

Chapman Allen

**The Heroes of the
School: or, The Darewell
Chums Through Thick and...**



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The Heroes of the School; or, The Darewell Chums Through Thick and Thin

CHAPTER I

EXPELLING A PUPIL

“What are you looking so glum about this morning, Stumpy?” asked Ned Wilding as he greeted his chum, Fenn Masterson, otherwise known as “Stumpy” because of his short, stout figure. “Haven’t you got your lessons, or are you going to be expelled?”

“I’m not to be expelled but some one else is, Ned.”

“What’s that? Some one going to be expelled?” asked Bart Keene, coming up in time to hear what Fenn said.

“John Newton is,” replied Stumpy.

“What’s that got to do with you?” asked Bart, for, as had Ned, he noticed that Fenn looked worried.

“It might have something to do with me if John – ”

Just then the bell of the Darewell High School began to ring, and, as it was the final summons to classes the three boys and several other pupils hurried into the building. On the way up the stairs Ned Wilding was joined by a tall youth with dark hair and eyes.

“What’s this I hear about John Newton?” asked the tall lad.

“Hello, Frank! Why Stumpy says John’s got to leave the school, but it’s the first I heard about it.”

“Are they going to expel him this morning?”

“Seems so. We’ll soon know.”

A little later several hundred boys and girls were gathered in the auditorium of the school for the usual morning exercises. When they were over the principal, Professor McCloud, came to the edge of the platform.

“I have a very unpleasant duty to perform,” he began.

Most of the boys and girls knew what was coming. The principal never prefaced his remarks that way unless he had to expel a pupil. Ned and Bart looked over toward where Fenn sat. They wanted to see if there was any reason for Stumpy’s seeming apprehension.

“John Newton!” called Professor McCloud, and a tall youth, with eyes that squinted slightly, left his seat and shambled forward.

“It’s coming now,” whispered Fenn, and Frank Roscoe, who was sitting beside him, looked at his chum and wondered.

“Any one would think it was you who had to face the music,” declared Frank.

By this time John Newton was standing in front of the raised platform on which the principal and teachers sat during the morning exercises. He did not seem to mind the humility or disgrace of his position. He turned half around and looked toward Fenn.

“If he says anything – ” began Stumpy, whispering to himself, but he did not finish the sentence for Professor McCloud was speaking.

“John Newton,” the principal said, “I am deeply grieved that I have to do this. It is very painful.” It was the same speech the pupils had heard before. The principal always used it, with such slight variations as might be necessary. “You have been dilatory in your studies. You have been insubordinate. You have played mean tricks. You have refused to mend your ways.”

The principal took a long breath. He always did at this particular point in his painful duty. But this time there was a variation from the usual scene. John Newton stepped forward and addressed the principal. It was a thing unheard of in the Darewell school.

“Professor McCloud,” said John, “I want to say that while I’m partly to blame in this matter, Fenn Mas – ”

“That will do! That will do!” interrupted Mr. McCloud so sharply that John started. A number of the pupils turned in their seats to gaze at Stumpy, who looked painfully self-conscious.

“There’s something in the wind,” whispered Ned to Bart.

“I’m not going to take all the blame,” persisted John, ignoring the principal’s command to remain silent. “Fenn Mast – ”

“I said that would do,” and Mr. McCloud spoke so decisively that John remained silent. “I know what you would say,” the professor went on. “I have looked into that matter thoroughly. No one is to blame but yourself, and your effort to shift the punishment to some other boy does not do you any good. You should not have attempted to mention any pupil’s name. I will not refer to it again, except to say that no one is involved but yourself. I am fully satisfied on this point.”

Frank noticed that Fenn seemed much relieved at the professor’s announcement, and he wondered what connection there could have been between his chum and John Newton.

“You have been given several opportunities to reform,” the principal went on, “but you have refused to profit by them. You are a dangerous element to have in this school. Therefore, we return you to your friends,” and, with a wave of his glasses toward the door to emphasize his remark, the principal indicated that John Newton might go. That ended it. John was expelled.

The pupils went to their various classes, and, though there was considerable whispering back and forth during the morning session as to what caused John’s expulsion, and what his reference to Fenn might mean, there was no chance to discuss the matter until the noon recess. Then questions and answers flew thick and fast.

