s not the question. Laurie ’s gone and put himself in a hole, and you ’ve got to help pull him out. Will you do it?”

Kewpie was again silent for a moment. Then he nodded. “Sure,” he said dubiously. “I ’ll do what I can, but—”

“There are n’t any ‘buts,’ ” declared Ned. “If you ’ll take hold seriously and do your best and learn to pitch—well, fairly decently, Kewpie, Laurie and I ’ll look after the rest of it. We ’ll see that you get your chance somehow with the team.”

“How are you going to do it?” asked Kewpie.

Ned shrugged. “Don’t know yet. That ’ll come later. Now, what do you say? Will you be a game sport and buckle into it, or are you going to throw us down? You ’ll have to quit bluffing about what you can do and work like the dickens, Kewpie. You ’ll have to quit eating sweet stuff and starchy things and get rid of about ten pounds, too. Well?”

Kewpie looked solemnly back at Ned for an instant. Then he nodded shortly. “I ’ll do it,” he said soberly. “Let ’s go.”

The next day, which was a Saturday, the baseball candidates forsook the gymnasium and went out on the field. The ground was still soft in spots, and the diamond was not used. There was a long session at the batting-net and plenty of fielding work to follow, and of course, the pitching staff unlimbered and "shot 'em over" for awhile. Beedle, Pemberton, and Croft comprised the staff at present, with two or three aspirants applying for membership. George Pemberton fell to Laurie's share. Pemberton was not so good as Nate Beedle, but he had done good work for the team last year and he was a "comer." Laurie, taking Pemberton's shoots in his big mitten, for the first time since he had been transferred from the out-field to a position behind the plate, watched his pitcher's work. Before this, Laurie had concerned himself wholly with the ball. Now he gave attention to the behavior of Pemberton, studying the latter's stand, his wind-up, the way his body and pitching arm came forward, the way the ball left his hand. More than once Laurie became so engrossed with the pitcher that the ball got by him entirely. He even tried to discern how Pemberton placed his fingers around the

sphere in order to pitch that famous slow one of his that had foiled the best batsmen of the enemy last spring. But at the distance Laurie could n't get it.

Pemberton was eighteen, tall, rather thin, rather awkward until he stepped into the box and took a baseball in his capable hand. After that he was as easy and graceful as a tiger. The difference between Pemberton's smooth wind-up and delivery and Kewpie's laborious and jerky performance brought Laurie a sigh of despair. As he stopped a high one with his mitt and quite dexterously plucked it from the air with his right hand, Laurie was more than ever convinced that the campaign on which he and Ned and Kewpie had embarked last evening so grimly and determinedly was foredoomed to failure. Gee! Kewpie would never be able to pitch like George Pemberton if he lived to be a hundred years old and practised twenty-four hours a day! Laurie almost wished that he had been born tongue-tied! Later, returning to the gymnasium, Laurie ranged himself beside Pemberton. He had provided himself with a ball, and now he offered it to the pitcher. "Say, George, show me how you

hold it for that floater of yours, will you?" he said.

Pemberton took the ball good-naturedly enough. "What are you trying to do, Nod?" he asked. "Get my job away from me? Well, here 's the way I hold it." He placed his long fingers about the ball with careful regard for the seams. "But holding it is n't more than half of it, Nod. You see, you 've got to flip it away just right. Your thumb puts the drag on it, see? When you let go of it it starts away like this." Pemberton swung his arm through slowly and let the ball trickle from his hand. Laurie recovered it from a few paces away and stared at it in puzzled fashion. He guessed he would n't be able to learn much about pitching that way. Pemberton continued his explanation carelessly. "You see, you 've got to start it off with the right spin. That 's what keeps it up after a straight ball would begin to drop. Now you take the 'fade-away.' I can't pitch it, but I know how it 's done. You start it like this."

Laurie listened and looked on with only perfunctory interest.- It was n't any use, he decided. Learning Pemberton's stuff and teaching it to

Kewpie was beyond his abilities. Besides, when he came to think about it, it did n't seem quite fair. It was too much like stealing another fellow's patent. Of course there was n't more than one chance in ten that Kewpie would progress to the stage where he might burst on the Hillman's baseball firmament as a rival to Pemberton, but . . . just the same . . . The next time Pemberton let the ball go Laurie picked it up and dropped it in his pocket.

The next day, Sunday, saw Ned and Laurie walking toward the Widow Deane's shortly after dinner was over. It had become a custom to go for a walk on Sunday afternoons, when the weather was gracious, with Polly and Mae and, sometimes, Bob Starling or some of the other fellows. To-day, however, there were indications that a late dinner was still going on at the Starlings', and the twins did n't stop for Bob. It had rained during the night but a warm sun had long since removed all signs of it. Along the streets bordering School Park doors and windows were open to the spring-like air. In the park the few benches were occupied, and, beyond, in the paved yard of the high school, some small youths were

indulging somewhat noisily in an amusement suspiciously like baseball. Of course it could n't be baseball, as Laurie pointed out, since the town laws sternly forbade that game on Sundays. At the further corner of Pine Street a small white house with faded brown shutters stood sedately behind a leafless and overgrown hedge of lilac. The twins viewed the house with new interest, for it was there that Miss Comfort lived. Ned thought that through a gap in the hedge he had glimpsed a face behind one of the front windows.

“Reckon this is her last Sunday in the old home,” observed Ned. It sounded flippant, and probably he had meant that it should, but inside him he felt very sorry for the little old lady. It was not much of a house, as houses went even in Orstead, but it was home to Miss Comfort, and Ned suddenly felt the pathos of the impending departure.

Laurie grunted assent as they turned the corner toward the little blue painted shop. “Guess we are n't going to hear from the Goop,” he said. “It 's three days now.”

“We—ell, he might be away or something,” answered Ned.

“I don’t believe so,” said Laurie. “He did n’t answer Miss Comfort’s letter, and I guess he is n’t going to answer our telegram. The old skinflint,” he added as an afterthought.

CHAPTER IX

THE AFTERNOON CALL

“WHICH way?” asked Ned as, a few minutes later, they went through the gate.

“Let’s go down to the river and along the road and see all the booful automobiles,” said Laurie.

“It’s not my idea of a pleasant walk,” returned Ned, “to get entirely covered with dust and then run over!”

“We’re not going to walk,” announced Polly. “Anyway, not yet. We’re going this way.” She and Mae turned toward School Park.

“Not going to walk?” exclaimed Laurie. “What are we going to do? Polly, don’t tell me you’ve gone and bought an automobile!”

“We’re going calling,” said Polly.

“*What!*” protested Ned. “Calling, did you say? Not much, Polly! At least, I’m not.”

“Now, Ned Turner—” began Polly.

“Oh, never mind him,” broke in Laurie. “I’ll

go calling with you, Polly. I just love to go calling. Have you any one specially in mind? Or shall we just take them as they come?"

They were crossing the street now diagonally, Polly and Mae in the lead. Laurie was smoothing his hair and settling his tie smirkingly. Ned looked rebellious. "Who are we going to call on?" he demanded dejectedly.

"You 'll know soon enough," laughed Polly. And he did, for the next instant she had pushed open a little gate between the lilac hedges and was leading the way up the short path to Miss Comfort's door.

"Gee!" murmured Laurie. But he and Ned followed obediently and stared questioningly at Polly while somewhere at the rear of the little house, a bell jangled in response to her tug at the brown crockery knob. "What 's the big idea?" whispered Laurie to Mae, who was nearest. But Mae only shook her head. And then, with such promptitude as to suggest to Ned that he had not just imagined that face at the front window, the door opened, and Miss Comfort was giving them welcome. There were introductions in the small hall, during which Ned trod on Laurie's foot

and Laurie pushed Mae into an umbrella-stand which had once been a length of drain-pipe and which now bore a faded design of cat-o'-nine-tails and swallows; and then, somehow, they were all seated in the front parlor, Laurie, who had neglected in the confusion to leave his cap in the hall, trying to stuff it into a side pocket.

The room was not over-furnished. There was a walnut sofa covered with faded green rep across one corner, a marble-topped walnut table between the two front windows, a bookcase midway of the inner wall, a number of straight chairs placed formally along the sides of the room, and an easy-chair at each window. There were also two footstools covered with crewel work, one of which Ned narrowly escaped, and a brightly hued Brussels carpet. A fireplace, surmounted by a white marble shelf, was blankly, inexorably closed by a glossy black sheet of iron. Two gilt candelabra adorned the ends of the mantel, and a black marble clock, whose stumpy hands had stopped at twelve minutes to nine on some long-past day, stood squarely in the center. There was a purple and green square of embroidery on the table and a few books of unexciting appearance. Every-

thing was spotlessly clean, immaculately neat, depressingly orderly.

Polly and Mae, as usual, crowded into one of the easy-chairs, and Miss Comfort sat erectly in the other. Miss Comfort proved to be small and rather thin, with lightish hair that was n't brown and was n't white. She had small, delicate features and dark eyes that remained very bright and clear. Miss Comfort might be nearly seventy, as Polly had stated, but there was something youthful in her pleasant face, her quick movements, and her thin, soft voice. Laurie was receiving these impressions when that thin, soft voice pronounced his name and he discovered that his hostess had turned from the girls and was looking toward him, her head pushed forward a little as if, despite their brightness, her eyes were not as serviceable as they had been.

“Mr. Laurie,” Miss Comfort was saying, “I want to thank you for your interest in my affairs. I do think it was extremely kind of you to send that telegram to my brother-in-law. Although I am convinced that nothing will come of it, I assure you that I appreciate your helpfulness.”

It was rather a precise and formal little speech,

and it is probable that Miss Comfort had prepared it in advance of the occasion. It left Laurie surprised and sputtering.

“But—but—why, that’s all right—if you mean—”

Polly came to his rescue: “It was mama who told, Laurie. She really didn’t mean to, but if you knew her as well as I do you’d know that she simply can’t keep a secret, no matter how hard she tried.”

“Oh,” said Laurie. “Well, you don’t need to thank me—us a bit, Miss Comfort. I—we were mighty glad to do anything we could, and we wish there was more we might do. I guess Polly’s told you that that—er—that your brother-in-law has n’t answered yet.”

Miss Comfort nodded. “Yes, and I’m not surprised. Mr. Goupil is a very busy man, I suppose, and I dare say he has n’t time to—to look after all matters himself.”

“Well, if you ask me—” began Laurie indignantly.

“But she has n’t,” interrupted Ned warningly. “I guess what Laurie was going to say, Miss Comfort, is that he—that is, we—both of—neither

of us—” Laurie was smiling enjoyably—“can understand how your brother-in-law could act so—so—”

“Rotten,” supplied the irrepressible Laurie.

“I know,” replied Miss Comfort. “Perhaps I can explain a little. You might say that Mr. Goupil and I are strangers. Yes, that is scarcely an exaggeration. My sister Amanda met him in New Jersey fourteen years ago when she was teaching school there. Amanda was much younger than I and—and impulsive. I knew nothing about Mr. Goupil until she wrote to me from Chicago saying that she was married and on her way west with her husband. I was dreadfully surprised, as you can well understand, for Amanda was—” Miss Comfort hesitated, coughed and continued—“was almost fifty years of age, and I had never thought of her becoming married. In my surprise, I fear that my letter to her was not—well, quite as sympathetic as it should have been. I suppose I showed her that I was a little bit hurt because she had not confided in me earlier. That was most unfortunate, because it led to a— a misunderstanding. I tried very hard to atone, but she never forgave me, and after two years she

stopped answering my letters.” Miss Comfort was silent a moment, gazing down at the thin hands folded in her lap. “I fear,” she went on at length, “Amanda gathered the impression that I did n’t approve of her husband. Well, I don’t suppose I did. I mean that I did n’t approve of him for her. You see, he was younger than Amanda by several years, and then he was a foreigner.”

“A foreigner!” exclaimed Polly. “Why, I did n’t know that, Miss Comfort.”

Miss Comfort nodded. “Yes, he was a Frenchman, Polly. Of course there are undoubtedly many most estimable French gentlemen, but it did seem to me that if Amanda *had* to marry she might have found a man of her own race.” Miss Comfort sighed and then she laughed apologetically. “I don’t know why I ’m telling you all this. Oh, yes, I was trying to explain about Mr. Goupil, was n’t I? Well, you see, after Amanda was married I never saw either her or her husband. They lived in Chicago a year or so and then moved further west, and after that I lost all trace of them until I received word lately of Amanda’s death. After that came this letter

from the lawyer about the house. Maybe, you see, Mr. Goupil does n't feel very kindly toward me, and if he does n't I don't suppose I should blame him one bit."

"This house belongs to him now?" asked Laurie.

"Yes. My mother left a will that gave everything to Amanda, but allowed me the use of this place until Amanda's death. Of course mother never meant it the way she wrote it. She just got a little mixed up, and as she did n't employ a lawyer to do it for her, why, it stood just as she wrote it. I've often wondered," added Miss Comfort, wrinkling her forehead, "what she *did* mean. I suppose she meant me to live here until my death, and not Amanda's."

"I'll bet you could break a will like that," declared Laurie eagerly.

"So Mr. Whipple told me," responded Miss Comfort. "He was the lawyer. He's dead now. But I did n't like to do it. It seemed kind of—of disrespectful to mother. Besides, I never had any suspicion that I would outlast poor Amanda."

In the ensuing silence Polly and Mae gazed sympathetically at Miss Comfort, who, smoothing

the old black dress over her kness, appeared lost in her thoughts. Finally:

“Well,” began Laurie. Then he stopped, cleared his throat, and said: “Look here, Miss Comfort, I ’d like to ask you— It may sound cheeky— Well, what I mean is, have n’t you—that is, are you—” Laurie’s cheeks reddened as he floundered on. “Have n’t you any—any means at all? Maybe it ’s none of my business—”

“No, Mr. Laurie, I have n’t,” replied Miss Comfort quietly. “There was n’t ever much money after my father died, and mother’s will left what there was to Amanda. That was just as it should have been, for as long as I had this house I was quite all right.” She smiled gently. “But, land sakes, I don’t want you young folks to trouble your heads about me and my affairs. Troubles are n’t for the young, Mr. Laurie.”

“That ’s all right,” was the dogged response, “but—but something—somebody— It does n’t seem right for you to have to go to—to that place!”

“Why, I don’t know,” said Miss Comfort thoughtfully. “I guess lots of perfectly respect-

able folks have gone to the poor-farm. I dare say there 's no disgrace. And they do say that the—the institution is conducted very nicely. No doubt I'll be quite comfortable there. And—and it isn't as though I'd have to stay very long."

"Oh," exclaimed Ned relievedly, "then you expect to—" But Polly interrupted him.

"Now, Miss Comfort," cried Polly indignantly, "don't you talk like that! Why, goodness gracious, you aren't old at all! The—the idea!"

"I should say not!" said Mae warmly. "The idea!"

Miss Comfort chuckled softly. "Well, I ain't helpless yet, I know, Polly, but I'm—" she coughed daintily— "I'm getting along in years, my dear."

"Seems to me," exploded Laurie, "there ought to be some place in this town where you could go. Would n't you a whole lot rather live in a—a—" he had started to say "barn," but changed it to—"a—a shed than go to that poor-farm place?"

"Why, yes, I don't know but what I would,"

said Miss Comfort, "as long as it had a roof and I could go on with my work. But I 'm afraid I could n't even pay the rent for a shed, Mr. Laurie. Now I ain't going to let you talk a minute longer about me. Why, I 'm just ashamed of myself!" She arose quickly and crossed to the door with short, firm steps. "Will you excuse me a minute?" she asked.

When she had gone the four visitors looked at each other silently. Finally, "Rotten shame, I call it," muttered Laurie. Ned nodded agreement. Polly, whose gaze was fixed on Laurie expectantly, said suddenly: "Laurie, if you have anything in mind I think you 'd ought to tell her. It might make her feel more comfortable."

"Anything in mind?" echoed Laurie. "I have n't. At least, only—"

Miss Comfort's return with a dish of cake stopped him.

A little later they were outside again, walking silently away from the little white house with the brown shutters. When they were at last out of sight of the front windows Polly turned eagerly toward Laurie.

"What were you going to say?" she demanded.

“You have thought of some plan, have n’t you?”

Laurie hesitated, frowning thoughtfully. “Not much of a one,” he answered. “I guess it does n’t amount to anything. Only—well, now look here, does n’t it seem that there ought to be some place somewhere in this town that would do for her? It would n’t have to be *much*, would it? Maybe just a sort of shed that could be fixed up and made comfortable? Or a nice stable that has rooms above it. You know some stables have quarters for the coachman or chauffeur or gardener. Maybe—”

“Why, I think it ’s a perfectly stunning idea!” cried Polly. “No one thought of that!”

“But she ’d have to pay rent just the same, would n’t she?” asked Ned dubiously. “Some rent, anyhow? And she said—”

“If we explained about her,” said Polly, “I ’m sure no one would think of asking rent for just a stable attic—” Laurie’s chuckles interrupted. “Well, whatever you call it. Loft, is n’t it? Anyhow, perhaps just a—a nominal rent would be all they ’d ask.”

“Why don’t we look right now and see if we can’t find something?” asked Mae excitedly.

“Why don’t we?” cried Polly eagerly.

“Just what I was about to propose,” said Laurie a bit patronizingly, “when Ned butted in. Let ’s start in and do the old burg systematically. Which way shall we go first?”

Dusk had settled over Orstead when the four, footsore and weary, returned to the shop. Their quest had been fruitless.

CHAPTER X

THE COACH MAKES A PROMISE

“TURNER,” said Coach Mulford, taking the vacant place on the bench beside Laurie and laying a hand on his knees, “Turner, they tell me you ’re grooming a dark horse.”

“Sir?” Laurie looked blank. Pinky’s smile told him that there was a joke somewhere about, but the phrase was a new one to him and he did n’t get the coach’s meaning. Mr. Mulford laughed.

“They tell me that you ’re training a new pitcher for us,” he explained. “How about it?”

Laurie reddened a bit. He was n’t surprised that the coach knew about it, for his crazy boast and his daily work-outs with Kewpie were known all over school and he was being joked unmercifully. Those morning sessions now were being attended by something of a gallery of interested spectators who were generous with suggestions and applause. But it occurred to him now that Coach Mulford must think him rather a fool.

“I—well, I ’m sort of helping Kewpie Proud-tree,” he answered haltingly. “He wants to learn to pitch, Mr. Mulford.”

“I see.” The coach evidently did n’t disapprove of the proceeding. Laurie gathered that from his tones. “I see. How ’s he getting on?”

Laurie shook his head. “Not very well,” he said frankly.

“Sorry to hear that,” was the grave reply. “Still, there ’s quite a while yet, and I dare say we ’ll manage to get along with Beedle and the others until your man ’s ready.” Mr. Mulford slapped Laurie’s knee again and again laughed. Laurie laughed, too, but it wasn’t a whole-hearted laugh. Aware of the coach’s amused regard, he felt slightly resentful. After a moment he said offhandedly:

“I reckon he ’ll be ready for the Farview game, sir.”

“Think so? Fine!” Mr. Mulford chuckled as he arose. “Well, let me know when he is ready, Turner.”

“If I do will you give him a trial?” asked Laurie quickly.

“What?” Mr. Mulford paused in his departure and looked back. “Give him a trial? Why, I don’t know, Turner,” he continued slowly, “but I might.”

“You—you would n’t care to make that a promise, would you, sir?” asked Laurie. Pinky’s round, red face smiled back as, after a perceptible pause, he nodded.

“Yes, I ’ll make it a promise, Turner,” he agreed. “But, mind you, you must n’t ask me to waste my time. If your Great Unknown gets so he can really pitch, you let me know, and I ’ll look him over. But no duds, Turner!”

When, just before supper that evening, Laurie jubilantly repeated the conversation to Kewpie, Kewpie was all swelled up over that title of Great Unknown until Ned dryly remarked that most Great Unknowns never amounted to a hill of beans. Even that pessimistic utterance failed to dispel all of Kewpie’s pleasure, however.

“That ’s all right,” he said. “But some of them make good, don’t they? Well, here ’s one of ’em. You ask Nod if I did n’t pitch some mighty nice curves this morning.”

“Yeah,” agreed Laurie glumly, “they curved

all right, but you must n't think that a batter 's going to step out of his box to hit your balls, Kewpie. Batters are n't that accommodating!"

"Gosh," complained Kewpie, "you don't give a fellow credit when he deserves it. If you think it 's any fun going through that stunt every morning—"

"Who started it?" demanded Laurie.

"Well, that 's all right, but—"

"You 'll get a nice long rest pretty soon," said Ned soothingly. "Spring recess 'll be along in less than two weeks, old son."

Kewpie made no reply for a moment. Then, "Well," he began hesitantly, "I was thinking, Nid, that maybe I ought—ought n't—ought n't to go home at recess."

"Not go home! For goodness' sake, why?"

"Well, I 'd lose a whole week, would n't I? You and Laurie will be here, won't you?"

"Yes," replied Ned, with a notable lack of enthusiasm. He and Laurie were n't at all keen on remaining at school during the spring vacation, but it lasted only eight days, and as the journey to California occupied four, why, as Laurie put it, "they 'd meet themselves coming back!"

“Sure,” continued Kewpie. “Well, I ought to stay, too, I guess, and get a lot of practice in. Don’t you think so, Nod?”

“Why, I don’t know.” Laurie looked startled. The prospect of seven long days with nothing to do but to catch Kewpie’s drops and curves seemed decidedly lacking in attraction. There were moments when Laurie’s determination wavered, and this was one of them. “I suppose it would be a mighty good idea, though,” he added listlessly. Ned’s mouth trembled in a smile.

“Absolutely corking, Kewpie,” he declared. “Of course, you ought to stay. But what about your folks? Won’t they expect you home?”

Kewpie nodded. “But I wrote yesterday and told them that maybe I wouldn’t be able to.”

“I ’d like to have seen that letter,” chuckled Ned.

Kewpie grinned. “I just told them that I might have to stay here on account of baseball practice,” he explained innocently.

“Of course,” agreed Ned gravely. “Well, you and Laurie can have a fine old time during recess. No recitations to bother you or anything.”

“O Death, where is thy sting?” murmured Laurie.

“There is, though,” observed Ned, throwing his legs over the side of the Morris chair and eyeing Laurie quizzically, “just one complication that occurs to me. I’ve heard talk of the baseball team taking a Southern trip during recess. In that case, Laurie, I suppose you’d go along.”

“Honest?” exclaimed Kewpie anxiously. “I didn’t know that!”

“Nor any one else,” said Laurie, frowning. “Don’t you know yet when Ned’s joshing?”

“Oh,” breathed Kewpie with immense relief. “I thought maybe—”

“A swell chance I’d have of going with the team if it did go,” said Laurie. “I can’t play ball. I didn’t make a hit this afternoon. Couldn’t even see the old pill! Guess I’ll quit and go in for—for soccer or rowing.”

“Yes, rowing would be nice for you,” said Ned. “You’re so big and strong! It’s a wonder to me they haven’t grabbed you for the boat before this!”

“I’ll bet I could row as well as you, you old bluffer!”

“There goes the bell!” yelled Kewpie. “Gosh, I did n’t know it was so late! S’long!” He collided with a chair and rushed out.

A week passed, a week of ideal weather. The days were mildly warm and spring-like, and Polly’s possible snow did n’t develop. It showered occasionally, usually at night, and never enough to interfere with baseball practice. Tennis came into its own again, and Bob Starling was torn between the desire to remain at home and speed the making of the court behind the big house and the longing to go over to the school field and engage in combat with his ancient rivals. The crews were on the river daily. The education of Kewpie Proudtree as a baseball pitcher continued. Laurie regained his batting eye in a measure and talked no more of abandoning the diamond for the courts or the four-oared shells. Ned borrowed three golf-clubs from as many different acquaintances, bought a fourth, and accompanied Joe Stevenson, captain of last autumn’s football’s eleven, around the links. Mr. Goupil, of Sioux City, Iowa, continued to emulate the Sphinx, and Miss Comfort was temporarily installed in one of the up-stairs rooms

at the Widow Deane's, Polly sleeping in the room below.

This arrangement had come about as the result of an eleventh-hour hitch in the program that was to have placed Miss Comfort in the poor-farm, down the river about two miles. It turned out that gaining admission to that institution was not such a simple matter as one might suppose. There was a great deal of red tape to be untied, and the untying of it occupied the energies of several of Orstead's influential citizens. There was no doubt that eventually Miss Comfort would reach that haven, but meanwhile there ensued a delay that might last a week—a fortnight—even longer. Bob Starling's father, instigated by his sister, who, since the death of Bob's mother, had kept house for them, offered very generous assistance of money. Other individuals had sought to aid, as, too, had the congregation of the little church that Miss Comfort attended. But all such offers had been gratefully and firmly declined. Hospitality the little old lady would have accepted, but charity in the form of money was, to her mind, something quite different and most repugnant. So, until the last knot in the mass

of red tape had been untied, she was to remain as Mrs. Deane's guest, an arrangement that brought as much pleasure to the Widow and Polly as it did to Miss Comfort.

Even Polly had now accepted the inevitable. That first search for a modest habitation for the exile had been discouragingly unsuccessful, as had a second and more half-hearted one, and the four sympathetic young folks had finally agreed that the situation was beyond them. If Polly was a wee bit disappointed in Laurie because of his failure to find a solution of the problem—and I think she was—she doubtless recognized the injustice of that emotion and concealed it. Laurie, once satisfied that everything had been done that could be done, philosophically banished the matter from his mind. Of course, he was just as sorry as ever for Miss Comfort, but that didn't keep him from giving his full attention to matters of more personal interest, such as trying to beat Elk Thurston out for the position of first substitute catcher, and striving, sometimes hopelessly, to make Kewpie into a pitcher. It is always so much easier to view another's misfortunes with philosophy than one's own.

Hillman's played two games during the week preceding the spring vacation and won one of them. The second, with Lincolndale High School, went to ten innings at 7 to 7 and was then called to allow the visitors to catch a train. Laurie, to his oddly mingled relief and disgust, saw action in neither of the contests. Elk Thurston took the place of Cas Bennett, the regular catcher, for the last two innings in the first encounter, but in the second game Cas worked through to the end. Laurie had to acknowledge that Elk did pretty well that Wednesday as a catcher—better, probably, than he could have done. Laurie's modesty, though, did not keep him from telling himself that, while he might have performed less skillfully behind the plate than Elk had, he was mighty sure he could have done better at the bat. The Orstead High School pitcher, the third since the beginning of the game, had nothing on the ball, was, in fact, scarcely more of a twirler than Kewpie Proudtree, and yet Elk had swung ingloriously at the first three offerings and had failed to so much as tickle one of them. "Bet you," thought Laurie, "I'd have *fouled* one, anyhow!"

The Lincolndale game was on Friday, and the next day vacation began. By noon the school was pretty well depopulated, although there remained a scattering of unfortunate fellows who, like Ned and Laurie, lived too far from Orstead to allow of a home visit, or who could not afford the trip. Kewpie had reached a compromise with his parents. He was to go home and remain until Tuesday morning. Then he was to return to school and the demands of baseball. Ned was cynical after Kewpie's departure.

"Bet you we won't see Kewpie again until a week from to-morrow," he said to Laurie.

Laurie shook his head. "I don't know," he replied," but I have a hunch that he will be back Tuesday. Kewpie's taking this pretty seriously, Ned, and he's really trying mighty hard. Sometimes I think that if only he was n't so outrageously like a dumpling he could do something at it!"