“Now Fenn, tell us all about it,” said Ned Wilding when he and the two other boys who had remarked Stumpy’s apprehension, were gathered in the basement where lunches were usually eaten. “What was John driving at? What were you afraid of?”

“Didn’t you hear Professor McCloud say it was all ended and he was satisfied I had no hand in it?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t satisfy us,” said Bart. “We want the whole story.”

“There isn’t much to it,” Fenn declared. “You must promise not to repeat it.”

“We’ll promise but I guess John will tell it all over town,” said Frank.

“You know John and I used to be pretty friendly,” Fenn began, getting his chums off into a corner. “He lives near me and I used to go fishing with him once in a while. But he got down on me because I wouldn’t lend him my best reel one day, though for a while I didn’t know he wasn’t friendly.

“He’s always playing some kind of tricks in school, but most of ’em aren’t any worse than those we get up. But this last one was the limit.”

“What was it?” asked Ned.

“He’d been reading some book on India, and how they catch tigers by smearing bird-lime on the leaves near the water-hole. He made some of the lime. I helped him. Got some of the stuff from the laboratory. Then he put it all over the papers in Mr. McCloud’s desk, one night after school, and they got so fastened together they couldn’t be separated.”

“You don’t mean to say you helped him do that?” asked Frank.

“Who said I did? I only helped make the bird-lime. He told me we could catch rabbits with it. I didn’t know what he was up to or I wouldn’t have done that much. When he learned he was discovered, for he left his knife in the desk, he said he was going to make me take part of the blame

for helping him make the lime. That's what I was afraid of this morning, when I heard he was going to be expelled."

"He did try to give you away," interrupted Bart.

"Yes, rather mean, too. But it seems Mr. McCloud had been investigating, though I didn't know it. He must have found out that I didn't have any hand in putting the stuff in the desk, even if I did help John make it."

"Lucky for you that he did," commented Ned. "Do you think John will try to do anything more to make trouble for you?"

"I hope not," Fenn replied.

"He was always up to tricks," commented Frank. "Once he daubed tar on the bottoms of his shoes and walked through the classroom, leaving black marks all over. He pasted paper caps on the pestle when the chemistry class was going to recite and Professor Long thought the powder he was mixing went off at the wrong time."

"Yes, and do you remember the time he whistled like a bird in school," put in Ned, "and made the teacher believe a canary was loose somewhere. My, but he can whistle!" he went on. "He can do as well as some of the fellows on the stage. I'm sorry he got expelled, but I'm glad you're out of it, Stumpy."

CHAPTER II

THE WRONG SLIDE

The four boys spent some time discussing the affair of the morning, and speculating as to what John Newton would do now that he could no longer attend school.

“Guess he’ll not worry much,” remarked Fenn. “He was saying the other day he thought he’d go off somewhere and try to get work in the city.”

“Work? He’s too lazy to work,” put in Ned.

“He said he’d like to get a job in a theater,” Fenn added.

“Shoving scenery around, or being part of the mob in Julius Cæsar would be his limit, I guess,” said Bart.

“Speaking of Cæsar reminds me that Fenn fell down in his Latin this morning,” said Frank.

“Yes, I should have boned away on it last night but I didn’t,” admitted Stumpy.

“I know why,” put in Ned.

“Why?”

“Saw you out walking with Jennie Smith, and I s’pose you didn’t get in until late.”

“Did she recite poetry to you?” asked Frank, for Jennie was somewhat inclined to verse.

“Say you fellows dry up!” exclaimed Fenn. “You don’t dare walk with a girl. Don’t know how to behave in company!”

“It takes Fenn to please the girls,” retorted Ned, and he dodged to escape a blow Stumpy aimed at him. Then the gong rang for the afternoon session and the pupils went back to their classrooms.

While the boys are at their lessons, which is about the only time, save when they are asleep, that they are not talking or doing something, there will be opportunity of telling who they are.

Ned Wilding’s mother had been dead some years. His father was cashier in the only bank in Darewell, a thriving manufacturing town not far from Lake Erie. The Still river ran through the place and it was a journey of about ten miles to the lake on that stream.