CHAPTER XI

ON LITTLE CROW

MAE FERRAND was not on hand the next afternoon when the twins and Bob Starling reached the Widow Deane's. Mae, Polly informed them, had gone to Poughkeepsie to spend Sunday with her grandmother. They decided to go down to the river for their walk this afternoon, and were soon descending Walnut Street. At the station they crossed the tracks, passed the freightshed, and went southward beside the river, blue and sparkling in the spring sunlight. Then they had to return again to the tracks and cross a bridge that spanned a narrow inlet. The inlet connected the river with a shallow stretch of marsh and water known as the Basin which lay between the tracks and the big rock-quarry. The quarry was slowly but very surely removing the hill called Little Crow, and the face of the quarry was fully eighty feet in height from the boulderstrewn base to the tree-topped summit. It was

here that stone was being obtained for the work on which Mr. Starling's company was engaged. Spur-tracks ran from the railroad to the base of the high cliff, about two hundred yards distant, and from the railroad again to the stone-walled dock wherein the quarry company loaded to lighters for water transportation. The Basin was a favorite place for skating in winter, and Ned reminded the others of several episodes of three months back.

“Remember the time Elk Thurston tried to get ashore over there by the rushes?” asked Ned. “Every time he put his foot down the ice broke and let him through.”

“And he got angrier and angrier,” laughed Polly, “and tried to hurry and—”

“Fell flat,” chuckled Laurie. “They told him the ice would n't hold him over there, but he always knows a little more than any one else. And, look, there 's the old *Pequot Queen* over there yet. It 's a wonder some one does n't take her away or break her up or something.”

“Nobody knows who she belongs to, I heard,” said Bob. “The old ferry company went bust three or four years back, and the quarry company

can't touch her because she is n't theirs. I heard they had a bill for dockage as long as my arm against the Queen, though."

"Still, that 's the quarry dock she 's in," said Ned, "and she must be in the way there. I don't see why they don't push her out and let her float down the river."

"She 'd be a menace to navigation," replied Bob knowingly. "The law would get them if they tried that."

"Sort of like a fellow driving an automobile into your front yard and leaving it there and going off," laughed Laurie. "You could n't put it out into the street because that would be against traffic rules and you could n't take possession of it—"

"You could send it to a garage, though," said Bob.

"Yes, and pay the garage bills!"

"The quarry folks could see that it got on fire accidentally," said Ned.

"It would only burn to the water-edge. The hull would be just as much in the way as the whole thing," objected Bob.

"I hope they 'll let it stay just where it is,"

said Polly. "I'm sure it comes in very handy when we come here skating. Remember that perfectly ferocious day just after Christmas, Laurie, when we were all nearly frozen and you made a fire in the—the fireplace—"

"Fireplace!" echoed Ned. "That 's corking!"

"Well, the—the—why, I don't see why it is n't a fireplace, Smarty. It 's the place you build the fire, is n't it?"

"Boiler," said Bob.

"Well, anyway, it just about saved my feet from freezing right off," declared Polly. "And we had a lot of fun on the boat, and I hope no one will do anything to it at all!"

"Guess you need n't worry," said Laurie. "Looks as if she 'd stay right here and rot to pieces. Guess she 's got a good start already."

Their homeward way led them through the woods and around the slope of Little Crow Hill, at first by an old wood-road and then by devious trails through the now leafless forest. That was the nearer way, but there was a longer, more arduous, and far more attractive route that took them to the summit of Little Crow and laid the world at their feet; for from above the face of the

quarry they could look for miles and miles up and down the broad river and across it and westward to the rising foot-hills of the mountains. Since to-day was as clear as a whistle and the air held that crisp quality that makes exertion a pleasure, Bob's suggestion that they go up to the top of the hill was accepted with enthusiasm by Ned and Laurie. Polly, glancing solicitously at her dress, hesitated. But she was, in the boys' parlance, "a good sport," and she didn't want to spoil their fun. So after a brief moment she, too, agreed, although with less enthusiasm, and they turned northward from the wood-road and ascended, for a time almost parallel to the railroad, a narrow path where the branches clutched mischievously at Polly's skirt and proved that she had had cause for indecision.

Laurie led, with Polly next. For a while the going was not hard, but then outcropping boulders set the path to twisting and winding, and soon they were helping themselves upward by branches and setting their feet carefully in the moist tangles of root and moss. It was half-way up a more than usually severe stretch, when every muscle was tense, that Laurie suddenly stopped

short, turned about and exclaimed "*Say!*" in such an unexpected and explosive burst of sound that Polly, thrown from her balance by her attempt to avoid collision with Laurie, and startled out of her wits, fell back against Ned. Only Bob's prompt support from the rear saved the situation. The three glared at the offender in outrage.

"Say," exclaimed Ned, "what do you want to do? Break all our necks? What's the matter with you, anyway, stopping like that and shouting like a crazy man?"

Laurie stared back for an instant as though he neither saw Ned nor heard him. Then his gaze fell and he turned away. "Sorry," he muttered.

"But—but what was it?" gasped Polly. "Did you see a snake or—or something?"

Laurie shook his head and began to climb again. "I just thought of something," he said.

"Well, for the love of lime-drops!" scolded his brother. "Don't think any more until we get to the top, you poor prune!"

They went on, but it was n't difficult to perceive that Laurie was n't obeying Ned's injunction. If he had been he would n't have stumbled over everything in his course and he would n't have

missed the path above the big fern-clad rock near the summit and gone wandering off into the brush all by himself until called back by the others. Ned observed him pityingly as he sheepishly rejoined them.

“We ’ll have to hold you when we get to the top,” said Ned crushingly. “If we don’t you ’ll probably walk right over the edge! What in the world ’s got into you?”

“Nothing,” answered Laurie, an absent expression possessing his features again. “What are you stopping here for?”

“Well, there *is* something,” said Ned accusingly, “and I know what it is. You ’ve got some crazy idea in your bean.” He turned to Polly. “He ’s always like that when he thinks he ’s discovered something big, like perpetual motion or—or how to make a million dollars. We ’ll have to watch him until he recovers, or he will do himself harm. You go first, Bob, and I ’ll keep an eye on him.”

The rest of the climb was accomplished without further incident, and they at last emerged in a small cleared space at the top of the hill. I don’t mean cleared in the sense of free from rubbish,

for occasional picnic-parties had offended against nature as they have a way of doing, and the scanty grass was littered with paper and empty cracker-boxes and an occasional bottle or tin. Ned viewed the scene disgustedly.

“Funny what human hogs some folks are,” he growled, kicking an empty olive-bottle over the edge of the cliff. He paused until, after an appreciable interval, the distant tinkling sound of breaking glass met his ears. “It’s enough to make you sick. Folks who can’t stand a speck of dust on their automobile will get out and eat their lunch and leave the place looking like a pigsty. Ought to be brought back and made to eat every scrap of the mess they leave behind them.”

“Right-o,” agreed Bob, “but I don’t believe these folks were automobilists, Ned. It’s a long way up here from the road.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Ned, “whether they came in a car or walked; they’re hogs just the same.”

“Well, let’s sit down and get our breaths,” said Polly, suiting action to words. “That’s a

perfectly frightful climb, is n't it. I don't think I tore my dress, though." She was making inspection and looked vastly relieved as no damage showed.

"Better luck going down," said Bob cheerfully, and Polly made a face at him as he sprawled beside Ned. Laurie had not joined them on the grass, but instead was lounging toward the edge of the cliff, his hands in his pockets.

"Laurie, please don't go so close," called Polly from a dozen feet away. "It makes me feel sort of squirmy."

Perhaps Laurie did n't hear her. He was very near the edge now, close by a pine that leaned outward at an angle, its roots clinging to the thin crust of earth that hid the rock beneath. Ned glanced toward him, and an expression of disapproval came to his face.

"He thinks he's smart," he said contemptuously. "He's always liked to walk on roofs and act silly goat that way." He raised his voice. "*Laurie!*"

Laurie gave a start. "Yes?" he answered. Then—well, then everything happened all at once

and with incredible speed. They saw Laurie grasp suddenly at the leaning tree, saw him miss it, saw one foot disappear over the edge in a tiny cloud of brown dust, and then, in almost the same instant, Laurie just was n't there!

CHAPTER XII

ON THE QUARRY SHELF

THERE was an instant of incredulous horror on the cliff top. Then Polly's smothered gasp broke the silence, and the two boys were on their feet. Short of the edge, Ned faltered for a moment, sick and trembling, and it was Bob who crouched on hands and knees and looked first down the steeply sloping face of rock. Beside him the earth was still trickling where Laurie's unwary foot had broken off an overhanging crust.

For a second Bob's gaze, fearfully searching the rocky débris far below, saw nothing. Then came a sharp cry of relief from Ned, who had now dropped beside him, and at the same moment Bob's gaze, retraveling the face of rock, fell on Laurie.

About thirty feet below them he was, his feet set on a shelf scarcely four inches wide, his right hand stretched high and its fingers hooked over

a still narrower ledge, his left hand flung outward, its palm pressed against the smooth surface. His head leaned against the raised shoulder, his forehead close to the rock. Viewed from below the quarry face looked perpendicular, as, indeed, it was farther around where the height was less, but here there was a perceptible slope, slight but sufficient to have saved Laurie from a headlong plunge to the strewn fragments at the base. His cap was gone and the miniature landslide had powdered his head and shoulders with red dust.

“Laurie!” called Ned tremulously.

For a space there was no answer. Then Laurie’s voice reached them, weak and muffled.

“Yeah?”

He didn’t raise his face.

“Are you hurt?” asked Bob anxiously.

“No, not—yet.” He stopped and then added, “Scraped a bit.”

“Can you hold on until we—we—” Ned stopped because he could n’t think just then what it was they could do.

“I reckon so,” answered Laurie. “Is there . . . anything near my left hand . . . I can reach, Ned?”

“No. Wait. Yes, there ’s a sort of edge about six inches higher. Can you reach it? Further up. Nearer you now. That ’s it!” Laurie’s questing fingers had found the spot. It was n’t much of a hold, only a bit of rough rock projecting an inch or so from the smooth face. Ned was suddenly aware that Polly was crouched beside him, crying nervously. He tried hard to think clearly. After a moment he said: “Laurie, we ’re going for a rope. It will take some time, but—but it ’s the only thing I can think of. Can you hold on until we get back?”

“I ’ll stick,” was the grim answer. His voice was clearer now and steadier. “How far down am I?”

“About thirty feet.” Ned stumbled to his feet. “No use both of us going, Bob,” he said hurriedly. “You stay. And Polly. I guess I can find rope at the quarry.” He was off then, running down the path. Bob dropped to his knees again beside Polly. Polly was speaking, trying to make her voice steady and confident.

“It won’t be long, Laurie,” she called. “Be—be brave and—”

“Hello, Polly,” answered Laurie from below,

a faint reminder of his old insouciance in his voice. "Nice fix, eh?"

"Yes, but don't worry, and—you 'd better not talk."

"Guess I 'd rather," answered Laurie. "Sort of keeps me from thinking about—things." After a moment he continued. "Position 's sort of cramped, Polly. Bob there, or did he go, too?"

"No, I 'm here," answered Bob. "I 've been thinking—"

"Don't do it," said Laurie. "I tried it, and now look at me! Wish my legs would n't tremble. How wide 's the thing I 'm standing on, Bob?"

"Three inches. Maybe four. What I was—"

"Rock?"

"Yes, a sort of narrow ledge across the face; a fault, as they call it. It runs downward at your left almost to the bottom, I 'd say. Listen, Nod. Suppose I got a long pole and lowered one end to you and held the other. Would that be easier for you to hold on to?"

Laurie considered a moment. "I reckon so," he answered. "My right arm 's just about dislocated. Try it, will you, Bob?"

Bob arose and disappeared into the woods.

“Wish I could stand on my heels for a while,” said Laurie. “My toes are trying to dance. Where ’s Ned gone for the rope?”

“To the quarry, he said,” Polly replied. “If Bob and I made a sort of rope of our clothes, Laurie, would n’t it be better than a pole?”

“Don’t believe so. I would n’t feel awfully easy in my mind if I trusted to that sort of rope. Anyway, I don’t intend to have you make rags of your new dress!”

“Oh, Laurie, as if a new dress mattered!” exclaimed Polly. “I do wish it was n’t so thin, though. Here comes Bob.”

Bob brought the dead trunk of a young black birch about five inches thick at the butt where, by hacking with his knife and twisting, he had managed to sever it. Now he slashed the larger branches away. “Good thing it ’s dried out,” he said to Polly. “If it was n’t it would be too heavy to hold. Hope it ’s long enough!”

“Oh, Bob, I don’t believe it is,” said Polly anxiously.

“If it is n’t I can find one that is.”

But it was. When Bob had lowered the smaller end down the cliff at Laurie’s right and Laurie

had very carefully and rather fearfully unclasped his numb fingers from their rocky hold and clutched them about the tree there remained a few inches of the butt end above the level of the ground. Taking a firm hold with both hands at arm's length as he lay facedown, Bob smiled his satisfaction.

“She 'll hold you, Nod, even if the shelf you 're standing on gives way! Polly can sit on my legs if she has to, and after that I 'm good for all day.”

“Gee, that 's a lot better,” said Laurie. “Wow, that arm was almost out at the socket! Can you see this fault, as you call it from where you are?”

“Yes.”

“Look it over, will you? Does it go right to the bottom?”

“N-no, not quite, I guess. I can't just see the end of it. There 's a three-cornered hunk of ledge sticking out down there. I guess it stops about a dozen feet from the bottom, Nod.”

“All right. Tell you what I'm figuring on. You check me up, you two. Suppose I have that rope that Ned 's gone for. It would n't be any

good for me to try and climb it, for I 'm aching all over and I just would n't have the strength. If I tied it around me you three could n't pull me up over that edge. Of course if the rope 's long enough you fellows can lower me down, or I could put a turn of the rope around me and get down myself, I reckon. How about that?"

"You 'd get awfully scraped up, I 'm afraid," said Bob. "I 'm pretty sure the three of us can pull you up, Nod."

"I don't believe you could. It would be risky, anyway. Maybe, though, I can climb up somehow."

"Perhaps," offered Polly, "Ned will bring some one back with him to help."

"Let 's hope so," said Laurie. "If he does n't, the next best thing is a rope long enough to reach to the bottom. My idea was this, Bob." He paused long enough to shift one foot gingerly and relieve his jumping nerves. "I thought I could tie the end of the rope under my shoulders and work along this ledge that I 'm standing on until I got where I could jump or drop or something."

"We could lower you the rest of the way if the rope lasted."

“Yes, of course. Question is—” Laurie’s words were coming slower now, with pauses between—“question is, can you folks follow along the edge and hold your end of the rope?”

Bob turned his head and studied. After a minute he said: “Yes, I ’m sure we can. The trees are close to the edge in places, but we could manage to pass the rope around them. We ’ll see to that. Trouble is, Nod, there ’s a place about ten or twelve yards from where you are where the blamed shelf sort of peters out for a ways, nearly five feet, I ’d say.”

“That so?” Laurie deliberated. “Well, if you fellows took a turn around a tree with your end of the rope I reckon I could make it, eh?”

“Yes, I think you could,” Bob agreed. “Sure, you could!”

“All right. Guess that ’s . . . the best plan,” said Laurie tiredly. “How long ’s Ned . . . been gone?”

“Oh, he *must* be back in a minute!” cried Polly. “He ’s been gone a long, long time.”

“Seen him down there . . . yet?”

“He probably went to the office-building near the dock,” answered Bob. “You can’t see that

from here. Keep the old dander up, Nod."

"I know," agreed Laurie, "only . . . I ain't so well in my dander! Ought to see . . . a doctor—"

"He 's coming!" cried Polly. "I hear him!"

Even as she spoke joyfully, Ned came into sight, panting, perspiring, flushed, a coil of rope over a shoulder. He fairly staggered up the last of the ascent and across the small clearing, his eyes questioning Polly's anxiously.

"He 's all right," cried Polly. Ned exhaled a deep breath of relief and struggled to disencumber himself of the rope. The girl sprang to his aid.

"I broke a window in the shed down there," panted Ned. "This was all I could find, but it 's good and strong." He began with trembling fingers to fashion a noose.

"Oh, Ned," faltered Polly, "it 's so short?"

"How long?" called Bob.

"Forty feet," replied Ned. "Maybe more. It 's more than long enough!"

Polly explained hurriedly, and Ned's face fell as he stared despairingly at the cliff's edge. Then his shoulders went back. "We 'll get him

up," he said grimly. "We 'll get him up or I 'll go down with him!" He went on bunglingly with the noose. Bob and Laurie were talking beyond the edge.

"Rope 's too short for your scheme," Bob said as cheerfully as he could. "Only about forty of fifty feet, Nod."

"Would n't do, eh?" Laurie asked after a moment's silence.

"No, too short by thirty feet, I guess. Twenty, anyway. We 'll have to pull you up, old chap. We 'll manage it."

Ned was peering down now. "I 've made a slip-noose, Laurie. We 'll lower it down, and you can get one arm through and then the other."

"Wait a bit," said Bob. "You 'd better take hold of that ledge again with your right hand first, Nod. These branches will be in the way. Can you reach it? Higher yet. There you are! All right." Bob pulled up the birch-tree, edged his body back, rolled over, and took several deep breaths. Then he rubbed his neck vigorously and got to his knees. "Polly," he directed, "you take hold of the end of the rope and, for the love of Mike, don't let go of it! Lower away now,

Nid. Coming down, old chap. Left arm first. Straighten it up. All right. Get your hold again. Now the other. Hold the rope closer in, Nid. Right-o! Fine! Tighten up easy, Nid. How 's that, down there?"

"All right, thanks. Ned, don't start anything until you 've rested a bit. I can hear you puffing down here. I 'm fine now and can spend the day here."

Ned sank down and relaxed, breathing heavily and mopping his face. "Best way to do," said Bob to him, "will be to take a turn of rope around a tree and let Polly take up the slack as we haul. It 'll be a hard tug, with the rope binding over the edge, but I guess we can do it." Ned nodded, took a deep breath, and stood up,

"Let 's go," he said shortly.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PEQUOT QUEEN

THE first pull on the rope resulted only in sawing through the turf and earth at the edge of the cliff until the rock was reached. The next tug brought a few inches more at the cost of terrific effort, for the rope must pass at almost right angles over the raw edge of the rock. Laurie, his hands clasping the rope above his head to lessen the strain across his chest, was showered with earth. Another heave, and Ned and Bob went back a scant foot, Polly, her weight on the rope, tightening the slack around the tree. Once more the two boys dug their heels into the ground and strained. This time there was no result. They tried again. It was as though they were pulling at the cliff itself. The rope tautened under their efforts but yielded not an inch.

“Must be . . . caught!” gasped Bob.

Ned, weak from that hurried climb up the hill, nodded, and closed his eyes dizzily. The mo-

ment's silence was broken by a hail from Laurie.

“No good, you fellows! The rope's worked into a crevice of the rock and is jammed there. I'll have to climb it myself. Make your end fast around something and stand by to give me a hand—if I make it!”

Bob silently questioned Ned, and the latter nodded again. “Let him try,” he said huskily. “If he can't—”

“Oh, wait, wait!” cried Polly. “We're—we're perfect idiots! He does n't have to do that, Ned! He can walk along that ledge, and we can hold the rope—”

“But it is n't long enough,” Bob expostulated.

“Not down,” said Polly impatiently; “up!”

“Up? By Jove, that's so! See what she means, Ned? Here, let's get this tied to the tree!” A moment later Bob was at the edge, his eager gaze following the narrow ledge as it ascended at Laurie's right. Scarcely twenty feet beyond, it ended at a perpendicular fissure hardly four feet below the top. Gleefully he made known the discovery to Laurie, and the latter, stretched like a trussed fowl against the rock, his toes still just touching the shelf, grunted.

“Never thought of that,” he said disgustedly. He stretched his head back until he could see the shelf. Then, “It’s a cinch,” he affirmed. “You’ll have to get the rope free first, though, and ease up on it until I can get my feet back on the ledge. Can you do it?”

“Have to,” answered the other cheerfully. Cautiously he and Ned untied the rope from about the tree, gave it some three inches of slack, retied it, and set to work at the edge of the cliff. Or, rather, Bob worked, for Ned’s hands trembled so that he couldn’t. The rope was fast in a jagged-edged notch of the rock, and Bob’s only implement, his pocket-knife, was somewhat inadequate. But he made it do. Using the handle like a tiny hammer, he chipped and chipped until finally the rope began to slip downward and Laurie’s weight rested again on the ledge. The end about the tree was unfastened; the rope was lifted from the channel it had dug through the overlying soil and carried a yard to the left. Then, with Ned and Bob and Polly holding it, their heels dug firmly into the sod, Laurie began his journey.

It was slow work at first, for his nerves and

muscles responded ill to the demands of his brain, and delays came when those above cautiously moved their position, taking new holds on the slowly shortening rope. Had Laurie been fresh for the task he would have swarmed up there in no time at all. As it was, it took a good ten minutes to reach the end of his journey; and, even so, he did not proceed to the limit of his narrow foot-path but, once his hands could reach the edge, squirmed his way over, Bob and Ned pulling and tugging.

Once there, he flopped over on his back in the tangle of brush and stretched legs and arms relievedly. In the little silence that ensued Bob removed the rope from Laurie and coiled it with unnecessary exactitude. Then Laurie took a long, deep breath, sat up, and said "Thanks!"

That relaxed the general tension. Bob laughed queerly, Ned grinned in a twisted way, and Polly dabbed at her eyes with a diminutive handkerchief.

"Welcome," said Bob dryly. Then all four began to laugh and talk at the same time. After a moment of that Bob laid a hand on Laurie's collar. "Let 's get out of this," he said. Laurie

got to his feet somewhat shakily, and they fought their way back to the little clearing. "Now," said Bob, "we 'll just sit down and look at that view we came up here to see and get rested for a quarter of an hour. I don't know how Laurie feels, but I 'm all in!"

"I 'll bet you are," responded Laurie. "Guess I had the easiest part of it."

"You look it," answered Bob sarcastically. Laurie's face was brown with dirt, his knuckles were bleeding, there was a cut on his chin, and his clothes were torn until they looked fit only for the ragman. Ned, who had been scowling blackly for the last minute or two, broke into sudden speech.

"Of all the crazy lunatics, Laurie," he began fiercely.

"Oh, *please*, Ned!" cried Polly. "He did n't mean to do it!"

"Let him say it," said Laurie humbly. "I deserve it, and it 'll do him good."

But Ned's eloquence had fled him. He said "*Humph!*" and turned his head away and stared hard at the wide expanse of scenery spread before him. The others pretended not to know that

there were tears in his eyes, and Bob said hastily: "Well, all 's swell that ends swell! How did it happen, anyway, Nod?"

"Oh, I was—was thinking about something and did n't realize I was so close to the edge, I guess. Then Ned called to me and I turned around quick and one foot began to go. I tried to catch hold of that tree there and missed it. Next thing I knew I was sliding down the rock. I guess that trying to catch hold of the tree saved me, because it threw me forward and, instead of falling outward, I went sliding down with my face scraping against the rock. Somehow, just by luck, I got hold of a root for a second. It broke off, but it helped, I guess, for I stopped with my feet on that ledge and my right hand holding on to something above me. I suppose I made sort of a fuss about it down there," he concluded apologetically, "but you don't know how quivery your nerves get, Bob. Seemed like my legs wanted to dance all the time!"

"Son, you certainly had a narrow squeak of it," said Bob solemnly. "Gee, when I saw you go over—"

"Oh, it was perfectly horrible," shuddered

Polly. "And then afterward, while Ned was gone—"

"There 's a busted window down there that some one's got to settle for," growled Ned.

"Believe me, old scout," replied Laurie feelingly, "I 'm willing to settle for a hundred busted windows! Of course, I don't mean that it would n't have been a heap more considerate of you to have slipped the catch with your knife and saved me the expense."

Ned faced them again then, glaring at his brother. "You poor fish!" he said contemptuously.

"That 's me," agreed Laurie smilingly. "Pulled up with a line!"

Polly and Bob laughed, the former a trifle hysterically. Then Ned's mouth twitched itself into a grin. "Laurie, you 're an awful fool," he said affectionately.

"Guess you 're right, Neddie." He climbed to his feet, stamped them experimentally, seemed to approve of the result, and added, "Well, unless some one else is going to fall over, say we go home."

“I ’m ready,” agreed Bob. “How about the rope? Ought n’t we—”

“In payment for my share in the recent—er—episode,” said Laurie, “I ’ll look after it. Where ’d you get it, Ned?”

“Why don’t we all go?” asked Polly. “It is n’t *much* farther that way.”

“Right-o,” agreed Bob. “Besides, who knows what Laurie would do next if we let him go alone?”

So they set off down the hill again, every one by now extremely merry and light-hearted in the reaction. They dropped the rope through the window in the shed adjoining the office of the quarry company and retraced their steps to the village and up Walnut Street and so, finally, just as dusk began to settle down, reached the little shop. There it was Polly who voiced the thought that had been in the minds of the rest for some time.

“Perhaps,” said Polly, “it would be better if we did n’t say anything about what happened.”

“Polly,” declared Laurie relievedly—and slangily, “you spoke a mouthful!”

“Yes,” agreed Ned. “No use worrying folks about a thing when it’s all over.”

“Of course not,” chimed in Bob. “Guess it won’t happen again, anyway.”

“Not with me in the rôle of happenee,” said Laurie with conviction.

“If it ever does,” said Ned, “you’ll hang over the cliff until you dry up and blow away for all of me, you poor simp!”

But when they had said good night to Bob Ned’s tune was different. “Old-timer,” he said after a silence, “you sure had me scared.”

“I know,” said Laurie soberly. “Sorry, Ned.”

“Uh-huh. ’S all right.” Ned slipped his arm in Laurie’s. “Wish you’d cut out that sort of thing, though. Always gives me heart-failure. It’s risky business, anyway.”

“Right,” agreed Laurie. After a minute, as they passed through the gate, he added, “No more I’ll risk my neck on dizzy height.”

“Well said, for if you do you’ve me to fight!”

That evening the twins were content to lounge in easy-chairs in the recreation-room and read, refusing challenges to ping-pong, chess, and various other engagements requiring exertion of

mind or body. They went early to bed and, although Laurie roused once to hear Ned in the throes of nightmare and had to quiet him before returning to his own dreamless slumber, awoke in the morning their normal selves again.

After breakfast that morning Laurie announced to Ned that he was going to walk down and explain the broken window, and settle for it if settlement was demanded. Ned said, "All right, come along." But Laurie persuaded the other that his presence during the conference with the quarry company officials was not only unnecessary but inadvisable. "You see," he elaborated, "it's going to require tact, old son, and Tact, as you know, is my middle name. Now, if I took you along you'd be sure to say something to queer the whole show and I'd have to fork over a dollar, maybe. No, better leave this to me, Ned."

"Must say you fancy yourself a bit this morning," scoffed Ned. "All right, though. Come over to Bob's when you get back. I told him I'd go around there and look at the court."

Laurie saved his dollar by narrating a moving tale of his fall from the cliff to the occupants

of the small office down by the river. One weazened little man who held a pen in his mouth and talked through it or around it—Laurie could n't decide which—reminded the visitor that if he had not trespassed on quarry company property he would n't have got in trouble. But it was plain that this view was not popular with the other members of the force present, and Laurie was permitted to depart with his last week's allowance intact.

From the office he made his way across toward the stone-walled dock where lay the *Pequot Queen*. Once he paused, turned, and sent his gaze to the great mass of rock that arose precipitately from beyond the littered floor of the quarry. He could n't see the tiny ledge that had saved his life yesterday, but there, looking very small from down here, was the leaning tree, and he measured the distance to the rock-strewn ground beneath and shuddered. He was still gazing when there was a dull concussion and a cloud of gray dust, and a great pile of rock slid down the face. The little locomotive tooted and came rocking toward the railway, dragging a flat-car loaded with two great squares of rock. On the farther

side of the small dock a lighter was being loaded, a big boom swinging from cars to deck to the music of a puffing engine and the shrill piping of a whistle. Laurie continued his way to the *Pequot Queen*.

A few years before the boat had been used in the ferry service between Orstead and Hamlin, across the river. Then the business failed to show a profit, the company was dissolved, and the *Pequot Queen* was pushed into the quarry company's dock—without permission, if rumor was to be credited—and left to rot. She was about fifty feet long and very broad of beam. The stern was occupied by a cabin with many windows, a few of which were still unbroken. Amidships, if one may apply the term to a launch, was a small engine-room in which a rusted upright engine still stood amid a litter of coal-dust. A door led to a smaller compartment, the wheel-house. Between that and the bow was a space for luggage and freight. The *Pequot Queen* had not carried vehicles.

At one time the boat had doubtless shone resplendent in white paint and gold-leaf. Now there were few traces of either remaining. The

name was still legible on each side of the bow, however, in faded black. Through the roof a rusty smoke-stack pushed its way to lean perilously to starboard. Atop the cabin, reached by a narrow companion, benches inside a pipe-railing had afforded accommodation for passengers in fine weather. The boat was secured fore and aft with frayed hawsers, and her rail lay close to the wall. Laurie viewed her speculatively from stem to stern and then stepped aboard. Had there been any one about to observe him they might have thought that here was a possible purchaser, for he went over the boat completely and exhaustively, giving, however, most of his time to the cabin. In the end he went ashore and once more viewed the derelict in frowning speculation. There was no doubt that the *Pequot Queen* had outlived her use as a water-craft. She still floated and would probably continue to float for many years yet, but old age had claimed her, as rotting timbers and yawning seams showed. Yet Laurie, whether or not he was a prospective purchaser, turned away at last with an expression of thoughtful satisfaction on his countenance.

Back by the railroad, he stopped and viewed

his surroundings intently. On one side lay the bridge, with the Basin beyond and to the left, and the big quarry to his right. On the other side was the company office and shed, the dock and pier, the latter piled high with roughly-squared blocks of stone. Toward town the river's margin was unoccupied for a space, and then came the coal-wharves and the lumber company's frontage. It was a noisy and dust-laden spot in which the *Pequot Queen* had been left to pass her declining years, and Laurie shook his head slowly as though the realization of the fact displeased him. Finally he crossed the bridge again, hurrying a little in order not to compete for passage with a slow-moving freight from the north, and continued along the river-front until he had passed the station and the warehouses across the track and was again allowed a view of the stream unimpeded by buildings. Here there was no wall along the river, but now and then the remains of an ancient wooden bulkhead still stood between the dusty road and the lapping water. Here and there, too, a rotted hulk lay careened or showed naked ribs above the surface further out. Across the road hardly more than

a lane now, a few dejected but respectable dwellings stood behind their tiny front yards. Behind them the hill sloped upward less abruptly than farther back and was thickly clustered with unpretentious houses wherein the industrious foreign-born citizens of Orstead lived. Compared to the vicinity of the quarry, however, this section of town was clean and quiet. There were trees here, and later on there would be grass along the unfrequented road and flowers in the little gardens. Westward lay the sunlit river and the wooded shore beyond. Laurie nodded approvingly more than once as he dawdled along, paying, as it appeared, special attention to the margin of the stream. Finally, more than an hour after he had left school, he retraced his steps as far as Ash Street and turned uphill.

Ash Street was two blocks north of Walnut and, having an easier grade to climb, was less devious in its journey. It brought Laurie at length to Summit Street a short block from the little white house from which Miss Comfort had lately removed. As he passed it Laurie observed that so far no vandal hand had been laid on it. The brown shutters were closed at the down-

stairs windows, and the buds on the lilac-bushes were swelling fast. Somehow these two facts, apparently unrelated, combined to bring a little pang of sadness to the observer. He went on, with only a glance down Pine Street to the blue shop, and entered the side gate of the Coventry place.

CHAPTER XIV

A PERFECTLY GORGEOUS IDEA

NED and Bob were watching Thomas, the man-of-all-work, rolling the cinder surface of the new tennis-court. Theirs was a pleasant occupation for such a morning, and Laurie joined them where they sat on a pile of posts and boards that had once been a grape-arbor and that had been removed to make way for the court.

“What happened to you?” asked Ned. “Thought maybe they ’d had you arrested. Bob and I were just talking of pooling our resources and bailing you out.”

“I found I had nearly ninety cents,” said Bob proudly.

“No, they were all right about it,” replied Laurie musingly. Then he lapsed into silence, staring thoughtfully at Thomas as he paced to and fro behind the stone roller.

“What do you think of it?” asked Bob, nodding at the court.

“Corking. Pretty nearly done, is n’t it?”

“Pretty nearly. It ’ll take about two days to put the gravel on. They ’re going to bring the first load this afternoon. It has to have clay mixed with it, you know, and that makes it slower. And then it ’s got to be rolled well—”

“Seems to me,” said Laurie, “a turf ’court would have been easier.”

“Yes, but they don’t last. You know that. And it ’s the very dickens to get a grass surface level.”

Laurie nodded. It was evident to Ned, who had been watching him closely, that Laurie’s mind was not on the tennis-court. “What ’s eating you, partner?” he asked finally. Laurie started.

“Me? Nothing. That is, I ’ve been thinking.”

“Don’t,” begged Ned. “You know what it did to you yesterday.”

“I want you and Bob to be at Polly’s this afternoon when she gets home from school. I ’ve got something to tell you.”

“Tell us now,” suggested Bob. Laurie shook his head.

“No use saying it twice.”

“What ’s it about?” asked Ned.

“About—about Miss Comfort.”

“Gee,” said Bob, “I thought that was done with. What about her, Nod?” But Laurie shook his head, and their pleas for enlightenment were vain.

“You ’ll know all about it this afternoon,” he said. “So shut up.” A minute after he asked, “Say, Bob, does your father know the folks who run that quarry?”

“Yes, I guess so. He buys stone from them. Why?”

“I want to meet the head guy, president or general manager or whatever he calls himself. That ’s all.”

“Want to meet him! What for? Going to get after him for not having a railing around the top of the bluff?”

“Not exactly. Know any one here who has a launch?”

“Lunch? Say, what are you talking about?”

“I did n’t say lunch, you goop; I said launch, l-a-u—”

“Oh, *launch!* Why, no, I don’t believe so. I know a fellow who owns a canoe—”

“Sure,” agreed Laurie with deep sarcasm,

“and I know a fellow who owns a bean-shooter, but it does n’t interest me. There must be some one who has a launch around here. There are half a dozen on the river.”

“Why, there ’s a man down there who rents boats, you idiot. I think he has some sort of a launch. I thought you meant—”

“What ’s his name? Where ’s he live?”

“Name ’s Wilkins or Watkins or something, and he lives—I don’t know where he lives, but he keeps his boats up by the old chain-works.”

“Thanks. You fellows going to spend the day here? Let ’s do something.”

“Want some tennis?” asked Bob eagerly. “I ’ll take on you and Nid.”

Laurie looked inquiringly at his brother. “Would you?” he asked. “Seems sort of too bad to take advantage of his ignorance.”

“It ’ll teach him a lesson,” answered Ned, rising, stretching, and looking commiseratingly down at the challenger. “Pride goeth before a fall and a haughty spirit—”

“Before the Turners,” completed Laurie. “Come on to the slaughter, Bob, before my heart softens and I let you off.”

Shortly after three that afternoon, Laurie, perched on a counter in the Widow Deane's shop, had the floor. That sounds peculiar, I acknowledge, but you know what I mean. They were in the shop because Mrs. Deane and Miss Comfort were occupying the back—pardon me, the garden. "It 's like this," Laurie was telling Polly, Mae, Ned, and Bob. "We could n't find a place on land for Miss Comfort, and so it occurred to me that a place on the water might do." He paused to enjoy the effect of this strange announcement.

"On the water!" echoed Polly. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"Yes," cried Mae, "whatever—"

"Don't you get it?" asked Ned. "He wants Miss Comfort to join the navy!"

Laurie grinned. "Shut up, you idiot! You know the *Pequot Queen*?" They all agreed silently that they did. "Well, I 've been all over the boat this morning. It would take about two or three days—and a few dollars, of course—to make her into just as nice a house as any one would want. Take that cabin—"

"But, look here, you three-ply goop," inter-

rupted Ned, "Miss Comfort would n't want to live on a tumble-down old ferry-boat!"

"How do you know?" asked Laurie. "Have you asked her?"

"But—but she 'd be afraid, Laurie," protested Polly. "I 'm sure I should! Suppose it floated away or—or sank—"

"Suppose it spread its wings and flew on top of the court-house," answered Laurie sarcastically. "It could n't float away because it would be moored to the bank, and it could n't sink because there would n't be enough water under it. Now, just listen a minute until I get through. Of course I know that the scheme sounds funny to you folks because you have n't any imagination. As for saying that Miss Comfort would n't live in the *Pequot Queen*, you don't *know* anything of the sort. I 'm blamed certain that if I was—were Miss Comfort I 'd a lot rather live in a nice clean boat tied to the bank than go to the poor-farm!"

"Well," said Polly dubiously, "you 're a man."

"A man!" jeered Ned.

"Well, you know perfectly well what I mean," said Polly. It was evident that Polly wanted very much to be convinced of the practicability of

the plan, and her objection had been almost apologetic. Mae, taking her cue from her friend, awaited further enlightenment in pretty perplexity.

“Miss Comfort has enough to furnish it with,” continued Laurie. “At least, Polly said she had taken a lot of stuff with her.” Polly nodded vigorously. “All we ’d have to do would be to board up about four windows on each side of the cabin, put some shades or curtains at the others, put a new lock on the door, run a stove-pipe through the roof—”

“Perfectly simple and easy,” said Ned. “Go on, son.”

“That ’s about all. That cabin ’s big enough for her to live in comfortably, big enough for a stove and bed and table and chairs—and—and everything. Then, there ’s the roof, too. Why, she could have a roof-garden up there, and a place to dry her clothes—”

“After she ’s fallen overboard?” asked Bob.

“That ’s all right,” answered Laurie a trifle warmly. “Have your fun, but the scheme ’s all right, and if you ’d quit spoofing and stop to think seriously a minute—”

“Why, I think it ’s a perfectly splendid idea!” asserted Polly with a bewildering change of front.

“Gorgeous!” chimed in Mae.

“If only Miss Comfort can be persuaded to try a life on the ocean wave,” added Ned dryly. “Seems to me the first thing to do is to ask her what *she* thinks of it.”

“No, it is n’t,” said Laurie. “The first thing is for you to go down there with me right now and see for yourselves. If you don’t agree with me we ’ll just let it drop.”

“Of course,” said Polly. “Come on, every one! Oh, I do hope that Miss Comfort will like it!”

“How about the owners?” asked Bob as, a minute later, they were all on the way to the river. “Well, not the owners, for I suppose there are n’t any. But what about the quarry people, Nod? Think they ’ll let us have it?”

“Don’t see why not. It ’s no good to them, and it ’s in their way. That ’s where your father comes in, Bob. I want him to introduce us to the head guy and say a good word. Think he ’d mind?”

“No, but even if Miss Comfort lived in the boat, Nod, it would be just as much in the way, would n’t it?” Bob looked puzzled.

“No, because it would n’t be there any longer. We ’d have it hauled out of their dock and taken to a place I found the other side of town, up-river. Know where Ash Street comes out down there? Well, about two blocks beyond that. We ’d draw the boat up close to the bank, make her fast, and build a sort of bridge to the deck. Some of that stuff in your yard will come in very handy.”

“Why, that would be perfect!” declared Polly. “I did n’t want to mention it, Laurie, but I was dreadfully afraid that Miss Comfort would n’t want to live down there by the quarry, with the dynamite shooting off and all those rough-looking men about!”

“Sounds as if the young fellow’s scheme might have something in it after all,” allowed Ned. “Just the same, I’ll bet the quarry folks won’t give up the boat unless some one pays them for storage or whatever it ’s called.”

“I ’m not so sure,” said Bob. “Dad’s company is a pretty good customer just now, and if dad will talk with the head of the firm—”



They all accompanied Laurie to the *Pequot Queen*

“He might tell them that he would n’t buy any more of their old stone,” said Mae. “I guess that would—would bring them around!”

“Not a doubt of it,” laughed Ned. “Well, let’s have a good look at the old ship first. Maybe she’s fallen to pieces since morning!”

But she had n’t. They spent a full twenty minutes aboard her, while Laurie explained and Polly’s enthusiasm grew by leaps and bounds. Bob, too, came over to Laurie’s side, and even Ned, although he still pretended to doubt, was secretly favorable. As for Mae—well, as Polly went so went Mae! After they had viewed and discussed the *Pequot Queen* to their satisfaction, Laurie led them back along the river and showed the place he had selected for the *Pequot Queen’s* future moorings. It was a quiet spot, disturbed by scant traffic along the lane, now that the chain-works was no longer in operation. Passing steamers and tugs might infrequently break the silence with their whistles, and when, further down, a coal-barge tied up at the wharf, the whir of the unloading machinery would come softened by distance. Between the well-nigh unused road and the water lay a strip of grass and weeds, a

ribbon of rushes, a narrow pebbled beach. Some sixty feet out a sunken canal-boat exposed her deck-house above the surface. Six yards or so from the tiny beach the remains of a wooden bulkhead stretched. In places the piles alone remained, but opposite where Laurie had halted his companions there was a twelve-foot stretch of planking still spiked to the piles.

“We could bring her up to that bulkhead and make her fast to the piles at bow and stern. I figure that there ’s just about enough water there to float her. Then we ’d built a sort of bridge or gangway from the bulkhead to the shore. She could n’t get away, and she could n’t sink. That old hulk out beyond would act as a sort of breakwater if there was a storm, too.”

“I think it ’s a perfectly gorgeous idea,” said Polly ecstatically. “And just see, Mae, how very, very quiet and respectable it is here!”

Ned, though, seemed bent on enacting the rôle of Mr. Spoilsport. “That ’s all right,” he said, “but how are you going to get permission to tie her up here? This property belongs to some one, does n’t it?”

Laurie looked taken aback. “Why, I don’t be-

lieve so, Ned. Here 's the road and here 's the river. There 's only a few feet—”

“Just the same,” Ned persisted, “some one 's bound to own as far as high tide.”

“Maybe the folks in the house across the road,” suggested Mae.

“Mean to tell me,” demanded Laurie, “that the fellow who left that canal-boat out there had to ask permission?”

“That 's in deep water,” answered Ned.

“So would the *Pequot Queen* be in deep water!”

“Maybe, but your bridge or gangplank would n't be.”

“Oh, ' shucks,” said Laurie. “That does n't sound like sense. Does it, Bob?”

“Well, I guess whoever owns this little strip would n't object to a person landing on it.”

“Of course not,” said Polly. “Besides, I don't believe it belongs to any one—except the town or the State of New York or some one like that!”

“Guess we can find that out easy enough,” said Laurie, recovering confidence. “Now, what 's the verdict? Think there 's anything in the scheme?”

CHAPTER XV.

ROMANCE AND MISS COMFORT

THEY did, even Ned allowing that, if certain obstacles already indicated by him could be surmounted, and if Miss Comfort could be persuaded to adopt a nautical life, the scheme had merit.

“All right,” said Laurie, “Then the next thing is to sound out Miss Comfort. You can do that better than any of the rest of us, Ned.”

“Me? Where do you get that stuff?” demanded Ned. “It ’s your scheme.”

“But I have n’t your—your powers of description and—er—persuasion, old-timer.”

“Nothing doing,” replied Ned implacably. “I ’ll go with you and help out, but it ’s your idea, and you ’ve got to spring it.”

“Yes, Laurie,” agreed Polly, “I think you can explain it more clearly than Ned can, because you ’ve thought it all out so wonderfully. But we ’ll all go with you, of course.”

“All right,” assented Laurie. “Let ’s go and get it over with. I dare say she won’t listen to it, though.”

“You can’t tell,” said Polly. “Miss Comfort is awfully—well, courageous, Laurie, and she thinks you ’re so wonderful that—”

“Huh,” muttered Ned. “Wonder where she got that notion.”

“Compared to the poor-farm,” declared Mae, “I think the *Pequot Queen* is a perfect paradise!”

“Well, you just mention that to Miss Comfort, will you?” requested Laurie gloomily as they started back.

“Guess there ’s another thing we have n’t considered,” said Bob thoughtfully.

“What are you doing?” asked Laurie disgustedly. “Stealing Ned’s stuff?”

“No, but look here; Miss Comfort will be an awful long way from folks who buy her cake and stuff, won’t she? Think they ’ll hike way down here?”

A short silence ensued. Then said Polly, “That is so, Laurie, but maybe—”

“Sure, it ’s so,” was the answer, “but will you

allow me to remind the gentleman that this place down here is just about a mile and a half nearer than the poor-farm?"

"Never thought of that," laughed Bob.

"Anyway," said Polly cheerfully, "I don't believe it will matter much. If folks want Miss Comfort's cakes they 'll come for them, or send for them. As for what we buy, why, I would n't mind coming for it a mite. It—it 's just a nice walk!"

They found Mrs. Deane and Miss Comfort having tea in the sitting-room when they reached the little blue house, and their errand must needs be postponed until more cups and saucers and more sweet crackers had been distributed. At last, however, with four pair of eyes fixed on him with embarrassing attentiveness, Laurie set down his cup, drew a long breath, and broke the moment's silence with an explosive "*Miss Comfort!*"

That poor lady was so startled that she nearly upset her tea. Laurie plunged on hurriedly.

"I suppose you have n't heard any more from your brother-in-law, have you?"

"Why—why, no! No, I have n't, Mr. Laurie."

"Thought so," resumed Laurie. "Well, now,

here 's—here 's something that it seemed to me—to all of us that maybe would be something that you might sort of take into consideration if nothing better turned up, because, after all, that poor-farm is n't any place for a lady like you, and being on the water is n't anything at all if you 're hitched up tight to the land and know you can't sink, which you could n't *possibly*, Miss Comfort, because there would n't be enough water under you."

Laurie paused for breath and realized with confusion that he had made an extremely poor start. Miss Comfort looked bewilderedly from him to Mrs. Deane, to Polly, to Ned, and back to Laurie. "Sakes alive!" she gasped. "What in the world is he talking about?"

Mae's giggle came as a welcome diversion.

"Laurie," said Polly, "you 'll have to start right at the beginning, you know." She turned to Miss Comfort. "He has a perfectly wonderful idea, Miss Comfort, and we 're all just crazy about it. Now, Laurie."

The interlude had allowed the exponent of the wonderful idea not only to recover his breath but to rearrange his thoughts, and now he began

over and explained very creditably just what the idea was. Occasionally one of the others threw in a helpful word, Miss Comfort, who had taken up her crocheting after setting her tea-cup aside, soon laid it down. Her face brightened as Laurie's idea became clearer to her and her eyes sparkled more than ever. She leaned forward in rapt attention, and did not interrupt once. Even when Laurie had said all he could think of and Polly had added an enthusiastic postscript, Miss Comfort said no word for several silent moments. Then she gave a deep sigh and clasped her thin hands tightly above her crocheting.

“And I would n't have to go to that place!” she breathed wonderingly.

“Laurie, what did I tell you?” cried Polly joyously.

“I 'm sure,” said Mrs. Deane, “it would be very nice, Pansy—” three startled gasps followed—“but would you feel quite—quite *at ease* on a *boat*?”

“I should,” replied Miss Comfort with surprising emphasis. “I 've always been fond of the sea, all my life. Maybe it 's because my grandfather on my mother's side was a sea-

captain. That Spode tea-cup that you admired so much was a part of a set that he brought back from one of his voyages. Yes, ever since I was a child I've longed for the sea and for ships. Once I almost took a trip from New York to Fall River on a steamer, but just at the last moment mother decided to go by train instead. I was tragically disappointed. And now to think that after all these years I'm to—to go to sea!"

"But, you know," said Ned, breaking the little silence that followed, "it would n't be exactly going to sea, Miss Comfort, for, of course, the boat would be tied to the—the land, and—"

"It would be for me," replied Miss Comfort softly. "I'd be living on a boat with the water all around me. And I could watch the steamers and the ships come and go. And there'd be the smell of the salt water all the time, too. Oh, my dears, I'd love it! It—it sounds far, far too good to be true, Mr. Laurie. Are you sure that—that everything can be arranged?"

Miss Comfort felt for a square of linen with a narrow black border and gently dabbed her eyes. Laurie felt it his duty to acknowledge that he was n't sure at all, but he did nothing of the

sort. He scowled surreptitiously at Ned and answered firmly: "Absolutely, Miss Comfort. There is n't a doubt!"

And then, to Laurie's surprise, Ned said just as convincingly, "It 's as good as fixed right now, ma'am."

Miss Comfort sighed happily and beamed about the circle. "Well, I just can't believe it," she said, laughing tremulously at her own emotion. "Why, I can't think of anything that would make me happier than to live on a real boat right on the water! Just think of going to sleep with the lapping of the waves all about, and of waking up in the morning and seeing the blue, blue ocean—no, I should say river—stretching away and away! Oh, my dears, there 's romance about the sea that I 've always longed to know. Maybe, at my time of life, I shouldn't be talking about romance, but—"

"Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Deane vehemently. "Fiddlesticks, my dear! At your time of life, indeed!" It seemed to the others that the Widow might have borrowed Miss Comfort's handkerchief and put it to good use. Laurie cleared his throat.

“That ’s right,” he said gruffly. “I guess folks can enjoy things like that just as much at eight—sev—sixty as they can any time!” Aware of Polly’s horrified look, he subsided. Miss Comfort, though, was far too absorbed in the joyous prospect to heed.

“I must go and see it,” she went on animatedly. “Is it very far, Mr. Laurie? I suppose,” she concluded, with a sigh, “it ’s too late to go to-day.”

“Yes ’m,” assented Laurie. “I guess you ’d better wait until to-morrow. It ’s quite a walk for—er—for any one.”

“We ’ll all go down to-morrow morning,” announced Polly, “every one of us. Yes, you will, too, mama. I ’ll get Miss Billings to tend the store for an hour. If we start at eight I can get back in time for school.”

“Eight!” exclaimed Laurie.

“Of course. We ’re all through breakfast at half-past seven, and—”

“But, Polly, maybe that would be too early for the boys, dear,” interposed her mother. “Perhaps they don’t have breakfast—”

“It ’s all right, Mrs. Deane,” said Ned. “We ’ll meet you over at the school corner at

eight. Laurie was just thinking that perhaps we ought to start earlier, weren't you, old son?"

"Er—oh, yes! Sure! Still, eight will do, I guess."

"Then that's arranged," said Polly. "Now let's talk about the boat some more."

The next morning they all set out according to schedule to show Miss Comfort the *Pequot Queen*. Laurie had doubts as to the wisdom of this, for he thought it would have been better if they could have fixed up the boat a little before exhibiting it. But, as Polly said, Miss Comfort would never have waited. Laurie need not have entertained any uneasiness. Even the river threw Miss Comfort into a tremor of delight, and after that she walked so fast that Mrs. Deane had hard work to keep up with her. When, while still at a distance, Laurie pointed out the *Pequot Queen* with a few stammered words of apology, Miss Comfort stopped still, clasped her hands, this morning adorned with black silk mitts, and gazed long and silently. The boys viewed her doubtfully and anxiously, but doubt and anxiety speedily fled, for the little lady's face expressed something very close to rapture. The boys

looked away. Ned whistled a few tuneless notes softly. Then they went on, Miss Comfort walking faster than ever and saying no word.

“Well,” said Laurie later, “you ’ve got to hand it to her for imagination. Why, when I said to her, ‘Here ’s where the stove goes,’ or ‘You could put your bureau here, Miss Comfort,’ blessed if I don’t think she actually saw them there! Once, after she ’d decided to put the kitchen table over on the further side of the cabin, she was over there a few minutes later and sort of feeling around just like she was trying to find the rolling-pin or something!”

“And was n’t she pleased?” asked Bob. “Gosh, you ’d have thought we ’d presented her with a million-dollar castle! The old girl is certainly happy!”

“Cut out the ‘old girl’ stuff,” growled Ned. “She ’s a lady.”

“Sure, I did n’t mean anything, Ned. And as for being old, gee, I ’ve seen a heap of younger folks that could n’t have shown half her pep!”

A visit to the town hall obtained for them the information that the tract of land between road and river behind the old bulkhead was town prop-

erty, and their informant assured them that no one would object to the contemplated gangway.

Laurie got back to No. 16 alone to discover Kewpie, sweated and unkempt of hair, lolling in the Morris chair and fondling glove and ball. "Say, where the dickens have you been?" Kewpie demanded aggrievedly. "I've been waiting hours!"

"Hello!" said Laurie blankly. "Where—where did you drop from?"

"Came on the ten twenty, of course. Wanted to get some work in before dinner. Thought you'd be all ready for me, too!"

Laurie returned the other's reproachful gaze with one even more reproachful, "Oh, gosh," he sighed. "I was hoping you'd forget to come back!"

CHAPTER XVI

MR. BROSE WILKINS

THERE seemed nothing for it but to take Kewpie into their confidence, and this they did when, after dinner, Ned and Laurie were back in No. 16. Kewpie, still demanding a work-out and impatient at delay, proved that he was not entirely obsessed by baseball. He became quite excited about Miss Comfort and the *Pequot Queen* and demanded to be let in on the affair.

“Got any money?” asked Ned.

Kewpie smiled in an irritatingly superior manner and showed a purse fairly bulging with bills and silver coins. “Which,” he observed grandly, reminds me that I owe you fellows a trifle.” The twins accepted payment without demur.

“I asked about money,” said Ned when that matter had been concluded, “because to get in on this game, Kewpie, you have to have—er—three dollars.”

Kewpie’s countenance promptly betrayed the

secret thought that he could remain out and still manage to survive. Whereupon Laurie added hastily: "Of course, three dollars makes you a life member, you understand. You can become an ordinary member for two."

Kewpie grinned and disentangled two one-dollar bills from the wad. Ned accepted them gravely. "Want a receipt?" he asked.

"Yes, I 'd like a receipt for your cheek," responded Kewpie flippantly. "Bet nobody else has put in any little old two dollars! Bet nobody else has put in two bits!"

"The books of the association are always open to inspection," replied Ned coldly, pocketing Kewpie's contribution.

"All right, Nid. Now, what about some pitching?"

Laurie tottered to his feet. "Come on," he sighed. "But, oh, Kewpie darlin', I rue the day I first looked on your ugly face!"

Later that day the initial contribution to the expense fund was augmented by like sums paid or pledged by the others, and the colossal amount of twelve dollars resulted. Laurie opined that it

would suffice, since he meant to beg or borrow whenever possible. In the evening the twins went over to see Bob's father, and that gentleman readily agreed to intercede with the Porter Quarry Company in their behalf. "I'll stop there in the morning, boys, and see Porter himself. Bob, you stay around the telephone here, and I'll call you up about nine."

And at a little after nine the next morning the message came. The Porter Quarry Company, Mr. Starling telephoned, claimed no equity in the *Pequot Queen*, and, furthermore, would be extremely relieved to see the last of her!

Five minutes later Laurie and Bob had set out to find Mr. Wilkins, who conducted the boat-yard a quarter of a mile beyond the new location chosen for the *Pequot Queen*. There were a pier and a landing, two weather-stained sheds, piles of second-hand lumber, and a few boats in various stages of dissolution. But there was no Mr. Wilkins, even though they crossed the lane and adventured to a neighboring house. They had decided to give up the search for the time when there came a hail from the river. A small launch

chugged toward shore, and a man waved to them from it. They went to meet it. The noisy motor was stilled, and the man hailed again.