Frank Roscoe lived with his uncle Abner Dent, who was a wealthy farmer, residing on the outskirts of the town. Frank had been with his relative as long as he could remember. He never knew his father or mother, and his uncle never mentioned them. The boy had been brought up with the idea that both his parents were dead. He was a manly youth, but there was a certain strangeness and an air of mystery about him. It was puzzling to his comrades, though they liked him none the less for it.

As for Bart Keene, it would be hard to find a finer specimen of American boy. He was stout and sturdy, and would rather play ball than eat. His father, who was proprietor of a large factory, used to say Bart talked sports in his sleep. Bart had a sister Alice, as gentle as he was rough, though his roughness was not at all offensive. She had an idea she would like to be a trained nurse, and used every opportunity of practicing for her chosen profession. Let any one cut his finger, or run a sliver into it and Alice would exclaim:

“Oh, do let me bandage it up! I’m so glad it happened – no, I don’t mean that – I mean it’s such good practice for me!” Then she would hustle around for salve and strips of cloth and render first-aid-to-the-injured after the most approved fashion.

You couldn’t help liking Fenn Masterson. “Stumpy” was the jolliest chap in seven counties, his friends used to say, and, it seemed with truth. He had blue eyes that always seemed to be laughing at you, as though his very figure, about as broad as it was long, was the best joke in the world.

But Fenn was not proud of his shape. He often deplored it, especially when he went walking with a girl, which he did whenever he got the chance. Stumpy was fond of the girls, and some

of them liked him, – especially Jennie Smith already mentioned. She used to confide to her chum, Alice Keene, that Fenn reminded her somewhat of Falstaff, whom you can read about in Shakespeare, if you wish.

The boys had been chums all through the grammar school and their friendship was further cemented when they continued on at the high school. They were four of the best-liked boys in the institution, and the leaders when it came to sport, fun or doings of any sort. They were generally seen together and if anything was undertaken the “Darewell Chums,” as they were called from the name of the town, were sure to be found in the van.

The boys lived in the same neighborhood in the better part of the place, all save Frank, whose uncle’s house was about a mile outside the town, but on the same highway on which his chums resided.

Going home from school that afternoon the four chums saw John Newton standing on a street corner. As they passed him John called:

“Hey Stumpy, I want to speak to you a minute.”

Fenn dropped behind his chums and spoke to John for some time. Ned, Bart and Frank walked on, and then waited for him.

“Is he going to pay you off?” asked Ned, as Fenn joined his companions.

“No, he wanted to tell me he was sorry he tried to throw the blame on me.”

“Look out for him, Stumpy,” advised Bart.

“Oh John is thoughtless, but he doesn’t mean anything bad,” Fenn said. “I guess this was quite a lesson for him.”

In school the next afternoon Frank, Bart and Fenn each received a note from Ned, the papers being passed along in that mysterious postal fashion which prevails in all schools. The missives read:

“Watch for some fun at the science lecture.”

This was a talk given every Friday afternoon by Professor Long, who used stereoptican slides. The lecture was usually on some popular topic.

It was quite a large class that assembled in the darkened laboratory at the last period of the afternoon. The professor began his talk. It was about volcanoes, and he described their formation, the theories regarding them, and the causes for their terrific action.

“I will now throw on the screen,” the instructor said, “a picture of Mt. Vesuvius in full action. It is a wonderful view of a wonderful phenomenon.”

There was a moment’s delay, and he slipped a slide into the lantern. Ned nudged his chums.

“Watch!” he whispered.

The next instant there was shown on the screen a picture of a boy setting off a giant fire-cracker under the chair of a sleeping man, who was depicted in the act of rising high into the air under the propulsion of the pyrotechnic. It was an irruption, but one not down on the program.

CHAPTER III

A QUEER CHARACTER

A chorus of laughter broke out among the students. It certainly was mirth-provoking to see that picture in place of the fire and clouds of smoke from the volcano. The class was in an uproar.

Professor Long waited patiently until the noise had subsided. He even allowed the wrong slide to remain on the screen. The boys finally ceased laughing. Then the instructor spoke.

"I presume that was done as a joke," he said. "If so I think it was a very poor one. I don't mind fun, but I like it in the right place. A certain amount is good, even in the schoolroom."