“Looking for dad?” he asked. He was a tall chap of possibly twenty-two or three years with copper-red hair that curled closely about his bare head. His face was long and thin and chiefly remarkable for a lazy, good-natured, and very wide smile. The boys explained their errand while the little launch floated close to the inshore end of the wharf.

“Dad ’s over to Hamlin doing a job of work. But I can give you a tow. Where ’s your launch?” Bob told him. “Huh?” asked young Mr. Wilkins, his smile almost fading. “The old *P. Q.*? You bought her?” They explained further. Young Mr. Wilkins looked dubious. “Don’t know as I ’d want to take a chance like that,” he said. “S’pose the Porter folks had me pinched. May be all right, fellers, like you say, but you don’t own her—”

“But we ’ve told you that it ’s all right,” interrupted Bob. “We would n’t be stealing her, anyhow. All we want to do is bring her up the river and tie her up to the bulkhead down there.”

“That ’s so.” The tall youth’s smile broadened to normal. “All right. When you want I should do it?”

“Pronto,” said Laurie. “Right off. How much will you charge for the job?”

Young Mr. Wilkins viewed them swiftly and shrewdly. “Oh, it ain’t worth more ’n five dollars, I guess,” he answered carelessly.

“I ’ll say it is n’t!” exclaimed Bob. “Listen, please. We ’re not selling you the boat. All we want is a tow.”

The other laughed merrily. “I would n’t give you five dollars for her, feller. Well, how much do you want to pay?”

Oddly, perhaps, they had n’t considered the question before. But Laurie answered quite promptly, “Two dollars.”

“All right,” was the equally prompt reply. “Jump in!”

Two minutes later the launch was chugging out into the stream, Laurie and Bob huddled in the stern seat, with the water rippling past a scant four inches below the gunwale. The craft was rather an amazing affair, being not more than fourteen feet in length and apparently built

of odds and ends. No two planks seemed the same width, while, as for length, they were anywhere from two feet to ten. Water trickled in from innumerable seams. The engine was a diminutive thing of one cylinder, with a fly-wheel scarcely larger than a good-sized dinner-plate, but it pushed the boat along at a good gait, the boat shaking and trembling at every explosion in the cylinder. The skipper, seated on an empty box by the engine, laughed.

“How do you like her?” he asked. “Some cruiser, eh? I knocked her together two, three years ago. Got that engine out of a yacht dinghy that sank over by Eagle Beak one time. She’s sort of wet underfoot, but she generally gets there. You fellers from Hillman’s?”

Bob said they were.

“Fine man, the Doctor. Used to work for him sometimes when I was in high school. Mowed grass and so on a couple of summers. My name’s Ambrose Wilkins. Called Brose generally. What sort of a baseball team you fellers going to have up there this year?” He gave a negligent tug at the tiller-line and swerved around the stern of a tug that was backing out

from the coal-wharf with a lighter snuggled beside her.

“Why, pretty good, I reckon,” answered Laurie.

Brose Wilkin’s grin broadened more. “Guess you weren’t up there when we played you that twenty-two to three game. Course not. That was five years ago. That was some game, boys. Hillman’s didn’t get a hit until the fifth and didn’t put a run over until the eighth. Then our in-field went flooey for a minute, and your crowd piled in three runs. Some game!”

“Did you play?” asked Laurie.

Brose nodded and squirted some oil in the general direction of the little engine. “Yeah,” he answered. “Pitched.”

“Oh! Well, you must have been good,” replied Laurie.

“Fair,” the other acknowledged modestly. “That would have been a shut-out if a couple of our in-fielders hadn’t cracked.”

Laurie stared intently at the *Pequot Queen*, now less than two hundred yards away. After a moment he asked idly, “Do you still play ball?”

“Yeah, I pitch for the Lambert team, over to

Munroe. At least, I been pitching for them. There 's a team down at Carmel that 's written me a couple of times lately. Guess they 'll make me an offer soon. I got twenty a game from the Lamberts, but I guess this Carmel crowd 'll do better.''

“Twenty dollars a game?” asked Bob.

“Yeah. 'T ain't much, of course, but it helps. Besides, I like to play ball, and there ain't so much doing up here that dad can't tend to it once a week. Well, here 's the old *P. Q.* Gee-whillikins, fellers, I remember when this old scow was a regular lady! Say, what you guys meaning to do with her, anyway?”

“That 's a long story,” evaded Laurie.

“All right. None of my business, eh? Reach under that seat, will you, and pull out that coil of rope.”

No one paid any attention as the *Pequot Queen's* weather-grayed hawsers were cast off and, with Laurie and Bob at the bow, the long idle craft moved slowly from the dock. Until the last moment Laurie had feared that some officious employee of the quarry company would object, and he breathed freely when the boat was

clear of the little harbor and her broad nose had been pointed up-stream. She moved sluggishly since, as Brose Wilkins remarked, she probably had enough water under her deck to fill a pond. "Water-line 's 'most a foot under," said Brose, "but she 'll come all right as soon as she gets started." The boys thought the three-quarter-inch manila rope that Brose was using as a tow line perilously weak, but it proved quite equal to its purpose. At first the little one-lung engine threatened to throb itself into junk in its effort to move the *Pequot Queen*, but gradually the larger craft got under way, imperceptibly at first, and the voyage up the river began. It was slow going, but the tiny launch never faltered, and the *Pequot Queen*, having, as it seemed, finally made up her mind to say good-by to her old home and set forth on an exciting adventure, displayed a cheerful willingness to follow this new acquaintance.

On the coal-wharf a half-dozen workers paused in their labors and stared incredulously. One shouted a question, and after that the *Pequot Queen* wallowed leisurely past to a chorus of ribald comments. In answer Laurie, seated on

the bow rail, waved a nonchalant hand. Further along other denizens of the waterfront stood and stared at the sight. That they were causing a tremendous sensation was quite evident to the passengers on the old ferry-boat, and, boy-like, they enjoyed it thoroughly. Laurie regretted that they had n't brought a flag and run it up on the short staff beside them!

Getting the *Pequot Queen* into her new berth was far more difficult than persuading her to leave her old home. She had to be taken past the sunken canal-boat without running her bow on the bottom, and that task required patience and ingenuity. But Brose Wilkins was equal to it, and finally, after much tugging and swinging and shoving—the *Pequot Queen's* steering apparatus was no longer of use—the battered old craft was lying against the short stretch of bulkhead. That her rail smashed off the upper plank of the bulkhead was immaterial, since it allowed her to get a few inches nearer. That the boys had neglected to bring anything to tie the boat up with complicated matters at first. They had not brought the old hawsers along since they had been uncertain whether they had been the property of the

boat's former owners or of the quarry company. In any case, those rotted ropes would have been of only temporary use. Laurie offered to run over to a store and get some new line, but Brose vetoed that suggestion.

"You fellers hold her here a few minutes," he said. "We 've got some second-hand stuff over in the shed that 'll do fine and won't cost you but a few cents. All we need is about thirty feet at each end." He chugged off, leaving the boys sitting on the rail of the boat with their legs dangling over the bulkhead planking. The *Pequot Queen* showed no desire to leave her new home. In fact, she seemed more desirous of pushing her way right up on the beach, and Laurie audibly wondered whether they had n't better somehow strengthen the bulkhead.

"I guess she 'll be all right when she 's once tied up," said Bob. "We 'll ask the Wilkins chap when he comes back."

Brose allayed their fears as he climbed aboard the *Pequot Queen* with a supply of thick hawser. "She won't budge when we get her fixed," he assured them. "Ease her off a bit while I stick these fenders over the side." The fenders were

two sausage-shaped canvas bags attached to short lengths of cord, and he inserted them between bulkhead and boat about ten feet apart, making the free ends of the cords fast under the low rail. "They won't cost you anything," he said. "They 're worn out. All right for this job, though. Now let 's see."

Ten minutes later the *Pequot Queen* was fast, bow and stern, the worn but still serviceable hawsers securely tied to two spiles. "There," said Brose. "She 'll stay put till the Yankees win the World's Championship, fellers!"

"We 're awfully much obliged to you," said Laurie gratefully. "You've been mighty decent. Now, how much is it, rope and all?"

"Two dollars and seventy-five cents," answered Brose. "But I 'll throw off the seventy-five cents if you 'll tell me what in the name of Old Joe Barnes you 're aiming to do with her now you 've got her!"

Laurie questioned Bob silently, and, because they had taken a sudden and immense liking to the queer, loose-jointed, red-haired Brose, Bob nodded. So Laurie told him the whole story, and Brose Wilkins's eyes opened wide and his broad

smile threatened to jostle his ears while he listened. Once or twice he chuckled, too. And when Laurie had finished he laughed until tears stood in his gray eyes. Laurie frowned then. He supposed it did sound rather funny, but Brose's laughter lasted too long. It was n't *that* funny! Then, just when Laurie was forming a stinging rebuke in his mind, Brose wiped his streaming eyes with a sleeve of his old brown sweater and became coherent. He had previously attempted without success to speak.

"Well, if that don't beat the Cubs!" he gasped. "I got to hand it to you fellers for using the old bean! And, say, what about Miss Pansy, eh? Ain't she running true to form? I'll say she is! You can't beat that little woman, fellers. She's plucky, she is! Think of her living down here all by her lonesome, and tickled to do it because she's on a boat! Funny, eh? And sporting, too, eh? She's a wonder, Miss Pansy is!"

"You know her then?" asked Laurie, mollified.

"Know her? Know Miss Pansy Comfort? Known her since I was that high." Brose swept a hand along about six inches from the deck." Used to be in her Sunday-school class. Done odd

jobs for her when I was a kid, often. Shingled the shed roof for her not more 'n four years ago. Sure, I know her. Guess every one does. I heard something about her having to leave that house up there, but I did n't know she was up against it like that. Well, say!"

"Don't you think she'd get on all right here!" asked Laurie anxiously. "I've been thinking that it 'll be sort of lonely here at night for her."

"She 'll get on. Trust her. She 's plucky. Anyway, no one would trouble her. Why, gee-whillikins, I 'll look out for her myself! I 'm going past here all times, land or water, and I 'll keep the old eagle eye peeled sharp. Another thing. You say you 're going to fix this old ark up a bit. You 'd have to, of course. Well, that 's where I come in, eh? I 'm sort of handy with tools, and I 'd like mighty well to help. What say, fellers?"

"Gosh," answered Laurie joyfully, "I say 'Sure!' That 'll be simply corking. And maybe you 've got some tools?"

"Tools? Yeah. Or if I ain't I can get them. When you aiming to get at her and what you aiming to do?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE FUND GROWS

THEY parted from Brose Wilkins half an hour later. The work of fixing up the *Pequot Queen* for Miss Comfort's accommodation seemed shorn of all difficulties. They were to start in the morning on the gangway between boat and shore, Bob supplying the material and Brose the tools. "Better get that up first," said the latter, "so 's you can get aboard without wading. You don't need to bring much material, fellers. There 's a pile of second-hand stuff over on our wharf we can make use of. Don't forget the spikes, though. I ain't got any spikes. Well, see you fellers again."

Brose pushed off the launch with a foot, jumped nimbly aboard, and waved a long, lean hand. And just then Laurie remembered something.

"Hold on," he called. "We have n't paid you!"

"To-morrow," said Brose. "It won't be but

seventy-five cents, anyway; just the worth of that hawser. That tow ain't going to cost anything now I know who I done it for!"

The launch broke into sound and disappeared momentarily around the stern of the *Pequot Queen*. When they saw it again Brose was draped over the little engine, squirting oil.

I fear that Laurie begrudged Kewpie the two sessions of pitching-practice that day. Certain it is that the afternoon session was shortened to a scant thirty minutes, after which four boys set forth on a shopping expedition, armed with a list that Laurie had made after dinner. Still later they joined Polly and Mae at the shop. Progress was reported and plans for the next day laid. Then Bob treated the crowd, Kewpie virtuously choosing a ginger-ale.

To their disappointment, a light rain was falling that Thursday morning when the four boys set forth for the *Pequot Queen*. Ned trundled a wheelbarrow laden with lumber, and the others each carried a couple of two-by-fours or planks. Ned's load also included a paper bag of iron spikes, two hammers, and a hatchet. They chose Ash Street in preference to the busier thorough-

fares and, because the lumber on the wheelbarrow was continually falling off and the burdens on the boys' shoulders required frequent shifting, their progress was slow. The rain was n't hard, but it was steady, and Ned, who had arisen in a depressed state of mind, grumbled alternately at the weather and the wheelbarrow. They scarcely expected to find Brose Wilkins on hand when they reached the boat, but there he was awaiting them. Laurie introduced Ned and Kewpie, and work began.

By eleven o'clock a gangway led from the bank to the deck of the *Pequot Queen*. Or, if you liked, you could call it a bridge. It was twenty-six feet in length and thirty-two inches wide, and it was supported midway by two posts which Brose had driven into the sand. It was railed on each side so that, even in the dark, Miss Comfort could traverse it safely. Later it was to be painted, the planking green and the hand-rails white. At least, that was what Brose said, and since Brose seemed to have taken command of operations no one doubted the assertion. Ned and Kewpie, who had been to Walnut Street on an errand, arrived just as the last plank was laid, and the five drew

up on the bank and admired the gangway. Of course, as the material was all second-hand, the job did n't possess the fine appearance that new lumber lends. A stern critic might even have sneered at the joinery, for Brose Wilkins worked with speed rather than accuracy, and the gangway reminded Laurie a little of Brose's launch. But it was strong and practical, and none of the admirers were inclined to be fastidious. On the contrary the boys were loud in commendation, even Laurie and Bob, who had wielded saw and hammer under Brose's direction, praised the result highly. Then they all walked along it to the deck and solemnly and approvingly walked back again to the shore. As Bob said proudly, it did n't even creak.

They spent an hour clearing the boat of the worst of the dirt and rubbish, preparatory to the more careful going over to follow in the afternoon, and finally they parted from Brose and climbed the hill again.

There was no pitching-practice that forenoon.

Shortly after half-past one they went to Mrs. Deane's, reported progress to Miss Comfort, borrowed two pails, a broom, a scrubbing-brush, and

a mop, and returned to the scene of their labors. Brose was again ahead of them. He had taken down the smoke-stack and was covering the hole in the roof with a piece of zinc sheeting. "I was thinking," he explained, "that she might want to use this place for something, and there was a lot of water coming in around that old funnel. After I paint around the edges of this it 'll be tight." Brose drove a last flat-headed nail and swung his legs over the side of the boiler-room. "I was thinking that maybe she 'd like to keep a few hens in here."

"*Hens!*" cried the quartet below in incredulous chorus.

Brose nodded. "Yeah, she was always fond of hens, Miss Pansy. Used to have quite a lot of 'em until her fences got sort of bad and they took to wandering into other folks' yards. There would n't be much trouble here, I guess. They could go ashore and wander as much as they pleased and not hurt anything."

Ned broke into laughter. "Can't you see Miss Comfort's hens filing ashore every morning with a big red rooster in the lead?"

"Sure," agreed Brose. "Put up half a dozen

nests and a couple of roosts across here and you 'd have a fine chicken-house. Anyhow, no harm in stopping the leak."

"I dare say she can use it for something, anyhow," said Laurie.

"If it was me," said Kewpie, "I 'd keep ducks. Look at all the water they 'd have!"

For better than an hour dust flew from bow to stern on the *Pequot Queen*, and the scrape of the scrubbing-brush and the slap of the mop sounded from cabin, deck, and wheel-house. To introduce water into the boiler room would have made matters only worse there, for the floor and even the walls were black with coal-dust. They cleaned out the fire-box and used the broom repeatedly and closed the doors on the scene. But by four o'clock the rest of the boat was thoroughly clean, and only sunlight and warmth were needed to complete the work. The rather worn linoleum on the cabin floor looked very different after Bob's scrubbing brush and Kewpie's mop had got through with it. Even the paint in there had been won back to a fair semblance of whiteness. By that time Polly and Mae, released from school,

had also arrived, and the *Pequot Queen* resounded to eager voices. The rain had ceased and beyond the hills westward the gray clouds were breaking when, carrying pails and mop, broom and brush, the party of six went back to the shop in merry mood.

It had been very hard to keep Miss Comfort away from her new home thus far, and, since they wanted to have everything in shape before she saw it, they didn't recount to her all that had been accomplished, "You see, ma'am," said Laurie, "she was pretty dirty, and—"

"But I'll attend to the cleaning," declared Miss Comfort eagerly. "Land sakes, I don't expect you boys to do that!"

"No, ma'am, well, now you take that hen—I mean boiler-room. That wouldn't be any sort of work for you."

"But it does n't seem right to let you young folks do so much. Why, just look at the boy's shoes! They're soaking wet!"

"Oh, Kewpie does n't mind that, Miss Comfort. Besides, I guess it's just outside that's wet. Is n't it, Kewpie?"

Kewpie moved his foot once or twice experimentally and obtained a gentle squishing sound. He nodded. "That 's all," he said.

"But," resumed Laurie, "I guess we 'll have everything ready for you by Saturday noon. I thought we might get the stove down that morning and put it up. Then, maybe, on Monday you could move in!"

"You don't think I could get settled Saturday?" pleaded Miss Comfort. "I 'd so love to spend Sunday in my—my new home."

Laurie silently consulted the others and read assent. "Why, yes, ma'am, I think we could have everything all ready by, say, half-past ten or eleven."

"That would be much nicer," exclaimed Polly, "for then we could all help get the things arranged."

"Oh, thank you," cried Miss Comfort gratefully. "To-morrow I 'll engage Peter Brown to move my things Saturday morning. And to think that it won't be to the poor-farm! I told Mr. Grierson yesterday about it. He 's one of the overseers, you know. He seemed—almost—almost put out, and I thought for a moment he was

going to insist on my going to that place after all." Miss Comfort laughed softly. "He said he had been 'counting on me.' "

"Yes, ma'am," said Laurie, "you go ahead and arrange for the team for Saturday at about ten thirty, and we'll see that the place is all ready, won't we, Polly?"

"Yes, indeed, we will, Miss Comfort, even if we have to—to work all night! Mae and I don't have to go to school again for a week after tomorrow, and we can do lots of things for you, I'm sure."

"You've done so much already, my dear, all of you!" Miss Comfort sighed, but it was a happy sigh. "I don't know how to thank you, I'm sure. It does seem as if—as if—" She faltered then, and before she could continue Laurie got to his feet somewhat noisily and the others followed suit.

"Got to go along," he said hurriedly. "Change Kewpie's feet—shoes, I mean. Might take cold. See you in the morning, folks."

Laurie made his escape, followed by the others, sighing relief. Outside on the bricks, Kewpie's shoes *squished* beautifully, but Kewpie was

frowning. "I like the old soul," he announced, "but, say, she 's awful leaky around the eyes!"

"So you 'd be if you were seventy years old and folks were—were kind to you and—and all that sort of thing," replied Laurie gruffly and vaguely. "Folks get that way when they 're old; sort of grateful and tearful. They can't help it, I guess!"

It was still well short of supper-time, and so they stopped at Bob's to see the tennis-court. The surface layer was almost finished, and two sturdy posts for the net, startlingly, shinningly green, had been sunk. While they admired, Mr. Starling joined them from the house, and Laurie thanked him for his assistance with the quarry company.

"Glad to have helped, Laurie," replied Bob's father. "And that reminds me. Seen the pear-trees?"

"Pear-trees? No, sir. Not to—to notice them."

"Come and look at them." Mr. Starling led Laurie around the corner of the new court and along the further walk to where a few fruit-trees, their branches still bare, occupied one corner of

the garden. Laurie viewed the trees interestedly, but failed to note anything remarkable, and he turned to his guide for enlightenment. Mr. Starling was selecting two bills from a long black wallet, keeping his back to the others. He thrust the bills into Laurie's hand.

"We 'd like to help a little, my sister and I," he said. "Use that in any way you like, Laurie, but you need n't say where it came from. If you need more, let me know."

"But we don't really need it, sir," protested the boy. "We 've got twelve dollars, and I don't believe—"

"Put it in your pocket," insisted Mr. Starling. "You can find some way of using it for Miss Comfort's—er—comfort!" He raised his voice. "Look promising, don't they? Lots of fruit this year, I guess. Thomas is quite a gardener, if you take his word for it." He turned Laurie about with a hand on his shoulder and paced back toward the others. "We feel sort of sorry for that little woman," he added, lowering his voice again. "Hard to pull up stakes at her age, I guess. Ought to do what we can for her, Laurie. Come to me again if you need some more."

At supper Dr. Hillman asked the twins to come to his study, and there he produced a pink slip of paper from a desk drawer and handed it to Laurie. "My sister and I have wanted to help ever since we first learned of Miss Comfort's—ah—embarrassment, but have been somewhat at a loss to know how to do so. She is greatly averse to anything resembling charity, as you probably know. To-day we heard of your interest in the matter, Laurence, and of your—ah—ingenious solution of the lady's problem, and it occurred to us that if we handed a small contribution to you you would doubtless be able to use it to advantage and at the same time—ah—consider it confidential."

"Twenty-five more!" exclaimed Laurie when they were back in No. 16. "Forty from Mr. Starling. Seventy-seven in all! What'll we do with it?"

"Blessed if I know?" replied Ned, "unless we install steam heat and open plumbing!"

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS COMFORT COMES ABOARD

BEHOLD the *Pequot Queen* at ten o'clock Saturday morning!

She is freshly painted from end to end on the shoreward side, gleaming white, with bright yellow trim. The other side is to be done later. Just now the painter, a sure-enough professional painter from Joyce & Connell's, is finishing the upper deck.

The gangway is resplendent, too, for Brose did that himself yesterday, using plenty of drier. The deck is protected by bits of board to walk on, although by evening the buff paint will be hard enough. The doors are to have a second coat later, but as they are they look pretty fine. Wonderful what paint will do, is n't it? You 'd hardly think this was the same old *Pequot Queen*.

But there 's the cabin yet. Linoleum shining with new varnish, walls and ceiling creamy white, blue and white curtains at the windows, Miss

Comfort's old stove blackened and polished by Kewpie until you 'd never suspect it was not brand-new! And that 's a real sink in the corner, even though it is n't working yet. You just can't hurry a plumber! There 'll be a pump alongside, of course. Miss Comfort will get her drinking-water at the Parmenter's across the road. They 're real friendly folks. Mr. Parmenter hauled the coal that 's in the bin in the boiler-room himself. That shelving is all new. Brose and Bob put that up. The hanging lamp in the center is one Mrs. Deane had. Miss Starling sent those flowers. Looks pretty nice, does n't it? Would n't mind living here yourself? Well, neither would I! And look at the view from those windows; sun sparkling on the water, boats passing! Think Miss Comfort 'll like it?

That was a busy, bustling morning. As early as Ned and Laurie and Kewpie reached the *Pequot Queen*, Polly and Mae and Brose Wilkins were before them. Although much had been accomplished yesterday, much remained to be done. Bob arrived an hour later, bearing a box of

flowers from his aunt. Brose, singing as he worked, dropped his hammer to touch up a spot with a paint-brush, abandoned paint-brush to seize again on hammer or screw-driver. Kewpie, eager for employment, got in every one's way and accumulated a great deal of fresh white pigment every time he turned around. The plumber, having set the sink up, went away, and the awning man arrived to take measurements. The awning was to cover the rear half of the roof-deck. There had once been an awning all over the roof, and, although the frame had disappeared, the sockets into which the uprights had been screwed remained. To put an awning over the whole roof-deck was beyond their means, but they could well afford to protect half of it. Brose was going to make two flower-boxes to fit the benches along the railing and fill them with earth so that, when summer came, Miss Comfort would have a veritable roof-garden up there. Brose thought of all sorts of things, practical and otherwise. One of the practical things was a place to dry clothes on the small deck forward, where he stretched four lengths of line from a post set

in the flag-pole socket at the extreme bow to four galvanized iron hooks screwed to the front of the wheel-house.

At eleven Peter Brown arrived with Miss Comfort's worldly belongings. Peter was small and very black; Peter's horse was small and presumably white; and Peter's wagon was small and extremely ramshackle. How he managed to get so much on it was a question! A narrow black walnut bedstead in several sections, together with its appurtenances; a drop-leaf mahogany table; a funny old trunk with a rounded top; five chairs of assorted shapes and sizes; a packing-case of cooking-utensils; a barrel of china and crockery; a walnut what-not; a wash-boiler filled with miscellany; a marble clock wrapped in a patchwork quilt; some books; three pictures in faded gilt frames; a huge bundle of bedding; a roll of frayed straw matting; some braided rugs; a spotless deal table and various other smaller sundries.

Peter and Brose unloaded at the end of the gangway, and the boys bore the things aboard. In the cabin Polly and Mae directed the bestowing of them, wiping everything clean with a dust-cloth as it was set in place. The packing-case

was left on deck, as was the barrel, but the rest of the things went inside, and when they were all there there was just room for the two girls to move cautiously about!

But half an hour later there was another tale to tell. The cooking-utensils were hung on nails, the dishes were on the shelves, the bed was set up and dressed, the trunk was under the deal table, the rugs were on the floor, the pictures were hung, the drop-leaf table stood under the hanging lamp, and order had emerged from chaos. Of course, as Polly acknowledged, the place did look a trifle crowded, but she guessed Miss Comfort would n't mind. Two articles alone defeated their efforts, the what-not and the marble clock. The what-not, built to fit in a corner, looked sadly out of place at the foot of the bed, and the marble clock simply cried aloud for a mantel to rest on. But the corners were all occupied, and there was no mantel; and so the what-not remained where they had put it, and the clock for the time being reposed on a window-sill.

Brose hustled the empty case and barrel to the boiler-room, which compartment held also a supply of kindling-wood and a quarter of a ton of

coal and so did n't look one bit like a hen-house! Miss Comfort was to have an early lunch at Mrs. Deane's, and she and the Widow were to arrive at the boat about half-past twelve. At exactly twelve Polly flipped her dust-cloth for the last time, the painter stowed his belongings in the wheel-house and called it a day, Brose relinquished his hammer, and seven satisfied and hungry workers gave their attention to the luncheon that the girls had prepared. To have dined at school would have prevented the twins and Kewpie from being on hand at Miss Comfort's arrival, and they did n't want to miss that!

There was plenty to eat, and full justice was done to the viands. It was a jolly, happy meal, too, for the *Pequot Queen* looked as none of them had ever hoped to see it look, and, as Brose remarked, it would look 'a sight better before they got through with it. "When the awning 's up and there 's flowers along the rail there— What color 's the awning, Laurie?"

"Red and white."

"Great! And then there 'll be little window-boxes under the two windows on this side. I 'm going to paint 'em white with green crisscrosses

on 'em; sort of lattice-effect, you know. And then I was thinking this morning that it would n't be hard to make a little flower-bed on each side of the bridge there later. I could plant morning-glories or something so 's they 'd climb along on the hand-rail. And some bright things, too, like geraniums or zinnias."

"Brose," exclaimed Laurie, "you 're a wonder!" He held aloft a paper cup filled with hot chocolate. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Mr. Brose Wilkins, without whose assistance—no, directorship this undertaking would have been a—but a partial success. To his untiring zeal and—er—"

"There they come!" cried Kewpie excitedly.

And there they did come, Miss Comfort in her best black dress—and probably her only black dress—and Mrs. Deane, Miss Comfort at least a yard in advance, Mrs. Deane trying hard to recover the distance. Polly jumped to the rail and "yoo-hooed" and waved. Miss Comfort heard and, it seemed, saw the *Pequot Queen* for the first time. She stopped short and stared from a half-block away. Mrs. Deane regained her lost ground and stared, too. For a long moment the

two stood motionless there. Then Miss Comfort started on again, this time at a funny little half-trot. Once more Mrs. Deane was outdistanced!

Polly and Ned and Bob ran across the gangway to meet them. The others remained on deck, Kewpie grinning broadly, Laurie only half smiling, Mae emitting little whispered ejaculations, and Brose, his comforting hammer once more in hand, humming a funny sort of tune under his breath. Miss Comfort's face was a study as she paused at the end of the gangway and swept the scene with rapt gaze. Then, still silent, she declined Ned's offered assistance and walked firmly and proudly across the gangway and stepped down upon her own deck!

It was not until she stood at the cabin door and looked inside that the little lady became articulate. Then she drew a deep breath and said, "*Well, I never!*" in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper. Then she was inside, with the others clustering about her and every one talking at once, Polly apologizing for the clock, Mae explaining about the what-not, Laurie promising water for the sink not later than Tuesday, Mrs. Deane exclaiming repeatedly to no one in

particular: "Why, I had no idea! I simply had no idea!"

After a moment or two Miss Comfort seated herself in the walnut rocker with the gray horse-hair upholstery and sighed again. "It 's too beautiful for words," she said. She reached out for Polly's hand and drew it to her, patting it with little quick gestures. "I never thought it would be like this, my dear, never, never! I just can't find any words to thank you all; not now; perhaps some day—" She searched for and found her tiny black-bordered handkerchief. Kewpie frowned and turned toward a window. Gee, she was getting leaky again! But, as before, Laurie provided a diversion.

"Here 's the fellow that did more than the rest of us put together," he said. Miss Comfort looked, and—

"Why, Brose Wilkins!" she cried. "You, too! Why, I did n't see you!" Brose shook hands, his broad smile again threatening his ears.

"Yes, Miss Pansy, it 's me," he said. "But you don't want to believe what Laurie tells you. I ain't done much but swing a hammer. Now, how you feeling, ma'am?"

“Very happy, Brose,” replied Miss Comfort softly. “Happier than a person has any right to be at my time of life, I guess. Is n’t it wonderful?” Her gaze swept over the little white room with its blue and white curtains aflutter in the sunlit breeze and all her friendly belongings about. “Does n’t the picture of grandfather’s ship look beautifully there, Brose?”

Brose agreed that it did. Every one else agreed that it did. Secretly, however, Bob, who had hung the article, told himself that that representation of a barkantine with all sails set plowing through a muddy-green sea had probably been done by the village sign-painter!

After that Miss Comfort arose and minutely inspected every inch of her domain, listening to Laurie’s somewhat involved explanation of the water system not yet installed, to Ned’s story of the roof-garden above, to Polly’s reason for placing the wash-boiler here and the knife-board there, and to Mae’s confidences regarding the whereabouts of the linen. Then she was taken off along the deck to see where the coal and wood were kept. At intervals Laurie took a slip of paper from a pocket and surreptitiously wrote

on it. When they reached the boiler-room he added the mysterious word "coal scuttle" to several other words already on the paper.

In due course they all returned to the cabin and sat or stood around and did a good deal of talking and exclaiming and laughing until, at last, Mrs. Deane jumped up suddenly and announced in a shocked voice that she must get right back and that she didn't know what Miss Billings would be thinking of her! That began a general exodus. Polly said that she and Mae would be down after supper to see if everything was all right. She had already offered to remain during the afternoon, but Miss Comfort had almost pathetically declined the offer. Miss Comfort, as was evident to all, wanted to be left quite alone for a while.

"You 're sure you won't be nervous at night," asked Mrs. Deane anxiously, "all alone here like this."

"Nervous?" repeated Miss Comfort placidly. "Not a bit. No more than I was in that empty house up there. I never was one of the scary kind, and down here, with the friendly water around me, I 'll never be lonesome again."

“I ’ll be looking in now and then,” said Brose. “I ’m liable to be passing most any time, Miss Pansy, and, whenever you want anything just let me know.”

“And to-morrow,” said Mae, “we ’re all coming down to call on you in your new home, Miss Comfort.”

“Do, my dear, do! Come to-morrow afternoon, and I ’ll make some tea for you. In the morning, of course, I ’ll be at church.”

“Church?” said Mrs. Deane. “I would n’t try it unless I felt real well, my dear. It ’s a long walk and a real steep one.”

“All the better,” replied Miss Comfort. “All my life I ’ve lived so close to the church that it was n’t any effort at all. Sometimes I think that if religion was n’t made so easy for us we ’d think more of it. ’T won’t do me a mite of harm to have to walk a little on a Sunday in order to worship the Lord. And I guess maybe He will approve of it.”

Going back, Laurie, walking beside Polly, said with a relieved sigh: “Gee, I was glad to get away without having her ask questions, Polly! I thought every minute she ’d want to know where

everything came from and how we had paid for it!"

"I know," said Polly thoughtfully. "It 's sort of queer she did n't, too. Because she must know that white-enameled sinks and pumps and awnings and such things don't just *happen*."

"Well, I suppose she just does n't stop to think," mused Laurie. "And I hope she won't. It would be fierce if she got insulted and went to the poor-farm after all!"

"Oh, she would n't do that!" declared Polly in horror. After a moment she added: "I 'll just bet you anything, Laurie, that she did notice and that she means to ask! She 's just waiting until she can speak to you alone, I believe."

Laurie groaned. "Then she 's never going to get the chance," he muttered. Polly looked doubtful.

CHAPTER XIX

LAURIE IS CORNERED

THE following afternoon saw the boys, minus Kewpie, escorting Polly and Mae to the *Pequot Queen*. Mrs. Deane had begged off. One must n't expect all April days to be fine, and this particular day proved it. It had showered off and on during the forenoon, and now, at half-past three, the rain was coming down hard and fast. The girls wore rain-coats over their Sunday gowns, and Ned and Laurie were draped in colorful yellow oilskins. Bob, in an old Mackinaw jacket, huddled under the dripping eaves of one of the two umbrellas. It seemed a particularly long way to the *Pequot Queen* under these circumstances, and it was a rather bedraggled quintet that at last filed into the cabin. Once there, however, discomforts were forgotten. A fire in the stove defied the dampness of the outside world; a kettle sang cozily; the white light that entered the open windows flashed on pol-

ished surfaces; and the bowl of flowers on the table added a cheerful note of color. And then there was the little hostess, all smiles of welcome and concerned murmurs over dripping coats and wet skirts.

The coats were laid aside quickly, and the visitors found seats, Polly and Mae occupying the same arm-chair, since there were but five chairs in the cabin and not even Laurie would have thought of sitting on Miss Comfort's immaculate blue and white spread! The lack of a sixth chair troubled Miss Comfort considerably. Bob pointed out that even had she possessed such a thing there would n't have been room for it and some one would have had to sit out on deck! And Polly and Mae assured in chorus that they did n't *mind* sitting together, not one *bit*.

Miss Comfort was brimming over with pride and happiness. Everything was too wonderful for words! And sleep— She held up her hands in something almost like consternation. Why, she had n't slept the way she had slept last night for years and years! She had had her supper late because she had been so busy fixing things up, and then she had sat at the window there for

a long time watching the lights on the water and on the further shore; and suddenly she could n't keep her eyes open a minute longer, it had seemed, and she had gone to bed and fallen right to sleep and slept and slept!

“It was so wonderful lying there and listening to the water lapping against the boat that I tried my best to keep awake. But I could n't. And then this morning when I awoke there was a beautiful fog and I could hear bells sounding and now and then a great, deep fog-horn on some boat. It was perfect! From my bed I can look out of the windows and see the river, and when the sun came out for a little while, quite early, it was beautiful!”

“Yes, ma'am,” agreed Laurie. “For myself, I never cared much for fog-horns, but maybe the kind they have here are different. I'm awfully glad you slept so well, though, and—and like it.”

“Like it! Oh, Mr. Laurie, I can never, never thank you enough for finding this beautiful home for me!”

“Oh, that was n't anything,” muttered Laurie.

“Why, Laurie Turner,” exclaimed Polly, “it was wonderful! The rest of us might have

passed this boat a thousand times and never thought of making it into a—an apartment!”

“Please, Polly dear,” Miss Comfort protested, “not an apartment! I want it just what it is, a boat—my boat. You don’t think, do you?”—she appealed to Laurie—“that it would do to change the name? Of course the *Pequot Queen* is very pretty, but I would so like to call it after grandfather’s ship there.” Her gaze went to the oil-painting on the wall.

“Don’t see why not,” said Laurie. “All we ’d have to do would be to paint out the old name. What was your grandfather’s ship called, ma’am?”

“The *Lydia W. Frye*,” replied Miss Comfort raptly. “He named her after my grandmother. She was one of the New Jersey Fries.”

Laurie had a slight fit of coughing, which he recovered from so abruptly, when he encountered Ned’s scowl, that he nearly choked. “A nice name,” declared Ned sternly. “I ’m sure we could change the letters on the bow.”

“Oh, now I don’t believe I’d want you to go to all that trouble,” said Miss Comfort. “I ’ll just call it the *Lydia W. Frye* to myself, and that

will do quite well. Now I 'm going to give you some tea.”

There were some cookies and sweet crackers with it, and for these the hostess apologized. She had n't had time to do any baking yet, she explained, and Brose had got these at the store for her last evening. To-morrow, however, she was going to get to work, for she had several orders that just had to be filled at once. It was after the first cup of tea—and it did seem that Miss Comfort's tea was very, very different from any other tea, tasting, as Ned put it, like *tea* instead of leather—that Laurie looked inquiringly at his brother and Ned nodded and the twins arose and stood with their backs to the door. Then Ned bowed and announced: “Original poetical composition by the Turner Brothers entitled—”

He paused and looked at Laurie. “What *is* it entitled?” he demanded. Laurie shook his head.

“We forgot to entitle it.”

“Entitled,” continued Ned, “entitled ‘Ode.’”

Polly clapped delightedly, and Bob inquired facetiously, “How much?” The twins bowed in unison, and Ned recited the first line and Laurie the second, after which they again alternated.

“O *Pequot Queen*, your stormy voyaging ’s o’er.

No more you ’ll brave the wave’s and wind’s discomfort.

Here, nestled ’gainst a peaceful, kindly shore,

You ’re parlor, bedroom, bath for our Miss Comfort!”

Applause was loud and prolonged. The twins bowed repeatedly, their hands on their hearts, their eyes languishing gratitude on the appreciative audience.

“Why,” exclaimed Miss Comfort, with the tone of one making a surprising discovery, “it was poetry!”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Laurie defensively, “but we warned you!”

Miss Comfort looked a trifle puzzled until Polly laughingly assured her that she mustn’t mind Laurie, that he was always saying silly things. Whereupon the little lady said disapprovingly: “You mustn’t say that, Polly. I ’m sure Mr. Laurie isn’t *silly*. Sometimes I don’t quite understand him, my dear, but I ’m sure he isn’t *silly*!”

“You ’re a perfect dear!” replied Polly rapturously.

Laurie had seized his cap and Mae’s umbrella.

“Back in five minutes,” he said from the doorway.

“Hold on! Where are you going?” demanded Ned.

“Got to see Brose Wilkins a minute about—about something.”

“Well, make it peppy,” said Ned. “We’re not going to wait for you long, old son.”

Laurie’s five minutes was more like fifteen, but he returned at last and they said good-by and were almost on their way when Miss Comfort sent Laurie’s heart down toward his shoes. “Mr. Laurie,” she asked apologetically, “I wonder if you’d mind stopping in to see me for a minute to-morrow.”

“Why—why, no, ma’am,” stammered Laurie. “I’d be pleased to.” He exchanged meaning glances with Polly. Then Polly asked: “Why don’t you stay now, Laurie, if Miss Comfort would like you to? We’ll leave one of the umbrellas.”

Laurie viewed her in strong disapproval but accepted the situation. “I don’t need any umbrella, though,” he said sadly. “I’ve got my coat, and it is n’t raining so hard now.” He and

Miss Comfort watched the others depart, and then she motioned to a chair.

“Won’t you sit down, please?” she asked. Laurie sat down, but on the extreme edge of the chair as though to lessen the space between him and the door. “You see,” Miss Comfort went on after a pause, “I ’ve wanted to ask you ever since Wednesday how you were doing all this, but I did n’t like to when the others were around. Now I do wish you ’d tell me, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Laurie gulped. “What—was it you wanted to know, ma’am?”

“Why, who has—has met the expense of all the changes and improvements you have made here, Mr. Laurie.”

“Oh,” said Laurie. “Oh! Well, you see, Miss Comfort, we have n’t done so much after all. Now, you take that hanging lamp. Mrs. Deane had that and was n’t using it—”

“Yes, I know about the lamp,” interrupted Miss Comfort gently, “but there ’s that sink and the awning and—and so many, many things.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Laurie glanced longingly at the doorway. “Well, now, you ’d be surprised how little things like that cost. You take that stove-

pipings, Miss Comfort. Maybe you thought that was new pipe, but it was n't. It was second-hand. We just shined it up, you see!" Laurie waved an all-encompassing hand. "Same way with the other things—more or less."

"That sink is n't second hand, is it?" she asked.

"Well, no, ma'am, not the sink." Laurie smiled engagingly. "But sinks are n't expensive. I was surprised, honest, I was, ma'am, when we got the price on that! Why, seems like things don't cost half what they did a couple of years ago!"

"Mr. Laurie," said Miss Comfort firmly, sitting very straight in her chair and looking at him earnestly, "you should n't try to deceive me. I know that you and the others have spent a great deal of money, and I 'd feel horribly if I thought it was all yours. Now, please tell me."

"Well—well, it 's like this. We did put in a few dollars, Miss Comfort, but not enough to mention, and we were so glad to do it that you ought n't to care a mite. Then—then two or three other folks, grown-ups, you understand, wanted to help out, and there was quite a good deal to be done, and so we took the money and

promised not to tell who 'd given it. You see, Miss Comfort, they wanted to see you comfortable here. And they were folks who could afford to do it, you know. And so—well, that 's how it was," Laurie concluded, observing Miss Comfort anxiously.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "If you promised not to divulge the names of the people who were so kind, I sha'n't expect you to. After all—" But she stopped and was silent a moment. Then, "I 've always said that I would never accept charity," she went on musingly, "but—well, I don't know. Maybe I have n't any right to be proud. Then, somehow, this does n't seem so—so degrading. It seems more like—well, just kindness, don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do," agreed Laurie emphatically. "And that 's just what it is, ma'am."

"I don't feel about it as I would have a few years ago, anyhow," said Miss Comfort thoughtfully. Then she smiled. "Thanks for telling me, Laurie. You don't mind my calling you just that, do you? You 've been so—so— *Won't* you have some more cookies?"

"No, ma'am, thank you." Laurie felt that

after going through the last few minutes he deserved a whole plate of cookies, but he resisted the temptation. Too many cookies weren't good for a fellow who hoped—sometimes—to be a catcher!

He was so relieved at the outcome of the talk that he didn't realize it was pouring harder than it had poured all day until he had turned into Ash Street. When he did, he gave up the idea of joining the others at the Widow's and headed as straight as Orstead's wandering streets would let him head for East Hall, arriving there extremely wet despite his oilskin coat. Sounds told him that many of the fellows had already returned, and at the head of the first flight he encountered Elk Thurston and his room-mate, Jim Hallock, coming down. Hallock said, "Hello, Nod," and then Elk asked: "How's the great pitcher coming on? Going to spring him on us pretty soon?"

Laurie said, "Not for another week or so, Elk," and heard Elk laughing as he and Jim went down.

A little later, when Ned and Kewpie arrived in No. 16, Laurie held their undivided attention.

Monday morning and recitations once more. Monday afternoon and baseball practice again. Things went well on the field, for the candidates for the team had returned with renewed ambitions. Besides, there was a game with Benson High School two days later, and that was something to work for. Laurie managed to hit the ball on the nose every time he stood at the batting-net, and later on, in the five-inning practice game, he caught for an inning and, so far as he could discern, did n't do so badly.

Back in No. 16 at half-past five, he found Kewpie awaiting him, Kewpie looking disheveled, weary, but triumphant. "I've got it!" he announced excitedly before Laurie was well through the door. "I've got the hang of it at last! That guy's a corker, Nod, and he says I'll know as much about it as he does in another month!"

"Restrain your enthusiasm, Kewpie," urged Laurie. "No use telling the whole dormitory about it. These walls are n't awfully thick, and I can hear Elk tramping around up-stairs like a hippopotamus right now." But Laurie looked very much pleased and settled himself to hear Kewpie's gladsome tidings. And when Ned came

in a little later he heard them all over again, and after Kewpie had reluctantly torn himself away the twins agreed that, even allowing for a slight exaggeration of the facts as set forth by their late visitor, stock in the Association for the Reclamation of Kewpie Proudtree had advanced many points. The next afternoon the lady members of that association were also taken into the secret, and there was much rejoicing.

Polly and Mae learned the news at Bob's tennis tea, for that long heralded affair was at last taking place. The court was finished and marked, the new creamy-white net was up, and, near at hand, a wicker table bore the paraphernalia of afternoon tea. Practice kept Laurie away until well after five, and Kewpie was missing for a time, too, but Ned and George Watson and Hop Kendrick and Hal Pringle and half a dozen other boys were there from the start. The gentler sex was represented by Polly, Mae, and Bob's aunt, the latter presiding at the tea-table. Bob beat George Watson, 6 to 4, in an exhibition set, and then Mae and Hal Pringle played Polly and Hop Kendrick. After that there was tea and sandwiches and cake, and then Bob took on Hal and

Lee, and the set went to 9 to 7 before Bob finally broke through on Hop's service and won. The court was all that Bob's fondest hope had pictured. Mr. Starling arrived before the party broke up and went through three games with Mae to the delight of the audience, by that time swelled with the arrival of Kewpie and Laurie.

Benson won from Hillman's the next afternoon, 13 to 7. The home team played rather ragged ball in the field, although the pitching of George Pemberton and Nate Beedle was satisfactory enough. Nate relieved Pemberton in the fifth inning, too late to prevent three runs that put the visitors well in the lead. Laurie saw the game from the bench, for Cas Bennett wore the mask from start to finish.

On Saturday afternoon Hillman's met Tudor Hall School and played a much steadier game. The Blue dislodged the opposing pitcher in the third inning and put the game safely away with six runs. Later four more were added, and the total of ten was more than enough to win, even though Tudor Hall staged a rally in the first of the ninth and hit Croft, who had succeeded Pemberton in the seventh, to all corners of the field

and got three runners across the plate before Pat Browne, in right field, pulled down a fly and ended the fracas. Again Laurie was a non-combatant, although Elk Thurston caught during the final two innings and behaved rather well during that hectic ninth.

The following afternoon Ned, as self-appointed secretary and treasurer, rendered an accounting of the *Pequot Queen* fund, showing a balance in the treasury of \$1.42. All bills had been paid, and the question of disposing of the balance came before the meeting. Kewpie's suggestion was typical.

"Pay it to Miss Comfort," he said, "and we 'll trade it out in cake!"

"It is n't ours," Ned reminded him sternly. "Besides it 's not for you to be thinking of cake, old dear."

It was Polly's suggestion that was finally adopted. They would give the vast sum to Brose Wilkins to be used for the purchase of flower-seeds for the boxes and beds. That momentous question settled, they set forth to call at the *Pequot Queen*, or, as Laurie reminded them they should now call the boat, the *Lydia W. Frye*.

April became May, and the Hillman's School nine went on playing Wednesday and Saturday games, losing not quite as often as it won. Laurie twice donned the mask in contests and did as well, perhaps a bit better, than he had expected to. He did very well at receiving the ball from the pitcher, and he was remarkably steady at all times, but he was weak when it came to holding the runners on bases, his heaves to second being erratic, to say the least. At bat, however, he was improving fast, and when May was a fortnight old there was not much to choose between him and Elk Thurston as a catcher, although possibly the latter's greater age and size inspired more confidence. Perhaps Coach Mulford thought so, for Elk was given more chances than Laurie behind the bat.

When Hillman's went to play Benson, most of the school accompanied the team. Polly and Mae went, too, escorted by Ned and George Watson. Hillman's won, but not until the tenth inning, and then by 3 to 2. Nate Beedle pitched fine ball that day. Hillman's returned to Orstead tired but happy.

Just a week later Polly celebrated her sixteenth

birthday with a party attended by Mae, Ned, Bob, Kewpie, and, since the affair was held in the forenoon, Laurie. And, of course, Mrs. Deane was present. Miss Comfort had been invited and in lieu of her presence had provided a gorgeous birthday cake. Antoinette, wearing a new pink ribbon that exactly matched her pink nose and ears, and Towser, the cat, may also said to have attended. Polly received many presents and was very bright of eye and very happy.

The celebration continued in the afternoon when the entire party attended the game with Cole's School, although, Laurie, of course, did not sit with the others in the stand but watched the nine tragic innings from the bench. Nate Beedle had a bad day; Croft, who succeeded him, was far worse; and Pemberton alone of the pitching staff showed any class. Pemberton got through the final two innings without allowing a hit, but the damage was already done. Cole's won by the scandalous score of 16 to 3! Polly remarked, a trifle unreasonably, that she thought, since it was her birthday, Hillman's might have won!

Rain caused the cancellation of the game with

Highland the next Wednesday, and Laurie accompanied Kewpie on his mysterious pilgrimage to the home of Brose Wilkins. Those pilgrimages had been made daily, excepting Sunday for about a month now, and never once, rain or shine, had Kewpie sought to avoid them. Whatever it was that kept the two boys on the dilapidated Wilkins premises for more than an hour this Wednesday afternoon, it must have been something important, for the rain never ceased for a moment during that time, and, knowing Kewpie as we do, it seems fair to assume that only an important mission could have kept him from the snug window-seat of No. 15 East Hall on such a day.

Returning, their way took them within a few yards of the *Pequot Queen*. The river beyond looked gray and sullen; the rain was falling steadily and remorselessly; the new paint of the transformed ferry boat gleamed with moisture. But from the smoke-pipe in the roof a cheerful trail of gray ascended, and at the windows the blue and white curtains shone cozily. Once they saw the small, erect form of Miss Comfort, white-aproned, pass a casement and, or so Kewpie solemnly

averred, heard the sound of a faintly sung song. There was such an atmosphere of warmth and hominess and cheer about the quaint abode that Kewpie lagged noticeably and would have welcomed a suggestion from his companion that they stop a moment and say "Hello" to the occupant. But it was close to supper-time and Laurie went sternly on, refusing to notice Kewpie's deep sigh.

They reached the entrance of the dormitory just as Ned got there. Ned carried his golf-bag and was very wet indeed. Laurie viewed him commiseratingly. "You poor forlorn fish," he said. "Don't tell me you've been playing golf a day like this!"

"Sure have," answered Ned cheerfully. "Won, too. Had Peyton three up on the seventh, too, old son."

"Well, you certainly are a nut! Did n't either of you know it was raining?"

"Did n't you?" countered Ned. "Look at your own shoes!"

"We," replied Laurie with dignity, "were engaged in a sensible and important occupation, not merely amusing ourselves!"

“Were, eh?” Ned grinned. “What important part did you play in it?”

“I,” began Laurie, “contributed my—er—my—”

“He chased the ball,” chuckled Kewpie as he disappeared to No. 15.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRY-OUT

BY the first of June Hillman's baseball team had settled into its stride. Four successive victories had restored the confidence of players and adherents alike, and the final test of the season, the game with Farview Academy, played this year at Orstead, was being viewed in prospect with less apprehension. Laurie had somewhat solved the science of throwing to bases from the plate and was running a very even race with Elk Thurston, a fact that did nothing to increase the entente cordiale between those two. Elk seldom missed an opportunity to make himself disagreeable to his rival, and since Elk was both older and bigger, and possessed also the prestige of being a member of the upper-middle class, Laurie had to keep his temper many times when he didn't want to. After all, though, Elk's offenses weren't important enough to have excused serious reprisals.

He made fun of the younger boy and "ragged" him when he was at work. Sometimes he got a laugh from his audience, but more often he did n't, for his humor was a bit heavy. His antagonism was largely personal, for he did not accept Laurie seriously as a rival.

He liked best of all to tease the other on the score of the latter's failure to make good his boast of transforming the impossible Kewpie Proudtree into a pitcher. Elk, like about every one else, had concluded that Laurie had given up that task in despair. But whereas the others had virtually forgotten the amusing episode, Elk remembered and dwelled on it whenever opportunity presented. That Laurie failed to react as Elk expected him to annoyed him considerably. Laurie always looked cheerfully untroubled by gibes on that subject. Any one but Elk would have recognized failure and switched to a more certain method, but Elk was not very quick of perception.

On a Saturday soon after the beginning of the month the Blue met Loring in a game remarkable for coincidences. Each team made eleven hits and eleven runs in the eleven innings that were

played—errors and brilliant plays alternating. George Pemberton started for Hillman's but gave way to Nate Beedle in the second. Elk caught the final two innings in creditable style, and Laurie again looked on from the bench.

On the following Monday afternoon Laurie laid in wait for Mr. Mulford on the gymnasium steps. "We 're ready for that try-out whenever you are, sir," he announced.

"Eh? What try-out is that?" asked the coach.

"Proudtree's, sir. You know you said you 'd give him one."

"Proudtree? Why I understood he 'd quit long ago!"

"No, sir, he did n't quit. He's been practising at least an hour every day, except Sundays, for more than two months."

"He has? Well, well! And you think he can pitch some, do you?"

"Yes, sir," answered Laurie firmly.

"All right. Now, let 's see. I don't believe I 'll have time to look at him to-day, Turner. How about to-morrow morning?"

“Tuesday? He has n’t anything from eleven fifteen to twelve, sir.”

“Good. Tell him to be over at the field at eleven twenty. You ’ll catch for him? I hope this is n’t just a flivver, my boy, for from present indications we ’re going to need pitchers next year.”

“Would n’t we be able to use another this year, if we had him?” asked Laurie, grinning. Mr. Mulford smiled responsively.

“Hm, we might, and that ’s a fact,” he acknowledged. “Well, have your champion on hand to-morrow morning, Turner.” He hurried on into the gymnasium, and, after a thoughtful stare into space, Laurie followed him.

“Next year!” scoffed Kewpie when, after practice, Laurie reported the gist of his talk with the coach. “He ’s crazy! What ’s the matter with this year? I ’ll bet you I can pitch as good ball as Orville Croft right now.”

“And that would n’t be saying much, either,” assented Laurie.

“Well, they ’ve got him on the team,” grumbled Kewpie. “Pinky ’s got a nerve if he thinks

I 'm going to wait around for a whole year after the way I 've been working all spring!"

"Yes, he ain't so well in his nerve," mused Laurie. "Ought to see a doctor about—"

"Well, did n't you tell him I wanted to play this year?" demanded Kewpie impatiently. Laurie shook his head.

"No, you see, dear old lad, I did n't want to overtax his brain. You know how these baseball coaches are. They can wrestle with one idea, but when it comes to two at the same time—" Laurie shrugged eloquently. Kewpie viewed him doubtfully.

"Oh, shut up," he said, grinning. "Well, anyway, he 's got to give me a chance with the team this year. If he does n't he won't get me next."

"I 'll mention that to him to-morrow," replied the other soberly. "I dare say if we take a firm attitude with him he will come around. Well, eleven twenty, then. I 'll wait for you in front."

"In front" at Hillman's meant the steps of School Hall or their immediate vicinity, and on the steps the two met the next forenoon. Laurie

had brought his mitten, and Kewpie had his glove and a ball in his pockets. On the way along Summit Street to the athletic field, which was a quarter of a mile to the south, Kewpie was plainly nervous. He didn't have much to say, but at intervals he took the ball from his pocket, curved his heavy fingers about it, frowned, sighed and put it away again.

Mr. Mulford was awaiting them, and Kewpie, for one, was glad to see that he was alone. After greetings the boys laid aside their coats, and Kewpie rolled his shirt-sleeves up. Mr. Mulford seated himself on a bench near the batting-net, crossed his knees and waited. His attitude and general demeanor told Laurie that he was there to fulfill a promise rather than in the expectation of being thrilled.

"Start easy," counseled Laurie. "Don't try to pitch until you've tossed a few, Kewpie."

Kewpie nodded, plainly very conscious of the silent figure on the bench. He wound up slowly, caught sight of Laurie's mitten held palm outward in protest, and dropped his arms, frowning.

"Yes," said Mr. Mulford, "better start slow, Proudtree."

Kewpie tossed five or six balls into Laurie's mitt without a wind-up and between tosses stretched and flexed the muscles of his stout arm.

"All right," said Laurie finally. He crouched and signaled under the mitten. Kewpie shook his head.

"I don't know your signals," he objected. "You tell me what you want."

"Pitch some straight ones," suggested the coach.

Kewpie obliged. His stand in the box and his wind-up were different from what they had been when Laurie had last caught him. Considering his build, Kewpie's appearance and movements were easy and smooth. He had a queer habit of bringing the pitching hand back close to the left thigh after the delivery, which, while novel, was rather impressive. Kewpie's deliveries were straight enough to please any one, but Mr. Mulford called:

"Speed them up, son. You 'd never get past the batsman with those!"

Kewpie shot the ball away harder. Laurie returned it and thumped his mitt encouragingly.

“That ’s the stuff, Kewpie! Steam ’em up! Now then!”

Kewpie pitched again and once more. Mr. Mulford spoke. “You haven’t any speed, Proudtree,” he said regretfully. “The weakest batter on the scrub could whang those out for home runs. Got anything else?”

Kewpie had recovered his assurance now. “Sure,” he answered untroubledly. “What do you want?”

Mr. Mulford replied a trifle tartly. “I want to see anything you ’ve got that looks like pitching. I certainly haven’t seen anything yet!”

“Curve some,” said Laurie.

Kewpie fondled the ball very carefully, wound up, and pitched. The result was a nice out-shoot that surprised even Laurie, who nearly let it get past him into the net. “That ’s pitching,” he called. “Let ’s have another.”

Kewpie sent another. Mr. Mulford arose from the bench and took up a position behind the net. “Let ’s have that out-curve again,” he commanded. Kewpie obeyed. “All right,” said the coach. “Not bad. Try a drop.”

Kewpie's first attempt went wrong, but the next one sailed to the plate a little more than knee-high and then sought to bury itself in the dust. Laurie heard the coach grunt. A third attempt attained a similar result. "What else have you got?" asked Mr. Mulford. Laurie detected a note of interest at last.

"Got an in-shoot," replied Kewpie with all of his accustomed assurance, "and a sort of floater."

"Show me," answered the coach.

The in-shoot was just what it's name implied, and Kewpie presented two samples of it. The "floater," however, was less impressive, although Laurie thought to himself that it might prove a hard ball to hit if offered after a curve. Mr. Mulford grunted again. "Now pitch six balls, Proudtree," he said, "and mix 'em up."

Kewpie pitched an out, a straight drop, an out-drop, a straight ball, an in, and a "floater."

"That 's enough," said Mr. Mulford to Laurie. "Come over to the bench." Laurie dropped the ball in his pocket, signaled to Kewpie, and followed the coach. Kewpie ambled up inquiringly. "Sit down, son," said Mr. Mulford. Then, "Where 'd you learn that stuff?" he asked.

With Laurie's assistance, Kewpie told him.

"Wilkins," mused the coach. "Must have been the year before I took hold here. I don't remember any game with High School in which we got licked that badly. He must be all he says he is, though, if he can teach any one else to pitch that stuff. Well, I 'm not going to tell you you 're a Christy Mathewson, Proudtree, for you 've got a long way to go yet before you 'll be getting any medals. I guess I don't have to tell you that you are n't built quite right for baseball, eh?"

"Oh, I 'm down to a hundred and fifty-four," answered Kewpie calmly, "and I 'm not so slow as I look."

"I don't mean your weight," said the coach, suppressing a smile. "I mean your build. You 'll have to work just about twice as hard as Beedle would, for instance, to get the same result. You 're—well, you 're just a little bit too close-coupled, son!"

"I 've seen fellows like me play mighty good baseball," said Kewpie.

"I dare say. If you have, you 've seen them work mighty hard at it! Well, I 'm not trying to discourage you. I 'm only telling you this to

impress you with the fact—and it is a fact, Proud-tree—that you ’ll have to buckle down and work mighty earnestly if you want to be a really capable pitcher next year.’’

“Well, what about—” Kewpie glanced flittingly at Laurie—“what about this year, sir?”

Laurie saw the coach’s gaze waver. “This year?” he echoed. “Why, I don’t know. We ’re fixed pretty well this year, you see. Of course I ’m perfectly willing to let you work with the crowd for the rest of the season. Pitching to the net will teach you a whole lot, for you can’t judge your stuff until you ’ve got some ambitious chap swinging at it. Some of that stuff you ’ve just showed me would be candy for a good hitter. You ’ve got one weakness, Proudtree, and it ’s an important one. You have n’t speed, and I don’t believe you ’ll have it. That ’s your build; no fault of yours, of course.”

“I know that,” agreed Kewpie, “but Brose Wilkins says I don’t need speed. He says I ’ve got enough without it. He says there are heaps of mighty good pitchers in the Big League that can’t pitch a real fast ball to save their lives!”

“Maybe, but you ’re not a candidate for the Big

League yet. If you 've ever watched school-boy baseball, you 've seen that what they can't hit, five times out of seven, is a really fast ball. They like to say they can, and I guess they believe it, but they can't. Maybe one reason is that they don't often get fast ones, for there are n't many youngsters of your age who can stand the strain of pitching them. Mind, I don't say that you won't be able to get by without more speed than you 've got, but I do say that not having speed is a weakness. I 'm emphasizing this because I want you to realize that you 've got to make your curves mighty good to make up for that shortcoming."

"Yes, sir," replied Kewpie almost humbly. "I understand."

"Good. Now, then, let 's see. Oh, yes, about that ball you call a 'floater.' Did Wilkens teach you that?"

"No, sir, I—I got that out of a book. It—it is n't as good as it might be, I guess, but I 'm getting the hang of it, sir."

"Well, I would n't monkey with it just now. It 's a hard ball to pitch—hard on the muscles. You don't want too many things. If I were you,

son, I 'd stick to the curves and drops. That out-drop of yours is n't so bad right now, and I guess you can make it even better. If you have five things to offer the batter, say, an in, an out, a drop, a drop-curve, and a slow ball, you 've got plenty. If you 've got control and can change your pace without giving yourself away you 've got as much as the most successful pitcher ever did have. It 's control, son, that counts. All the fancy stunts ever known are n't worth a cent unless you can put the ball where you want it to go. And that 's that."

There was a moment of silence. Then Kewpie said: "Mr. Mulford, if I work hard and pitch to the net and all that could n't I get into a game some time? I mean some game this spring?"

"Why, I don't know," said the coach slowly. "What 's the idea? Want to get your letter?"

"No, sir, but I 'd—why, I 'd just like to, sir, *awfully*."

"There are only four games left before the Farview game," was the answer, "and I don't want to promise anything like that, Proudtree. But I will agree to put you in if the chance comes. Look here, you chaps, why don't you work together

and get to know each other? There's a lot in the pitcher and catcher being used to each other's ways. Then, perhaps, I can give you both a whack at a couple of innings some day. I'd do that, I think. You look after Proudtree, Turner. Make him work. Keep his nose to the grindstone. Remember that there's another year coming, eh?"

"I'll make him work," laughed Laurie.

"Then do I—do I get on the team?" asked Kewpie anxiously.

"You get on the squad," was the answer. "Report to-morrow afternoon. There's a game on, and you won't get much work, but you can pitch to Turner a while and learn the ropes. Let's get back now." Coach Mulford arose. "Turner, I suspected that you were going to waste my time this morning, but I was wrong. Your dark horse looks to me well worth the grooming!"

He set off across the field toward the gridiron on a short cut to the village, and the two boys walked back to school. For the first dozen paces nothing was said. Then Kewpie laughed and turned to his companion. "Told you I'd do it!"

he exclaimed triumphantly. "Told you I could pitch ball as well as the rest of them! Did n't I, now?"

"You told me a lot of things, you poor cheese," answered Laurie crushingly, "but where 'd you be if Ned and I had n't managed you? I'll tell you. You 'd still be lying on your window-seat, like a fat seal, reading 'How to Pitch'!"

"Huh, is that so? I guess if it comes to that, you fat-head, Brose Wilkins is the guy—"

"He sure is," agreed Laurie, "he sure is! And, prithee, you half-baked portion of nothing at all, who discovered Brose? Who persuaded him to waste his time on a big, fut lummoX like you?"

"Well, anyway," replied Kewpie, quite unaffected by the insults, "neither you nor Ned nor Brose Wilkins could have made a pitcher out of me if I had n't had the—the ability!"

"You ain't so well in your ability," said Laurie scathingly. "All you 've got is a start, old son, and so don't get to thinking that you 're a Big Leaguer! Maybe with prayer and hard work I'll make you amount to something by

next year, but right now you 're nothing but a whispered promise!"

"Oh, is that so?" said Kewpie, and again, "Is that so?" He was n't quick at repartee, and just then that was the best he could do.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEAD LETTER

ALTHOUGH Kewpie made no secret of his acceptance on the baseball team, in fact gave a certain amount of publicity to the fact, his appearance on the diamond the next afternoon created a distinct sensation. Aware of the sensation, Kewpie became suddenly taciturn, and when he did speak he clothed his words in mystery. Laurie, seeing an opportunity to render Kewpie's advent more spectacular, seized it. During Craigskill's practice on the diamond the Hillman's pitchers warmed up in front of the first base stand. Beedle and Pemberton pitched to Cas Bennett and Elk Thurston. As Croft was not to be used, Laurie's services were not required, and he sat on the bench. But when the opportunity was glimpsed he arose, picked a ball from the old water-bucket, drew on his mitten, and signaled to Kewpie. Then he took his place beyond Cas, and Kewpie ambled to a

station beside Nate Beedle, and a ripple of incredulous delight ran the length of the bench. Kewpie tossed a ball into Laurie's mitten, and the bench applauded with a note of hysteria. Not until then did Coach Mulford, who had been talking to the manager, become aware of the fact that something of interest was taking place. He looked, saw, stared. Then the ends of his mouth went up a little, tiny puckers appeared at the corners of his eyes, and he chuckled softly. Around him the players and substitutes were laughing uproariously. They had reason, it seemed. The sight of the short and rotund Kewpie in juxtaposition to the tall and slender Beedle might have brought a smile to the face of a wooden statue. But Kewpie seemed unaware of the amusement he was causing. He pitched his slow balls into Laurie's mitt gravely enough, finishing his delivery with his hand close to his left side, as though, as one facetious observer put it, a mosquito demanded attention.

Laurie laughed inwardly, but outwardly his expression and demeanor were as sober and as earnest as Kewpie's. Mr. Mulford's countenance showed him that that gentleman ap-

preciated the humor of the incident and that he was to be allowed to "get away with it." Beside him, Elk Thurston's face was angry and sneering.

"Some pitcher you 've got," he said, speaking from the corner of his mouth. "You and he make a swell battery, Turner." Then, as he sped the ball back to Nate, he called: "Guess it 's all up with you, Nate. See what the cat brought in!"

Nate smiled but made no answer.

Then Hillman's trotted out on the diamond, and the pitchers retired to the bench. Laurie chose a seat well removed from Mr. Mulford, and Kewpie sank down beside him. Kewpie was chuckling almost soundlessly. "Did you see Elk's face?" he murmured. "Gee!"

Laurie nodded. "He's awfully sore. He thought we 'd given up, you know, and when he caught sight of you coming out of the gym his eyes almost popped out of his head. There 's Ned over there in the stand, and George and the girls. Say, Kewpie, you 've just got to get into a game before the season 's over or I 'll be eternally disgraced!"

“I ’ll make it,” answered Kewpie comfortably. “You heard what he said.”

“Yes, but he did n’t make any promise. That ’s what ’s worrying me. Wonder how it would be to drop poison in Nate’s milk some day. Or invite him to ride in Mr. Wells’s roadster and run him into a telegraph-pole!” It was the sight of Mr. Wells coming around the corner of the stand that had put the latter plan into his head. “Got to manage it somehow,” he ended.

“That ’s all right,” said Kewpie. “Don’t you worry about it. He ’ll give me a chance soon. He did n’t say much yesterday, Nod, but I could see that he was impressed.”

“You could, eh?” Laurie viewed the other admiringly. “Say, you just hate yourself, don’t you?”

Craigskill Military College took a three-run lead in the first inning and maintained it throughout the remaining eight innings. The game was mainly a pitchers’ battle, with the enemy twirler having rather the better of the argument, and, from the point of view of the onlooker, was decidedly slow and uninteresting. Kewpie’s presence on the bench supplied a welcome diver-

sion at such times as Hillman's was at bat. Almost every one liked Kewpie, and his performance as center of the football team had commanded respect, but he came in for a whole lot of good-natured raillery that afternoon. So, too, did Laurie. And neither of them minded it. Elk glowered and slid in sarcastic comments when chance afforded, but they could afford to disregard him.

When the game was over the substitutes held practice, and the few spectators who remained were rewarded for their loyalty if only by the spectacle of Kewpie Proudtree sliding to first during base-running practice! Kewpie at bat was another interesting spectacle, for there was a very great deal he didn't know about batting despite having played scrub ball to some extent. But Kewpie believed firmly in Kewpie, laughed with the others at his own expense, and stored up knowledge. He was, however, heartily glad when the brief session came to an end, for some of the requirements had been extremely novel to him.

Saturday's game, played down the river at Melrose Ferry, resulted in a ten-inning victory

for Hillman's. To his surprise and chagrin, Kewpie was not taken with the team, but he went along nevertheless and viewed the contest with ironical gaze from a seat in the stand. It is probable that he felt no consuming grief when, in the fifth inning, Nate Beedle was forced to give way to Pemberton. It is equally likely that he would have managed to dissemble his sorrow had Pemberton been knocked out of the box and a despairing coach had called loudly for "Proud-tree! Find Proud-tree! We must have him! He alone can avert defeat!" Nothing of that sort happened, though. George Pemberton finished the game nicely, even bringing in one of Hillman's four runs with a safe hit to the left in the eighth. It remained to Captain Dave himself, however to secure the victory in the tenth inning with a home run. Returning to Orstead, Kewpie attached himself to Laurie and was very critical of the team's performance. Laurie, who had pinch-hit for Murdock in the eighth and had popped up a weak in-field fly, was gloomy enough to relish the conversation until Kewpie became too caustic. Then Laurie sat on him cruelly and informed him that instead of "panning" the

team he had better be thinking up some way of persuading Pinky to let him pitch a couple of innings in one or other of the two games that remained before the Farview contest. Thereupon Kewpie subsided and gazed glumly from the car window. His chance of pitching for the team that season did n't appear so bright to him to-day.

Sunday afternoon they took their accustomed walk, Polly, Mae, Ned, Laurie, and Bob, and as usual they stopped for a while at the *Pequot Queen*. The afternoon was fair and warm, and the *Pequot Queen*—or the *Lydia W. Frye*, if you prefer—made a very attractive picture. The new white paint and the golden yellow trim were still fresh, the gay red and white awning stretched above the upper deck, the flower-boxes were green and promising—there was even one pink geranium bloom in sight—and the beds that Brose Wilkins had made at each side of the gangway were filled with plants. Miss Comfort wore an almost frivolous dress of blue with white figures and her best cameo pin, the one nearly as large as a butter-chip, that showed a cheerful design of weeping willow-tree and a tombstone.

A yellow and white cat sat sunning itself on the railing and submitted indifferently to the caresses of the visitors. The cat was a gift from Brose, and Miss Comfort who had lived some sixty-odd years without such a thing, had not had sufficient courage to decline it. She had however, much to her surprise, grown very much attached to the animal as she frequently stated. She had named it Hector.

To-day Miss Comfort had news for them. The letter she had written to her brother-in-law in Sioux City had returned. She handed it around the circle. It had been opened, and its envelope bore an amazing number of inscriptions, many undecipherable, the gist of them being that Mr. A. G. Goupil had not been found. The missive had now been sent back by the Dead Letter Office in Washington. It was, Miss Comfort declared, very perplexing. Of course, she had always written to her sister at her home address but the firm name was just as she had told it.

“He might have moved away,” suggested Bob, “after your sister died.”

Miss Comfort agreed that that was possible, but Laurie said that in that case he would

certainly have left an address behind him, adding, "Well, if he did n't get that letter he probably did n't get our telegram, either!"

"Why, that 's so," said Polly. "But would n't they send that back, too, if it was n't delivered?"

"I reckon so. I 'll ask about it to-morrow at the office. Maybe you should have put the street and number on your letter, Miss Comfort."

"Why, I never knew it. That 's the address my sister sent me. I supposed it was all that was necessary."

"It ought to be enough," said Bob. "How big 's this Sioux City place, anyway? Seems to me they ought to have been able to find the Goupil Machinery Company, even if they did n't have the street address."

"Well," said Miss Comfort, "I 'm relieved to get it back. I thought it was strange that Mr. Goupil did n't take any notice of it. Now I know it was because he never received it. You see."

"Tell you what we might do," offered Laurie. "We might find out Mr. Goupil's address from the lawyers who wrote you about it and then you could write to him again, ma'am."

“Oh I shouldn’t care to do that,” replied Miss Comfort. “I ’m settled so nicely here now, you see, Laurie. In a great many ways it is better for me than my other home was. There were so many rooms there to keep clean, and then, in winter, there were the sidewalks to be looked after, and the pipes would freeze now and then. No, I think everything has turned out quite for the best, just as it generally does, my dears.”

“Just the same,” quoth Laurie as they returned up the hill past the telegraph office, “I ’m going in there to-morrow and find out what happened to that message we sent.”

“That ’s right,” assented Bob. “They ought to give us our money back, anyway!”

They learned the fate of the message without difficulty the following morning, although they had to make two calls at the office. On the second occasion the manager displayed a telegram from Sioux City. Laurie’s message had been delivered to A. T. Gompers, Globe Farm Machinery Company, Sioux City. The date and even the time of day were supplied. At first the manager appeared to consider Laurie and Ned over-

particular, but finally acknowledged that perhaps a mistake had been made. If, he said, the sender cared to put in a claim the company would take up the matter and make a thorough investigation, and if it found there really had been an error in delivery the price of the telegram would be refunded. But Laurie shook his head.

“We ’re a short-lived family,” he explained. “Few of us Turners live to be over eighty, and so I guess there would n’t be time. Thank you just as much.”

“What it amounts to,” said Ned, as they hurried back to a recitation, “is that Miss Comfort got the fellow’s name wrong somehow. Or maybe his initials. Or maybe the name of his company.”

“Or maybe there ain’t no such animal,” said Laurie. “I always did sort of doubt that any one could have a name like Goupil. It—it is n’t natural, Ned!”

“Oh, well, as Bob says, ‘All ’s swell that ends swell,’ and Miss Comfort’s satisfied with the way it ’s turned out, and so we might as well be.”

“Sure,” agreed Laurie. “We don’t own it.”

In front of the school entrance Mr. Wells’s

blue roadster was standing, a bit faded as to paint, a bit battered as to mud-guards, but having the self-assurance and poise of a car that has traveled far and seen life. Laurie, to whom automobiles were ever a passion, stopped and looked it over. "Nice old bus," he observed, laying a friendly hand on the nicked top of the brake-lever. "Let 's take a spin, Ned."

Ned laughed. "Think you could drive it?" he asked.

"Why not? I don't believe it 's locked. Kick on the switch, push down on the starter, put her into first—I wonder if the clutch works the same way as dad 's car. Yes, forward, back and across—All right, let 's go!"

Ned pulled him toward the gate. "You 'd better come along. First thing you know you 'll be yielding to temptation, old son."

"I sure would like to try the old boat out," acknowledged Laurie. "Some time he 's going to look for it and find it missing. He 's always leaving it around like that, putting temptation in my way!"

Examinations began two days later, and Laurie had other things to worry about than

blue roadsters or even Kewpie's non-participation in baseball games, for, just between you and me, Laurie and mathematics were not on very friendly terms, and there was at least one other course that caused him uneasiness. Yet, should I fail to mention it later, he did scrape past, as did Ned and, I think, all others in whom we are interested. But he was n't certain of his fate until a week later, which accounts in part for the somewhat perturbed and unsettled condition of mind that was his during the rest of the present week.

On Wednesday Hillman's scored another victory, and Laurie aided. Mr. Mulford put him to catch at the beginning of the sixth inning, and he performed very creditably during the remaining four. He made one "rotten error"—I am repeating his own words—when, in the eighth he pegged the ball a yard over Lew Cooper's yearning glove and so allowed a steal to second that, a few minutes later, became a tally. But otherwise he did very well behind the bat and made one hit in two times up. George Pember-ton pitched the game through, and Kewpie remained lugubriously on the bench. Afterward



“Nice old bus,” Laurie observed, “let’s take a spin, Ned”

he had quite a good deal to say about Mr. Mulford, none of which was very flattering. Hillman's had put the game on ice in the fifth inning, Kewpie averred feelingly, and it would n't have hurt Pinky or the team's chances to have let him pitch a couple of innings!

"And there 's only Saturday's game left," mourned Kewpie, "and that 's with Crumbie, and she 's better than we are and there is n't one chance in a hundred of my getting into it! Gee, I should think folks would n't make promises if they don't mean to keep 'em!"

Laurie, who was half of Kewpie's audience, Hal Pringle being the other half, reminded the speaker that Pinky had n't really promised, but his tone lacked conviction. He, too, thought that the coach might have used Kewpie that afternoon. Kewpie was still plaintive when Laurie remembered that the morrow held two examinations and hurried off for a brief period of study before supper.

I have already intimated that Laurie was not quite his usual care-free self that week, and the same is true to a greater or lesser degree of most of the other ninety-odd students. Finals are likely

to put a fellow under something of a strain, and, as a result, normal characteristics are likely to suffer a change. The sober-minded become subject to spells of unwonted hilarity, the normally irrepressible are plunged in deepest gloom, and the good-natured develop unsuspected tempers. All this is offered as plausible partial excuse for what happened on Friday.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FORM AT THE WINDOW

NED had been through a hard session that had not ended for him until after four o'clock, and he was very far from certain that his answers to Questions V and VIII were going to please Mr. Pennington. A game of golf with Dan Whipple arranged for four o'clock had not materialized, and Ned had returned to No 16 to spend the remainder of the afternoon worrying about the Latin examination. About 5:30 Laurie came in. Laurie had a bright-red flush under his left eye and looked extremely angry.

"What did you do to your face?" asked Ned.

Laurie viewed himself in the mirror above his chiffonier before replying. Then, "I did n't do anything to it," he answered a bit sulkily. "That 's what Elk Thurston did."

"For the love of mud!" exclaimed Ned. "Don't tell me you 've gone and had a fight!"

“I ’m not going to,” responded Laurie briefly, sinking into a chair.

“Well, then what—”

“Shut up and I ’ll tell you,” said Laurie crossly. “We were playing the scrubs, and Simpson had an exam and was n’t there, and Pinky put me to catching for them. Elk came sprinting in from third on a little in-field hit, and I got the ball and blocked him easy. He was out a yard from the plate, and that made him mad; that and the fact that he ’d made an ass of himself by trying to score, with only one out, on a hit to short-stop. So he jumped up and made a great howl about my having spiked him. Of course I had n’t. All I had done was block him off when he tried to slide. Cooper told him to shut up, and he went off growling.”

“Well, how did you get—”

“I ’m telling you, if you ’ll let me! After practice I was walking back with Kewpie and Pat Browne, and just before we got to the fence across the road down there Elk came up and grabbed me by the arm and pulled me around. That made me mad, anyhow, and then he began calling me names and saying what he ’d do if I

was n't too little, and I swung for him. Missed him, dog-gone it! Then he handed me this and I got him on the neck and the others butted in. That's all there was to it. How's the silly thing look?"

"It looks punk," answered Ned unsympathetically. "Better go down and bathe it in hot water and then put some talcum on it. Gosh, son, I should think you'd have more sense than to get in a brawl with Elk Thurston. That rough-neck stuff does n't get you anywhere and—"

"For the love of limes, shut up!" exclaimed Laurie. "I did n't start it!"

"You did n't? Did n't you just say that you hit him first—or tried to?"

"What of it? Would n't you have struck him if he'd called you all sorts of names, like that? I'll say you would! You're always strong on the 'calm yourself' stuff, but I notice that when any one gets fresh with you—"

"I don't pick quarrels and slug fellows right under the eyes of faculty, you idiot! For that matter—"

"Oh, forget it!" growled Laurie. "What dif-

ference does it make *where* you do it? You give me a pain!”

“You give me worse than that,” replied Ned angrily. “You look like—like a prize-fighter with that lump on your cheek. It ’s a blamed shame he did n’t finish the job, I say!”

“Is that so? Maybe you ’d like to finish it for him, eh? If you think you would, just say so!”

Ned shrugged contemptuously. “Guess you ’ve had enough for one day,” he sneered. “Take my advice and—”

“Your advice!” cried Laurie shrilly. “Your advice! Yes, I ’m likely to, you poor shrimp!” He jumped to his feet and glared at Ned invitingly. “You make me sick, Ned, you and your advice. Get it? You have n’t got enough spunk to resent a whack on the nose!”

“Oh, don’t shout like a cheap skate,” answered Ned disgustedly. “Go and fix yourself up, if you can, so I won’t be ashamed to go to supper with you!”

Laurie glared, swallowed hard, and finally nodded. “Listen,” he said slowly. “You don’t have to be seen with me if it offends your

delicate sensibilities. Get it? And, what's more, I don't want to be seen with you. I'm particular, too, you big bluff. When you want to go to supper, you go!"

Laurie grabbed wash-cloth and towel, strode across the room, and slammed the door resoundingly behind him. Left alone, Ned shrugged angrily. "Ugly-tempered brute," he muttered.

When supper-time came he descended alone to the dining-hall. Laurie had not returned to the room. Laurie arrived a few minutes late, with Kewpie, and took the seat at Ned's left in silence. He had put talc powder over the abrasion on his cheek-bone, and at a little distance it would not have been noticed. Nearer, however, the lump was plainly visible and seemed to be still swelling. Ned caught a glimpse of it from the corner of his eye, but his irritation still continued, and he offered no comment.

After supper both boys returned to No. 16, although not together, and for two hours occupied opposite sides of the table, and crammed for their last examination, which was due at ten to-morrow. Neither spoke once during the evening. At nine Laurie closed his books and went out. Half an

hour later Ned undressed and went to bed. Sleep did n't come readily, for there was to-day's examination to worry about, and to-morrow's, too, for he had n't made much of that two hours of preparation, he feared; and then there was this silly quarrel with Laurie. He guessed he had been as much to blame as his brother, but there was no sense in any one's getting mad the way Laurie had. When Laurie was ready to make friends, why, he 'd be ready, too, but that silly goop need n't expect him to lick his shoes! No, sir, if Laurie wanted to make up he could jolly well say so!

Sleep did come at last, and when he awoke it seemed hours later. The room was in black darkness, but the squares of the wide open windows were slightly grayer. What had awakened him he at first did n't know. Then his gaze caught a darker something against the gray-black of the nearer casement opening, something that scuffled on the stone ledge and grew larger as he wondered and watched. He opened his mouth to speak, and then remembered that he and Laurie were at outs. The form disappeared

from sight, and footsteps went softly across the boards, were muffled on the rug, and sounded again by the door. The door was opened, and for a moment Ned mentally pictured the boy peering anxiously out into the dim hall. Then the door closed again, and after a short silence Laurie's bed creaked. To prove to the other that his return had not been made unknown, Ned sat up in the blackness and thumped his pillow, striving to express disapprobation in the thumps. Across the room the faint stirrings ceased, and silence reigned again.

Ned smiled grimly. Laurie had probably thought that by being so quiet he could get in without his brother's knowing it, but he had shown him! Then Ned's satisfaction faded. What the dickens had Laurie been doing out at this time of night? It must be twelve, or even later! If he had been up to mischief—but of course he had; a fellow didn't climb into his room by the window unless he had something to hide. Even being out after ten o'clock was a punishable offense! Ned began to worry. Suppose some one had seen Laurie. Why had Laurie

gone to the door and listened unless he had suspected some one of having seen him? The idiot! The chump! The—

Over his head he heard a board creak. He listened. The sound reached him again. In Elk Thurston's room some one was up, too. Or had he imagined it? All was quiet now. Was it possible that Laurie and Elk had been settling their score? Surely not at this time of night. And yet— From across the room came the unmistakable sounds of deep and regular breathing. Laurie was asleep beyond a doubt! Ned frowned disgustedly. Here he was worrying himself about a silly coot that was fast asleep! He poked his head resolutely into his pillow. All right! He guessed he could do that, too! And presently he did.

In the morning Ned waited for Laurie to break the ice, but Laurie did n't. Laurie went about his task of dressing in silence. There was a sort of stern look in his face in place of the sullen expression of last evening, and more than once Ned caught him looking across in an oddly speculative way. The last time Ned caught him at it he began to feel uneasy, and he wanted very much to

ask what Laurie meant by it. It was almost as if Laurie had caught *him* at something, instead of its being just the other way about! But he was too stubborn to speak first, and they went out of the room with the silence still unbroken.

At breakfast, Mr. Brock, at whose table they sat, made the disquieting announcement that Edward and Laurence Turner were wanted at the Doctor's study at 8:30. Involuntarily the gaze of the two boys met swiftly. Each thought at once of examinations, although further consideration told them that it was still too soon for any shortcomings of theirs to reach the principal.

Although they had entered the dining-hall separately, now a common uneasiness took them together to the Doctor's, albeit in silence. They were asked to be seated, which they accepted as a favorable sign, but there was, nevertheless, something unsympathetic in Dr. Hillman's countenance. The latter swung himself around in his chair and faced them, his head thrust forward a little because of a near-sightedness not wholly corrected by his spectacles. And then Laurie observed that the Doctor was gazing intently at a

point just under his left eye, and told himself that the summons was explained. He was, though, still wondering why Ned had been included in the party when the Doctor spoke.

“Laurence,” he asked, “how did you come by that contusion?”

Laurie hesitated, then answered, “I was having a—a little bout with one of the fellows and he struck me, sir.”

“Who was the boy?”

“Thurston, sir.”

“Have you witnesses to prove that?”

“Yes, sir, several fellows were there. Pat—I mean Patton Browne, and Proudtree and—”

“When did it take place, this—ah—bout?”

“Yesterday afternoon, about half-past five.”

The Doctor mused a minute. Then, “Which of you boys entered your room by the window last night at about a quarter before twelve o’clock?” he asked. The question was so unexpected that Laurie’s mouth fell open widely. Then, as neither boy answered, the Doctor continued: “Was it you, Laurence?”

“N-no, sir!” blurted Laurie.

Then, ere the words were well out, he wished

them back, and in a sudden panic he added, "I mean—"

But the Doctor had turned to Ned. "Was it you, Edward?" he asked.

Ned's gaze dropped from the Doctor's, and for an instant he made no reply. Then he raised his eyes again, and, "I 'd rather not say, sir," he announced respectfully but firmly.

There followed another brief silence. Laurie was trying hard not to look at Ned. The Doctor was thoughtfully rolling a pencil across the big blotter under the palm of one hand. Ned watched him and waited. Then the Doctor looked up again.

"You are, of course," he said not unkindly, "privileged to refuse to answer, Edward, but when you do there is but one construction to be placed on your refusal. I presume that you did climb into your room by a window last night. I confess that I don't understand it, for this is the first time since you came to us that your conduct has been questioned. If you are shielding another—" his glance swept to Laurie and away again—"you are doing wrong. Punishment that falls on an innocent party fails of its purpose.

I am, therefore, going to ask you to reconsider, Edward. It will be better for every one if you answer 'yes' or 'no' to my question."

Ned returned the principal's gaze straightly. "I 'd rather not, sir," he replied.

"Very well, but I warn you that your offense is a very serious one and that it calls for a drastic penalty. Were you alone in the—ah—escapade?"

Ned looked puzzled. "Sir?" he asked.

"I asked you—But you need not answer that. I'll put it another way. There were two of you in the car according to an eye-witness. Who was the other boy?"

"Car?" faltered Ned. "What car, sir?"

The Doctor frowned disapprovingly. "It is so futile, my boy," he said, "to act this way." He turned to Laurie. "What do you know about this, Laurence? You have said that you did not enter your room last night by the window. At what time did you return to your room? Where were you, for instance, at, say, a quarter to twelve?"

"I was in bed, sir."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"About ten minutes past ten."

“Where was Edward then?”

“In bed, sir, and asleep.”

“What? You are telling me the truth? Did you see him there?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Doctor frowned perplexedly. “Then you know nothing of any one’s having entered your room by a window close to midnight?”

Laurie hesitated now. Then, “I went to sleep about ten minutes after I got in bed, sir, and so I would n’t be likely—”

“Please answer my question,” interrupted the Doctor coldly.

“I ’d rather not, sir,” said Laurie.

“One more question, then,” announced the inquisitor grimly. “Were you in Mr. Well’s automobile last evening when it collided with a hydrant on Washington Street at approximately half-past eleven?”

“Why, no, sir! I did n’t know it had—had collided!”

Ned was looking rather white.

“You know nothing about the incident?”

“No, sir!”

“And you, Edward?”

“No, sir.”

“But, if you deny the automobile part of it, why not deny the rest? I see, though. You knew that Mr. Cornish had seen you climbing in at the window. I’m afraid you won’t get anywhere that way, Edward. Mr. Well’s car was taken from the front of the school last evening and driven out Washington Street six blocks, where it was in collision with a hydrant. It was abandoned there. A reliable witness states positively that there were two persons in the car just before the accident. About ten or twelve minutes later Mr. Cornish saw some one climb up the Washington Street side of East Hall and disappear through your window. Those are the facts, Edward. The evidence against you is so far circumstantial, but you must acknowledge that the incident of the car and that of your—of some one’s entrance into your room by the window look to be more than a mere coincidence. In other words, whoever entered your room at midnight was in the stolen car a quarter of an hour before. That’s a fair and very natural assumption. If I were you, I’d think the matter over carefully and see me again before eight

o'clock this evening, at which time it will come before the faculty conference. And now, Laurence, let me have those names once more." He drew a scratch-pad to him and poised a pencil. "You say Elkins Thurston struck you and that Proudree, Browne, and—who else was there?"

"Lew Cooper and Gordon Simkins were there when—right afterward, sir, and I guess they saw it."

"Thank you. That is all, then. I shall have to ask both of you to remain in bounds until this matter is—ah—settled. Good morning."

"But—but, Doctor, I 'm—I 'm on the baseball team, sir!" exclaimed Laurie in almost horrified accents. "We play this afternoon!"

"I 'm sorry, Laurence," was the reply, "but until you are more frank in your answers I shall have to consider you under suspicion, also."

"Well," said Laurie bitterly, when they were outside, "you certainly have made a mess of things!"

"I!" exclaimed Ned incredulously, "*I 've* made a mess of things? What about you?"

"Me? What could I say?" countered Laurie hotly. "I did all I could!"

“All right,” said Ned wearily. “Let’s drop it. He won’t be able to pin anything on you. You’ll get out of it all right.”

There was a trace of bitterness in Ned’s voice, and Laurie scowled. “Well, he asked me so suddenly,” he muttered apologetically, “I—I just said what came into my head. I’m sorry. I’d have refused to answer if he had n’t sprung it so quick.”

“It would have been rather more—rather less contemptible,” answered Ned coldly.

Laurie flushed. “Thanks! I guess that’ll be about all from you, Ned. When I want any more of your brotherly remarks I’ll let you know!” He swung aside and left Ned to go on alone to No. 16.

The story of the purloining of the physical director’s blue roadster was all over school by that time. Ned got the full details from Kewpie. Mr. Wells had left the car in front of School Hall, as he very often did, and was playing a game of chess with Mr. Pennington. Shortly after half-past eleven he had looked for the car, had failed to find it, and had hurried to the corner. There he had met a man coming down Walnut

Street who, when questioned, said that he had seen such a car as Mr. Wells's about five blocks east, where Washington and Walnut Streets come together, not longer ago than five minutes. There were two persons in it, and the car was not being driven more than, possibly, twenty miles an hour. Mr. Wells had gone out Walnut Street and found the car with one front wheel on the sidewalk, the mud-guard on that side torn off, and the radiator stove in. There was no one about. The car was n't very badly damaged, it was said, but Mr. Wells was awfully mad about it. It was down in Plummer's Garage, and Ned could see it if he wanted to. Kewpie had seen it. It looked fierce, but maybe it would n't cost more than a hundred dollars to fix it up again!

“Know who did it?” asked Ned.

“Me? I'll say I don't!” Kewpie laughed relievedly. “I guess it was professional automobile thieves, all right, though. They were probably heading for Windsor. That's a dark corner up there, and I guess they lost the road and turned too quick. They must have lost their nerve, for Mr. Wells drove the car down to the garage and it went all right, they say. Guess

they thought it was done for and did n't try to see if it would still go. Sort of a joke on them, was n't it?"

"I suppose," said Ned carelessly, "none of our fellows are suspected?"

"Of course not. Why, it happened after half-past eleven! Say, you have n't—have n't heard anything?" Kewpie's eyes grew round with excitement. "Say, Ned, what is it?" But Ned shook his head wearily.

"I know no more of the business than you do, Kewpie. Now beat it, will you? I've got an exam at ten."

CHAPTER XXIII

SUSPENDED

NED did n't get much studying done, though. Instead, he spent most of the half-hour remaining before the examination in trying to solve the mystery of the stolen car and Laurie's part in the affair. It was n't like Laurie to indulge in a prank so mischievous, and he could scarcely believe that Laurie had taken part in the escapade. Still, he had the evidence of his own senses. He had seen Laurie enter by the window; and, too, he recalled the latter's stated desire to drive Mr. Well's car. At home in California Laurie was forever begging the wheel away from his father and was never happier than when steering the big car along the smooth roads about Santa Lucia. But, if Laurie had taken Mr. Well's roadster, who had been with him? He wished that Laurie had n't told a lie to the Doctor. That, too, was something very unlike Laurie. Of course, as he had said afterward, the question

had been sudden and unexpected, and he had said the first thing that came into his mind, but that did n't excuse the lie.

Ned's refusal to answer had been made in the effort to shift suspicion from Laurie to himself, but he wondered now if it would not have been as well to tell the truth. His self-sacrifice had n't helped his brother much, after all, for Laurie was still suspected of complicity. The affair would probably end in the suspension of them both, perhaps in their expulsion. It was all a sorry mess, and Ned had n't discovered any solution of it when ten o'clock came.

Rather to his surprise, he got through the examination, which lasted until past twelve, very well. Then came dinner, at which neither he nor Laurie displayed much of the exuberant spirit that possessed their table companions. After the meal Ned went over to the library for an hour. When he returned to No. 16 he found Laurie standing at the window that looked southward toward the distant ball-field, dejection in the droop of his shoulders. Ned felt very sorry for the other just then, and he tried to find some-

thing to say but could n't, though he cleared his throat twice and got as far as "Hm!" You could n't see much of the baseball game from that window. The diamond was at the far end of the field, and a corner of the football stand hid most of it. Laurie found a book and read, and Ned began a letter to his father. Somehow the afternoon wore away.

Kewpie burst in at a little before five, at once triumphant and downcast. Hillman's had won, 11 to 8, but Kewpie Proudtree had not been allowed to pitch for even a part of an inning, and so his last chance was gone, and if Pinky called that doing the square thing— But Laurie broke in just then. "Can it," he said gruffly. "You saw the game, anyhow, and that 's more than I did!"

"That 's right," said Kewpie, apologetically. "It 's a rotten shame, Nod. What 's Johnny got on you, anyhow? You can tell me. I won't say a word."

"He has n't got anything on me," growled Laurie. "He just thinks he has. Who pitched?"

"George started, but they got to him in the

fourth—no, fifth, and Nate finished out. Gee, they were three runs ahead of us in the seventh!”

“Did Elk get in?”

“No, he ’s got a sprained wrist or something. Pinky had Simpson, of the scrubs, catch the last of the ninth. He dropped everything that reached his hands, though.”

“Elk ’s got a sprained wrist, you say? How ’d he do it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it is n’t a wrist. He ’s got something wrong, though, for I heard Dave Brewster talking about it.” After a minute Kewpie returned to his grievance, and, since Laurie appeared busy with his own thoughts, he was allowed to unburden himself to his heart’s content. Ned condoled with him somewhat abstractedly. When he had taken himself out Laurie broke the silence.

“With Elk out of the game,” he said bitterly, “I ’d have had my chance to-day, and then this had to happen!”

Ned might have reminded Laurie that he had only himself to blame, but he did n’t. He only said, “I ’m sorry, old son.” There was sincerity

in his tone, and Laurie heard it. He made no answer, however. But later, at supper, their feud was dead, and after supper, in the room, they talked enough to make up for twenty-four hours of silence. One subject, though, was not mentioned.

Sunday morning the blow fell. There was another visit to Dr. Hillman's study. Both boys were again questioned, but their answers did not vary from those they had given on Saturday. The Doctor showed genuine regret when he made known the decision of the faculty. Laurie had been exonerated from lack of evidence against him, although it was apparent that the Doctor considered him as deserving of punishment as Ned. Ned was suspended. That meant that he would not be passed in his examinations and would have to return next year as a lower-middler again. He might, as the Doctor reminded him, study during the summer and so make the upper-middle class during the fall term, however. As the present term was so nearly at an end, the Doctor continued, Ned would be permitted to remain at school until Laurie was ready to accompany him home. The Doctor ended the in-

terview with the suggestion that it would be a manly act on the part of the twins to reimburse Mr. Wells for the damage done to his car. Ned opened his mouth as though to say something then, but he changed his mind and closed it again very tightly. A minute later they were outside.

“Gosh, Ned, I ’m sorry!” said Laurie miserably.

Ned nodded. “Thanks. It ’s all right. One of us had to get it.”

“One of us?” repeated Laurie a bit blankly. “Why, yes, I suppose so, but—”

“Well, you ’ve got your baseball to look after, and I have n’t anything. So it ’s better they picked on me, is n’t it?”

“We—ell,” began Laurie. Then he stopped and shook his head in a puzzled way. Finally, “You ’ll stick around until Thursday, won’t you?” he asked anxiously.

The other nodded. “Might as well,” he said. “I could get out now and wait for you in New York, but I don’t see any reason why I should spend all that money just to act haughty.”

The blow having fallen, Ned, who had already

discounted it, cheered up quite remarkably. After all, he told himself, he had saved Laurie, and last autumn Laurie had saved him from something very close to disgrace, and so this sacrifice only somewhat evened accounts. He allowed himself to be persuaded to accompany the others on the Sunday afternoon walk, only pledging Laurie to say nothing of his suspension. It was not until Monday noon that the news leaked out, and not until hours after that that the school began to connect the incident of the wrecked automobile with Ned's fate. Even then most of those who knew Ned intimately refused to believe that there could be any connection between the two things. Questioned, Ned was very uncommunicative, and by Tuesday even his closest friends began to waver in their faith.

Laurie went back to the baseball fold on Monday. Kewpie's report about Elk was true. Elk was nursing a lame wrist. He had, it seemed, hurt it in wrestling with his room-mate. It had kept him out of the game Saturday, and it prevented his doing any catching on Monday; but on Tuesday the injured wrist appeared as good as ever, and Laurie, who had been temporarily

elevated to the position of first substitute catcher, again dropped into third place. The Farview game was due on Wednesday, which was likewise Class day and the final day of the school term. On Monday Coach Mulford was very easy with the first-string players but gave the substitutes a hard afternoon's work. Laurie caught four of the five innings that the substitutes played against the scrub team. In the final inning he gave place to Simkins and took that youth's berth at first base. Tuesday saw the whole squad hard at work in the final preparation for the enemy, and no player, from Captain Dave Brewster down to the least of the substitutes, had a minute's respite. "You fellows can rest all you want to after to-morrow," said the coach. "You can spend all summer resting if you like. To-day you 're going to work and work hard." Even Kewpie, who knew that Fate held nothing for him, was subjected to almost cruel exertion. He pitched to Laurie until his arm almost rebelled, and he was made to "dummy pitch" from the mound and then field the balls that Pinky batted at him and to all sides of him. And he ran bases, too, and Kewpie considered that the

final indignity and privately thought that the least Pinky could do was to leave him in peace to his sorrow. But before Tuesday's practice began other things of more importance to our story happened. While dressing Tuesday morning Laurie let fall a remark that led to the clearing away of mistakes and misconceptions.

"You must have gone to bed with your clothes on the other night," he observed. "If you didn't, you sure made a record!"

Ned stared. "What other night?" he asked.

Laurie floundered. Neither of them had referred to the matter since Sunday. "Why—well, you know. The night you got in the window," Laurie explained apologetically.

"The night *I* got in the window! Are you crazy?"

"Oh, well," muttered Laurie, "all right. I didn't mean to make you huffy."

He went on with his dressing, but Ned still stared at him. After a minute Ned asked: "Look here, old son, what made you say that? About me getting in the window, I mean."

"Why, nothing." Laurie wanted peace in the family. "Nothing at all."

“You had some reason,” Ned persisted, “so out with it.”

“Well, you were so blamed quick, Ned. You went to the door and then I heard you get into bed about thirty seconds afterward. It don’t seem to me that you had time to undress.”

“Let ’s get this right,” said Ned with what was evidently forced calm. “Sit down there a minute, Laurie. Why do you say it was I who came through the window?”

It was Laurie’s turn to stare. “Why, why because I saw you! I waked up just as your head came over the sill, you chump!”

“You saw *my* head come— Look here, are you in earnest or just trying to be funny?”

“Seems to me it’s you who are acting the silly ass,” answered Laurie aggrievedly. “What ’s the big idea, anyway?”

“But—but, great Scott, Laurie,” exclaimed Ned excitedly. “I saw *you* come in the window!”

“Cut the comedy,” grinned Laurie. “I was n’t out, and you know it.”

“Well, was I, you poor fish? Was n’t I in

bed and asleep when you came in, as you told Johnny you did?"

"Sure, but— Say, do you mean to tell me I did n't see—"

"Of course you did n't! But—"

"Then who *did* I see?" asked Laurie a trifle wildly.

"Who did *I* see?" countered Ned. "You say it was n't you—"

"Me! Hang it, I went to bed at ten and was n't awake again until I heard a noise and saw you—well some one coming in that window! Look here, if it was n't you, why did n't you tell Johnny so?"

"Because I thought it was *you*, you poor prune!"

"What! But I 'd said—"

"Sure you had, but I 'd seen you with my own eyes, had n't I?"

Laurie shook his head weakly. "This is too much for me," he sighed. "It was n't you and it was n't me but it was one of us! I pass!"

"But it was n't one of us," exclaimed Ned. "That 's what I 'm getting at. Don 't you see what happened?" Laurie shook his head.

“Listen, then. We were both asleep, and we each heard the noise and woke up. Some one came through the window, crossed the room, opened the door, looked out to see that the coast was clear, went out, and closed the door after him.”

“But I heard you get into bed!”

“No, you did n’t. You heard me sit up and punch my pillow. I wanted you to know that you were n’t getting away with it. For that matter, I heard your ‘bed creak and thought you were getting into it.”

“I sat up, too,” said Laurie. “Gee, that ’s a queer one! All this time I thought it was you and could have kicked myself around the block for yelling ‘No!’ when Johnny asked me that question! Then—then who the dickens *was* it, Ned?”

“That,” answered Ned grimly, “is what we ’ve got to find out. Just now it ’s up to us to get out of here before we miss our breakfasts!”

“Hang breakfast!” shouted Laurie. “This is better than a hundred breakfasts! Why—why, it means that you—that you are n’t suspended! It means—”

“Put your collar on, and make it snappy,” laughed Ned. “We’ve got some work ahead of us this morning!”

After breakfast they hurried back to No. 16, barred the door against intruders, especially Kewpie, sat down at opposite sides of the study table, and faced the problem. They continued to face it until nearly eleven. They examined the window-sill for clues, and found none. They leaned out and studied the ivy by means of which the mysterious visitor had reached the second story, and it told them nothing, or so it seemed at the moment. As they turned back to the room Ned said idly: “It’s lucky the fellow didn’t have to get to the third floor, for I don’t believe he could have made it. That ivy sort of peters out above our window.”

Laurie nodded uninterestedly and silence ensued, just as silence had ensued so frequently before in the course of morning. Then, several minutes later, Ned said suddenly, questioningly:

“Thurston!”

Laurie shook his head. “Not likely. Besides, what reason—”

“Wait a minute. I didn’t tell you. It didn’t

seem important. After I 'd settled down again that night I heard the floor up-stairs creak twice. I was n't just certain then, but now I am! Elk Thurston was moving about up there, Laurie!"

"Well, what if he was? That does n't prove—" He stopped and frowned intently. "Hold on, though, Ned! What about Elk's wrist?"

"We 've got it!" cried Ned.

"Yes, maybe. Let 's go slow, though. You don't happen to know whether Elk can drive a car, do you?"

"No, but I 'll bet you anything you like that he tried to drive that one! Look here, our window was open and it was easy to reach. He could n't have made his own without chancing a fall. He trusted to our being asleep. He—"

"What about the other fellow, though?" asked Laurie. "We did n't see—"

"No, but maybe he got in first. Maybe it was really he who awoke us. Come to think of it, you said that when you woke up the fellow's head was just coming into sight. Well, in that case there would n't have been enough noise—"

"By jiminy, that 's so! Bet you that 's what

happened. But who— Say, maybe the other fellow was Jim Hallock!”

“Just what I was thinking,” agreed Ned. “I don’t see, though, how we can prove anything against either of them. Look here, son, I guess the best thing we can do is see Johnny and tell him all about it. After that it will be up to the faculty. Come on!”

They had to wait some time for an audience, but finally they were facing the Doctor, and Ned, as spokesman, was saying very earnestly: “Neither Laurie nor I was out of our room after ten o’clock Friday night, sir. Somebody did come in our window, though, and woke us up. I thought it was Laurie and he thought it was me, and that’s why I didn’t want to answer your question, sir.”

Now, nothing could have been clearer and simpler than that and yet, when Ned had finished, the principal blinked behind his spectacles, gazed a moment in silence, and then waved a hand.

“Sit down, boys,” he said. “Now, Edward I think you’d better say that all over again.”

CHAPTER XXIV

MR. GOUPIL CALLS

AFTER practice that afternoon Laurie returned to the room to find Ned engaged in sorting things out preparatory to packing up. When Laurie entered, however, the other paused in his effort to stuff more rubbish into an already overloaded waste-basket and announced in triumph, "We had it right, partner!"

"Elk Thurston?"

"Elk and Jim Hallock. Elk's just left here."

"Left here? You mean he was in to see you?"

Ned nodded. "Yes. It was rather decent of him, I think. Take that idiotic expression from your face and sit down. This is how Elk tells it. He and Jim were looking out of their window that night and saw the lights of Mr. Wells's car on the other side of the hedge. One of them said something about Mr. Wells always leaving his car around and what a joke it would be if it was n't there when he came back for it. Well,

that idea sort of stuck, and after a while Elk suggested that they sneak down and run the car off around the corner. Elk says that Jim usually wouldn't have gone in for anything like that on a bet, but there 'd been some tough exams that day, and Jim was sort of keyed up. Anyhow, they sneaked down-stairs after a while and got out by one of the windows in the recreation-room. They didn't dare try the front way, for Cornish had his study door open. They put the brakes off and tried to push the car toward Washington Street, but it was heavy, and after they 'd got it a little ways they decided to start it and run it around the corner. So they did, pretty sure that it was too far off for Mr. Wells to hear. Elk took the wheel and they went to Washington Street. Then, he says, the thing was working so pretty they thought they 'd go on further. When they got to where Washington joins Walnut it was pretty dark, and he swung to the right too soon.

“That 's when they hit the hydrant. Of course, they were scared pink, and Elk shut the motor off and they beat it as fast as they could. When they got back here they found that

some one had been prowling around and had locked the window. Then they saw our windows open and decided to climb up by the ivy. Elk says they hoped we 'd be asleep. If we waked up they meant to tell us and ask us to keep mum. Jim climbed up first and made it all right, but Elk had hurt his wrist when the car struck the hydrant, and he had a hard time of it. They didn't either of them know that Cornish had seen them. For that matter, he only saw one, I guess, and that one was probably Elk, for he says it took him two or three minutes to get to the window because his wrist hurt him so. Seems that Jim left the hall door open after him, but the draft closed it, and that 's what woke us up, I guess. Well, what Elk came for was to say that neither of them knew they 'd been seen and that they had n't meant to throw suspicion on us. He says if they 'd known that Cornish was prowling around they would n't have entered our window. He was very particular about making that clear. Guess he thought you might think he had done it on purpose to get even with you. And that 's that, old son."

Laurie nodded thoughtfully. "Kind of too

bad," he mused. "I suppose they did n't intend anything but a sort of joke on Mr. Wells. Did he tell you what they were going to get?"

"Get? Oh, they 're suspended, he says. He seemed to feel worse about Jim than about himself. Do you know, old son, after all Elk is n't such a bad sort. At least, that 's the way it strikes me after hearing his spiel. He says he 's not coming back next year. He 's going to tutor this summer and try and make college in the fall."

"Yeah," said Laurie abstractedly. "Well, I 'm sort of sorry for him. And of course he did n't mean to get us in wrong." He lapsed into silence. Then, abruptly, "Cas Bennett split his finger with a foul tip about half an hour ago," he announced.

"He did?" exclaimed Ned. "Gosh, that 's tough luck! Will it keep him out of the game?"

"Yes," replied Laurie.

"That is tough! Say, what are you looking so queer about?"

"Just thinking," answered Laurie. "You try it."

"Huh?"

“Use the old bean, son. Cas has split his finger, Elk ’s suspended—”

“Great jumpin’ Jehoshaphat! Why, then, you—you—”

“Correct,” said Laurie. “I ’ll have to catch to-morrow, and—and at the present moment, Ned, I ’m scared to death!”

That had been a day of events, and it was not yet over. Attic Society was giving its usual end-of-the-term blow-out that evening, and both Ned and Laurie were invited. The affair began at eight, and at half-past seven they were in No. 16 putting the finishing touches to their toilets. Although it was a stag-party it called for best clothes and polished shoes and carefully brushed hair, and Laurie was trying hard to subdue a rebellious lock on the crown of his head when there came a knock on the door. Both boys shouted “Come in!” simultaneously. Then the door was opened, revealing Mr. Cornish, the hall master, and a stranger. The boys grabbed for their coats, Laurie dropping a military brush to the floor with a disconcerting noise. Mr. Cor-

nish ushered the stranger in but himself came no further than the door-sill.

“Here is a gentleman to see you, Laurence,” said the instructor. “I was quite certain you were in, and so I brought him up.”

Mr. Cornish smiled, nodded to the guest, who bowed impressively, and departed, closing the door behind him.

“Very glad indeed—” began Laurie.

“Have a seat, won’t—” supplemented Ned.

“Thank you.” The stranger again bowed and seated himself, placing a cane across his immaculately clad legs and balancing a somewhat square derby hat perilously atop. “I begin by offering you my apologies for this intrusion,” he continued.

“Not necessary,” mumbled Laurie, his gaze busy with the guest. The latter appeared to be about fifty, was under rather than over average height, and was very broad and thick and, like his derby, rather square of contour. He even had a distinctly square face which began very high up, because of the disappearance of what hair may have adorned the front of his head at

one time, and ended in an auxiliary chin. He wore a very black mustache whose ends were waxed to sharp points. His eyes were quite as black and almost as sharp as his mustache. He looked foreign, and, indeed spoke with more than a trace of accent, but he was evidently a gentleman, and he impressed the boys very favorably.

“With your permission,” he continued, “I will introduce myself.” He regarded Laurie. “I have the honor of addressing Mr. Laurie Turner?” Laurie nodded. The guest carefully secured hat and stick, arose, and bowed deeply. “I,” he announced then, “am Mr. Goupil.”

For an instant silence ensued. Then, “Mister—I beg your pardon,” said Laurie, “but did you say *Goupil*?”

“Goupil,” confirmed the gentleman, bowing again and smiling very nicely.

“You mean,” stammered Laurie, “*the* Mr. Goupil? Of Sioux City? Miss Comfort’s Mr. Goupil?”

“Surely.”

“Why—why, then,” exclaimed Laurie, “I’m mighty glad to meet you, sir.” He stepped forward with outstretched hand, and Mr. Goupil en-

folded it in a far more capacious one. "And this is my brother Ned." Mr. Goupil then shook hands with the amazed Ned. After that they all sat down. Mr. Goupil arranged stick and hat with precision, cleared his throat, and began:

"My dear sister-in-law has told me of your most kind efforts in her behalf, and I have presented myself to make explanation and to add my expressions of gratitude." Mr. Goupil spoke rather deliberately and seemed to choose his words with care. "That your telegram received no response is a matter of extreme regret. Yet, when I inform you that it never reached me, you will, of a certainty, exonerate me from discourtesy, Mr. Laurie."

"Why, surely," agreed Laurie eagerly. "We had already found out that the telegram was delivered to the wrong person, sir."

"Ah! Is it so? But doubtless!" Mr. Goupil paused and nodded several times. "Allow me, please, the explanation of certain ever-to-be-regretted circumstances. You must know, then, that after the death of my excellent and never-to-be-forgotten wife I was plunged in sorrow. You,

sir, have never lost a beloved wife—but, no, no, of a certainty you have not!” Mr Goupil laughed at himself heartily before he went on. “Very well. To pursue. In my sorrow I returned to the country of my birth for a visit, to France, to Moissac, where live many of my relations. But, sir, one does not elude Sorrow by crossing the ocean! No, no, it is here!” Mr. Goupil struck himself twice on the chest. “Soon I return, sir, yet in the brief period of my absence the harm has been done!” He paused with dramatic effect.

“Indeed,” said Ned sympathetically, yet puzzled.

“Yes, sir, for although I am absent but five months, yet when I return a so horrible deed has been perpetrated in my name.”

“Indeed.” It was Laurie’s turn this time. Mr. Goupil’s large countenance depicted the utmost dejection, but only for a moment.

“In my absence,” he went on, brightening, “my lawyer, in whose hands all my affairs of person were left, learned of the terms of the will of my late wife’s mother. The will says that at the death of my late wife the property in this so

quaint town occupied by my dear sister-in-law shall revert. Thereupon, stupid that he was, my lawyer proceeds to write to my sister-in-law to that effect. The rest, sir, you know. Yet this lamentable news reached me but three days ago! 'What,' asks this lawyer, 'will you do with this property in Orstead, New York?'

"'What property do you speak of?' I ask him. He tells me then. I am overcome. I am frantic. 'Imbecile!' I shout. 'What have you done?' I come at once by the fastest of trains. I am here!"

"That—that was very nice of you," faltered Laurie, keeping his eyes carefully away from Ned.

"Nice! But what else to be done? For nothing at all would I have had it so happen, and so I hasten to make amends, to offer apologies to my dear wife's sister, to you, sir, to correct a so great mistake!"

"Certainly," assented Laurie hurriedly. "Of course. But what I don't understand is why the letter that Miss Comfort wrote to you didn't reach you, sir."

Mr. Goupil made a gesture of despair. "I

will explain it also. My dear sister-in-law made a mistake of the address. I saw the letter. It was wrong. I—but wait!” Mr. Goupil drew forth a handsome card-case, selected of the contents, and reached forward. Laurie took the card and read:

Chicago

Sioux City

Des Moines

GOUPIL-MACHENRY COMPANY

Stocks Bonds Investments

514-520 Burlington Bldg., Sioux City, Ia.

Members of the

Chicago Stock Exchange

“You see?” pursued Mr. Goupil. “My dear sister-in-law made the mistake regrettable. She addressed the letter to the ‘Goupil Machinery Company.’ There is none.”

“I see,” said Laurie, enlightened, as he passed the engraved card to Ned. “This MacHenry is your partner, sir?”

“Of a certainty. Adam MacHenry he is, a gentleman of Scottish birth, but now, like me, William Goupil, a citizen of the United States, sir.”

“Oh! Well, but look here, Mr. Goupil. Miss

Comfort must have had your initials wrong, too, then, for—”

“Ah, another misfortune! Attend, please. My name is Alphonse Guillaume Goupil. Yes. Very well. When I am in this country but a very short time I find that Alphonse is the name of all waiters in all hotels everywhere I go. I put aside Alphonse then. I am Guillaume Goupil. Then I become prosperous. I enter into business. Many do not know how to pronounce my first name, and that is not well. So I then spell it the American way. To-day I am William Goupil, American citizen!”

“That explains why the telegram didn't get to you,” said Laurie. “Well, the whole thing's been a sort of—of—”

“Sort of a comedy of errors,” suggested Ned.

Mr. Goupil seized on the phrase with enthusiasm. “Yes, yes, a comedy of errors! You'll say so! A comedy of errors of a certainty, beyond a matter of a doubt! But now, at last, it is *finis*. All is satisfactorily arranged. You shall hear. First, then, I offered my dear sister-in-law a nice home in Sioux City, but no, she must stay here where it has been her home and

her people's home for so long a time. Also—Mr. Goupil laughed enjoyably—“also, Mr. Laurie, she fears the Indians! But at last it is arranged. In the fall she will return to her house. By then it will be a place worthy of the sister of my dear and greatly lamented wife. To-morrow I shall give orders, oh, many orders! You shall see It will be—” Mr. Goupil raised his eyes ecstatically—“magnificent!”

“Well, that certainly is great,” said Laurie. “I can't tell you how pleased I—we both are, Mr. Goupil.”

Mr. Goupil bowed again, but without arising, and smiled his own pleasure. “I shall ask you to believe, Mr. Laurie, that never did I suspect that my dear sister-in-law was in any need of assistance. But now I understand. It shall be arranged. From now on—” He waved a hand grandly. Words would have said far less.

He arose. Laurie arose. Ned arose. Mr. Goupil bowed. Laurie and Ned bowed.

“Once more, Mr. Laurie, I thank you for your kindness to my dear sister-in-law. I thank also your so noble brother. I shall be in Orstead for

several days and it will give me great pleasure to see you again. We shall meet, yes?"

"Of a certainty," answered Laurie, with no thought of impertinence. "To-morrow, perhaps, at Miss Comfort's, sir. We are going there in the morning to say good-by to her."

"Excellent! Until the morning, then." Mr. Goupil bowed. Laurie bowed. Ned bowed. Mr. Goupil placed his derby in place, gave it an admonishing tap, smiled pleasantly once more, and was gone.

Laurie closed the door after him and leaned weakly against it.

"If anything else happens to-night," he sighed, "I'll go batty!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE MARVELOUS CATCH

WEDNESDAY afternoon, and the hands of the clock in the tower of the Congregational Church, seen distantly over the tops of the trees, pointed to eighteen minutes before three.

Ideal weather for Class day, hot in the sun, pleasantly warm in the shade, with a very blue sky trimmed around the edges with puffs of creamy-white clouds. An ideal day, too, for the big game, with plenty of heat to make muscles responsive and no wind to deflect the ball from its long, arching course. Kind, as well, to the wearers of pretty, light dresses, with whom the stands were liberally sprinkled, mothers, sisters, cousins and aunts of the important-looking graduates. Dark-blue pennants and pennants of maroon and white drooped against their staffs save when a moment of frenzy set them swirling above the sloping stands.

The game was three innings old, and the black score-board behind the back-stop held six big round naughts. Those three innings had not been devoid of interest, however, even if neither team had tallied. Nervousness and over-anxiety had filled at least two of them with breathless moments. In the first and second Farview had placed men on bases; in the second Hillman's had got Pat Browne as far as third. There had been errors by both sides, and more than one case of poor judgment. Nate Beedle, pitching for the home team, and Luders, for the visitors, had been in hot water much of the time. Yet each had survived, and now, at the beginning of the fourth inning, with Farview coming to bat, the game was still to be won or lost.

Laurie had been through some bad moments. For the first two innings he and Nate had not worked together very smoothly. They had had a half-hour of practice before an early dinner, during which Nate had coached the new catcher and Laurie had mastered signals. Later, Cas Bennett had given Laurie the "dope" on the Farview batters. He was still giving it between innings, for Laurie's mind was in no condition

to memorize. By the beginning of the third inning ten Farview players had come to the plate, and at least ten times Nate had refused Laurie's signal. Of course Laurie had known that Nate was right and that he was wrong, but it had all been mighty confusing and disconcerting. Added to that was the continuing dread of throwing badly to second. He could peg the ball to first unerringly enough, or to third, but the long heave across the width of the diamond terrorized him. Once when he should have thrown to Lew Cooper that fear of misfortune held his hand, and Hillman's had groaned as a Farview runner slid unchallenged to the bag. Save for that occasion a throw to second had not been called for, and the test was still ahead of him. For the rest, Laurie had done well enough. He had dropped the delivery more times than he cared to recall, but had escaped without penalty. Once the ball had got past him entirely and bounded against the back-stop, but, fortunately, the bases had been empty. During the first of the third he and Nate had come to understand each other better, and constant reiteration by Cas had finally impressed Laurie with the foibles of the

enemy batsmen. Now, at the beginning of the fourth, he breathed easier and found himself sustained by a measure of confidence. His throw to second, before the first of the enemy stepped into the box, was straight, hard, and knee-high.

Farview began with a scratch hit to the left field that took an unexpected bound away from Frank Brattle's ready glove. Followed a screaming two-bagger that placed the first runner on third. Only a smart throw-in by Lee Murdock prevented a tally then and there. The tally came later, however, and a second followed close behind it. Nate passed a batter and filled the bases. Then a pretty sacrifice fly to short right moved the runners up, and Farview cheered her first score. Nate struck out the subsequent batter. Then came a rolling grounder to Cooper and Lew scraped it up and, with all the time in the world, threw low to first. By the time Tom Pope had turned around about three times looking for the ball that he had stopped but not caught, the runner on third had scored, the batsman was safe, and the chap from second was half-way between third and the plate. Tom shot the ball home; Laurie got it, held it, and swung

downward. There was an instant's confusion of dust and sound, and the umpire swung his mask upward and out.

Two runs for Farview.

Farview clung to that lead until the sixth, but could not add to it. In her half of the fourth Hillman's got Captain Dave as far as second, but Murdock's fly to left made the third out. In the fifth the opposing pitcher struck out Laurie and Nate and kindly allowed Cooper to pop a fly to third baseman.

In the sixth things began to happen, all at once and on all sides. Farview started the trouble by hitting through short-stop for a base. Nate pitched ten deliveries before the next batsman at last fouled out to first basemen. Then came an attempted sacrifice. The batsman laid down the ball scarcely two feet from the plate, and the runner on first was off. Laurie dashed his mask aside, scooped up the trickling sphere, stepped forward, and sped it to second. The throw was perfect, and Pope got the runner. Hillman's applauded delightedly, and from the Blue's bench came the approving voice of the coach, "Good work, Turner!" Laurie, accepting

his mask from a Farview batsman, reflected that maybe nothing was nearly as bad as you pictured it beforehand, and remembered with surprise that in making the throw he had not consciously thought a thing about it; had n't hoped he would make it or feared that he would n't; had simply picked up the ball and plugged it across the diamond! Exit the bugaboo!

With two down, however, Farview refused to yield the inning. Instead, she poked a hit across second base and another past third and so added another tally. That seemed to distress Nate Beedle unnecessarily, and he proceeded to pass the next batsman. And after that, with two gone and two strikes and one ball on the succeeding aspirant, he pitched three more balls in succession and passed him, too! Very suddenly the bases were full, and the game seemed about to go glimmering. And at that moment George Pemberton and the scrub catcher strode off around the first base stand, and if the visiting crowd had n't been making such a ridiculous noise the thud of ball against mitten might have been heard from back there.

Nate was, in baseball parlance, "as high as a

kite." His first effort against the new batsman was a ball that Laurie only stopped by leaping two feet from the ground. Laurie walked half-way to the pitcher's box, amid the exultant howls of a joyous foe, shook the ball in Nate's face, and savagely told him to take his time. Laurie was angry just then. Nate was snappy and told Laurie to "go on back and quit beefing! I'll get him!" Laurie signaled for a high ball; the batter "ate up" low ones. Nate hesitated, shook his head. Laurie called for one close in then. Nate wound up and stepped forward. The result was a wide one that made the score two balls and no strikes. On the bench Mr. Mulford was watching with sharp eyes. Nate followed with a fast ball that was struck at too late. Laurie's heart retreated down his throat again. Once more he signaled a high one. This time Nate made no demur, but the ball failed to go over. A substitute detached himself from the group on the bench and sped around the stand. Laurie, holding the ball, glanced toward the coach. He got the expected sign. Nate, too, saw, and began to pull at his glove. Captain Dave joined him at the mound. Nate looked gloomy and mu-

tinous. Then George Pemberton came into sight, paused an instant at the bench, and strode toward the box.

Hillman's cheered and Farview jeered. Nate went to the bench with hanging head. As he tossed the ball to the relief pitcher Laurie saw Mr. Mulford pull Nate to a seat beside him and put a big arm over the sorrowful one's shoulders. Then George Pemberton was pitching his warm-up balls, and Laurie was devoutly hoping that they were n't samples of what he would offer later. They were, but Laurie didn't know it then, for, with three balls and but one strike on him, the over-eager Farview third baseman struck at George's first offering and got it. The bases emptied, and red legs streaked for the plate. But far out in deep center field Lee Murdock cast one last look over his shoulder, turned, and pulled down the fly, and Hillman's let loose with a sound that was half a groan of relief and half a yell of joy!

With the score 3 to 0 against her, Hillman's pulled up even in the last of the sixth. Craig Jones worked a pass; Tom Pope sacrificed him neatly to second; and Captain Dave, function-

ing perfectly at last in the rôle of clean-up batter, hit for two bases, and both Cooper and Jones scored. Pat Browne was safe on a fielder's choice, Dave going out at third. Brattle hit safely, and Murdock was passed. The bags were all occupied, and the home team's cohorts roared exultantly and waved blue banners in air. And Laurie came to bat.

I 'd like immensely to tell how Laurie knocked a home run or even a single, but truth compels me to state that he did nothing of the sort. He swung twice at good ones and missed them, and ended by swinging a third time at a very poor one. It remained for Pemberton to deliver the hit and, perhaps because he was a proverbially poor batter and wasn't feared one bit by Mr. Luders, he selected the second delivery and jabbed it straight at the young gentleman's head. Luders put up a defensive hand. The ball tipped it and bounded toward second. Three players ran for it. By the time short-stop had got it, Pemberton was galloping up to first, and Pat Browne had slid in a cloud of dust across the plate. A moment later Brattle was caught off second, and the trouble was over for the time.

The seventh began with the score 3 to 3, but it would n't have remained there long if George Pemberton had been allowed to pitch the inning through. George was even wilder than he had indicated. He could n't find the plate at all. Four successive balls put a Farview batter on first. One strike, a foul back of the plate that Laurie missed by inches only, and four more balls put another runner on bases. Laurie begged, counseled, threatened. George nodded agreeably and still sent them in anywhere but at the expected spot. When he had pitched one strike and two balls to the third man up, Coach Mulford gave the "high sign" and George, not at all regretfully, it seemed, dropped the ball and gave way to Orville Croft.

Somehow Croft came through unpunished. There were no more passes, for Croft put the ball over the base nicely, but there were so many near-hits that Laurie's heart was in his mouth almost every minute. If the Hillman's fielders had n't worked like a set of young professionals in that inning awful things would certainly have befallen the Blue. The infield showed real ball playing, and thrice what seemed a safe hit was

spoiled. Farview got the first of her runners to third, but he finally died there when Captain Dave dived to the base-line and scooped up a ball that was on its way to deep left.

For Hillman's the last of the seventh made good its reputation. It was the lucky seventh, and no mistake about it. Luck put Cooper on first when Luders slanted a slow curve against his ribs, and luck decreed that the red-legged short-stop should drop the ball a minute later when Cooper took advantage of Jones's slam to third. Perhaps luck had something to do with the pass handed to Pope, too, but it certainly did n't altogether govern Captain Dave's second long hit that sent in Cooper and Jones and put Hillman's in a veritable seventh heaven—I almost wrote "inning"—of delight!

That hit ended Luders's usefulness. He issued another pass, got himself into a hole with Frank Brattle, and was derricked, a sandy-haired youth named Clay succeeding him. Clay disposed of Brattle very neatly, Murdock flied out to short-stop, and again Laurie failed to deliver the hit that was, he felt certain, somewhere inside him. Laurie brought the lucky seventh to a close by

knocking a weak grounder to first baseman.

Hillman's visioned victory and was joyous and noisy when the eighth began, but after the first Farview batsman had lined out Croft's first offering for two bases the joy paled and the noise noticeably subsided. And when the next' red-legged batter had hit for a single it began to dawn on the Hillman's supporters that possibly the old adage to the effect that he who laughs last laughs best might be true. Hillman's pitching staff was exhausted, and if Croft went the way of Beedle and Pemberton—and he gave every indication of doing so—the only way the Blue would get the game would be as a gift from Farview! The Maroon and White took to Croft as a duck takes to water. He didn't have much except a couple of slow curves. His fast one was n't exceptionally fast, and it generally failed to locate the plate. Those slow curves pleased the Farview batsmen immensely. Even the tail-end of their list found no trouble in hitting them. Laurie, watching the man on first as a cat watches a mouse, saw more than a runner who might steal second; he saw a victory fading into defeat.

Croft worked two strikes on the next man, and then again came the dread sound of wood against leather. This time, though, the ball arched high and Cooper, racing back, got under it, and there was one down. The runner on third had no chance to score, or thought so. Then, when Captain Dave had talked briefly but earnestly to Croft, that youth promptly issued one more base on balls, and the sacks were filled, and defeat loomed large on the horizon. One down, the bases full, and Croft going the way of the others! Laurie's gaze wondered to the bench and Coach Mulford. And then, since to have looked at the bench at all without seeing it would have been impossible, he glimpsed the round, anxious, earnest countenance of Kewpie Proudtree. Laurie's heart jumped out of place for possibly the twentieth time that afternoon, and he called to Captain Dave.

The game was held up while captain and catcher conferred. Finally Dave hurried across and hailed the coach. Another conference followed, while Farview clamored for the contest to go on. Then Mr. Mulford waved his hand at Croft, and Kewpie, very much surprised but ap-

parently not at all overwhelmed, walked into the diamond, pulling on his glove.

There was a moment of silent amazement. Then Farview went delirious with delighted amusement. The Farview stand almost rocked with the laughter that emanated from it, laughter that came as a relief to strained nerves and was indulged in freely. Hillman's, recovering from its first instant of amazement, cheered valiantly, and, cheering, took hope. After all, it might well be that the chubby Proudtree would prove no worse than Croft. It was even possible that he might be an improvement on that youth. Meanwhile Farview laughed until tears came and Laurie and Kewpie met midway of mound and plate.

"Go slow, Kewpie," said Laurie, "and follow the signals. Take all the time you can; hear? Waiting may worry them. Keep your nerve, son, no matter what happens. Just pretend that you 're pitching to me in practice."

"Sure," agreed Kewpie complacently. "Don't worry about me, Nod. Let 's go!"

One down and three on, a hit meaning two runs! It was a tough situation that Kewpie

faced. But Kewpie seemed totally unworried. Laurie saw and marveled. His own heart was thumping inside him like a small sledge-hammer. He wondered if Kewpie was faking that unconcern and would presently go to pieces like the others, letting in an avalanche of runs!

But Kewpie was right. Laurie need n't have worried about him. Kewpie was magnificent, if a boy of Kewpie's size and proportions can ever be magnificent! He was as slow as cold molasses, yes, and his delivery elicited more amusement from the enemy, but he struck out with apparent ease the first batsman who faced him, caused the next man to foul out to Captain Dave, and fanned the third!

When that last of the enemy waved through empty air and then cast his bat from him venomously, Hillman's loved Kewpie Proudtree with a deep and fervid passion. Hillman's said so. Hillman's rose from stand and greensward and cheered his name to the blue afternoon sky and howled and yelled and went crazy generally. And Kewpie moved smilingly back to the bench to submit to the hugs of his companions.

There was no scoring for the Blue in the last

of the eighth, for Clay was master of the situation.

Then Farview started her half of the ninth with desperation written large on every countenance. Kewpie, the unhurried, returned to his job. He disposed of the Farview pitcher with four deliveries and then faced the head of the list. That he would survive that inning without misadventure was too much to hope for. The misadventure came when the Farview center fielder slammed a ball into left field and got two bases. Kewpie looked, or so Laurie thought, a little surprised and a little grieved, but he didn't allow his emotions to affect his pitching. He fooled the next man twice with his out-drop and finally finished him with a slow ball that the batter struck at too soon. Hillman's shouted, waved, and prepared to go home.

But the end was not yet. Up came the Farview captain, and he made it plain to Laurie at once that he wasn't to be caught with trifles. He demanded good ones. If he didn't get them he wouldn't swing. He didn't say all this in words, of course, but he looked it and showed it by calmly watching Kewpie's first offering drop

by him, a scant inch beyond the outer corner of the plate. In the end, he had his way. There was something that suited him, and he accepted it and drove it down third base line, scoring the man on second and placing himself on third when the throw went to the plate. Those who had wandered toward the exits reconsidered and stayed their steps. With a runner on third the score might yet be tied.

The Farview right fielder had not yet made a hit, but that to Laurie's thinking made him the more dangerous, and Laurie worked very carefully. Kewpie answered the first signal with a straight one over the center of the plate, and it went for a strike. The next was also over the center, but too high. Then again Kewpie failed. One and two now. The runner on third was dashing up and down the path, and the coaches were yipping like mad. Kewpie, however remained surprisingly calm. To show how calm he was he sent in a drop that scored a second strike for him, and the blue pennants waved triumphantly. Laurie called for the same thing again, but this time the batter did not offer at it; the score was two and three, and Laurie's heart

sank. The next must be good. He placed his hands out and called imploringly:

“Right into the old mitt, Kewpie! Make it good!”

And Kewpie made it good, and, since it was good, unmistakably good, the Farview youth swung against it with all his might.

But he hit under it, and the ball went up and up in the sunlight almost straight above the plate. Cries arose from all sides, a confusing bedlam of warning, entreaty, command. Laurie dashed his mask behind him, stared upward into the blue, saw the gray sphere poised overhead, turned and stepped back, looked again, again retreated. He was under it now—almost. One step further toward the back-stop—

Then Nemesis took a hand, or sought to. Laurie's backward placed foot found the discarded mask. He strove to retain his balance but could not and fell backward to the ground. The mask described a curve and landed yards away. Laurie's feet flew heavenward. His hands were stretched wide. Then his startled gaze saw a new danger. Right above him was the ball, falling straight for his face. Nothing

save pure instinct, the instinct that causes one to fend off a blow, brought his hands up before him. It was, however, not so much instinct as baseball training that brought them there palms upward. And, beyond any doubt, it was training that caused his fingers to close convulsively about the round object that landed with a loud smack in the hollow of his old brown mitten!

The Graduation Ball was over, and as the twins walked homeward with Polly and Mae twelve o'clock struck from the tower of the Congregational Church across the park. There was a big round moon riding high in the heavens, and the June night was warm and scented. Mae was to spend the night with Polly, and so the four kept together across Walnut Street and past the Starling house where, on the second floor, one lighted window proclaimed the presence of Bob. Even as Ned proposed a discreet hail, the light behind the shade went out.

"It was a lovely dance, wasn't it?" asked Polly. Laurie, beside her, assented. "It's been a perfectly gorgeous day," added Polly. "All of it. It was such fun this morning at

Miss Comfort's. And that Mr. Goupil is a darling duck, isn't he? And, oh, won't it be perfectly corking next fall, Laurie, when we have the boat for our own? Think of the good times we can have! It was wonderful of Miss Comfort to think of it."

"Bet you anything," chuckled Laurie, "she'll wish herself back there. Dare say she won't be able to sleep on shore again after a summer on the rolling deep!"

Polly laughed. "She's a dear, isn't she? And, Laurie, didn't everything turn out beautifully this spring? Think how we 'reclaimed' Kewpie and—"

"Heard Kewpie's latest? He told Ned and me before supper that he might not be able to play football next fall because he didn't want to risk hurting his pitching arm! He's a rare bird, that Kewpie!"

"Oh, he must play football! But he will, of course. Wasn't he splendid this afternoon? And—and weren't you splendid, too? I just shrieked and shrieked when you made that perfectly wonderful catch and saved the game!"

"I didn't save the game," answered Laurie.

“I dare say that fellow would have struck out in another minute. Anyhow, Kewpie says he would have!”

“But Kewpie does n’t know, and if he had made a hit it would have tied the score at least. Anyhow, your catch was absolutely marvelous. Every one says so.”

A short silence followed. Then Laurie said resolutely: “Look here, I guess you might as well know the truth about that, Polly. I did n’t really make that catch.”

“Why, what do you mean? I saw you make it!”

“Yes, I know, but—well you see, I did n’t *intend* to do it. I saw that ball coming down straight for the end of my nose, and I just put my hands up to ward it off. Of course every one thinks I ’m a regular wonder, but I ’m not. It was just an accident. I—I have n’t told any one but Ned—and you.”

“That does n’t spoil it a bit,” declared Polly. “You did catch the ball, did n’t you? And if you ’d just been trying to keep it from hitting you you would n’t have really caught it, would you?”

“That’s what Ned said,” mused Laurie.
“Hanged if I know!”

“Ned’s perfectly right,” responded Polly emphatically.

“Of course I am,” said Ned as he and Mae joined them before the door of the little shop.
“But what is it this time?”

“Never mind,” said Polly. “You can ask Laurie.”

“He probably won’t tell me,” said Ned gloomily. “He hates to say I’m right about anything. Gee, Polly, it seems funny to think that I won’t see this place again for three months.”

“It’s horrid,” answered Polly, and Mae murmured agreement. “Still, I suppose three months won’t seem *awfully* long. And you *will* write, won’t you?”

“Certainly will,” asserted Ned. “And don’t you forget to. But we’ll see you both in the morning. We don’t get away until eleven twenty-two. Thanks for coming to the dance.”

“Thanks for asking us,” said Polly, her hand on the door. “Good night. Good night, Laurie. We’ve had a lovely time.”

“Same here,” said Laurie as he tugged at Ned’s sleeve.

Ned joined him at the edge of the sidewalk, and they took their caps off and bowed in the manner of Mr. Goupil.

“Beneath yon moon’s effulgent light—”

“We, Nid and Nod, wish you Good Night!”

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