His tone was sarcastic now, and Ned began to feel a little uncomfortable.

"You young gentlemen," and he seemed to hesitate at the word, "you young gentlemen are sent here to learn. If you can do so and have fun, all right. I am paid by the city to teach you. I am expected to put a certain amount of knowledge into your brains. I can't unless you let me. I'm not a magician."

"I thought you would be interested in this lecture. It seems you would rather have a lot of horse-play and rowdyism instead. If I had known that I might have provided a different set of pictures. But not in school hours. The school authorities expect me to instruct you in physics and chemistry; not in foolishness. Young gentlemen, the lecture is over, but you can remain in your seats in the darkness until the usual hour for dismissing the class."

This was a different ending to the joke than Ned had anticipated. It was he who had put the wrong slide in with the others, having had access to the laboratory that morning. There were several murmurs from the boys not in on the plot. They did not relish sitting in the darkness for half an hour.

Professor Long began putting away the apparatus. He withdrew the firecracker slide and turned out the stereopticon. Then Ned did a manly thing.

"Professor Long," he called, out of the darkness. "I want to apologize to you and the class. I put the wrong picture into the pile. I'm sorry and I'll not do it again."

A silence ensued. The boys wondered at Ned's pluck in acknowledging his fault. But then he and his chums were that kind of boys.

"I can't excuse your conduct under any circumstances, Wilding," said Professor Long, sternly. "Still I will admit I like your manliness in admitting your fault. In view of what you have said, and as it is evident the other boys had no hand in it, I will go on with the lecture. But I must ask you to withdraw, and, as a punishment you will write out fifty lines of Cæsar after school."

It was a task that made some of the boys catch their breaths. But Ned felt he deserved it, though he said to himself the joke was worth it. He left the laboratory, and the lecture went on. He remained after school and completed his penance. Professor Long, who had some experiments to prepare for the next week's work, had also stayed after school.

"Don't do it again, Wilding," was all he said, and Ned was almost sure he saw the teacher smile.

Ned found his chums waiting for him. They were a little diffident about referring to the joke, but Ned had no such scruples.

"That was a sort of a boomerang," he remarked. "I spent fifty cents getting that slide, and to think how it turned out! Long is pretty touchy when it comes to his lectures. I guess I'll not monkey with 'em again."

"Well, you missed a lot of fun," said Frank slowly. "He told us a lot of interesting stuff about volcanoes."

"Bet none of 'em could match mine," came from Ned, with a laugh. "Mine was up-to-date."

"What you going to do to-morrow?" asked Bart of his friends.

“Nothing special,” replied Ned.

“Can’t we arrange a ball game?” inquired Fenn.

“I tried to but couldn’t,” said Bart. “Supposing we all go fishing?”

“Fine!” was the general cry.

“All right, meet at the Point, with lines and poles, at nine o’clock to-morrow and we’ll go to the Riffles.”

The Point was a tongue of land extending out into the river about a mile above the town. It was a favorite place for swimming as there was a sort of sandy beach there. The Riffles were a series of shallow spots about two miles above the point, and from there on up was good fishing. The river near the Riffles ran through a dense woods which were seldom visited.

Promptly on time the boys were at the meeting place. They had with them everything needed for a day’s fishing, from bait and poles to a lunch for themselves, as they did not intend coming back until afternoon.

The boys tramped through the woods toward the fishing holes, which they had often visited. They were talking of the events of the previous day at school, and Ned was explaining over again how he substituted the wrong picture slide.

“Here, where are you boys going?” a voice suddenly hailed them from the bushes that lined the path they were traveling.

They looked up, to see an old man, with a white straggling beard, which fell almost to his waist, peering at them. He was half hidden by the underbrush.

“Where you going?” he repeated.

“Fishing,” replied Ned.

“Whereabouts?”

“Up at the Riffles,” said Fenn.

“Better not,” cautioned the aged person. “It’s a dangerous place.”

The man stepped forth into full view. The boys saw he was poorly dressed. His trousers were quite ragged and his coat was torn in several places. He wore no hat.

“What makes you think so?” asked Frank.

“Don’t let it be known,” the old man went on, “but the King of Paprica holds dominion over the Riffles. He has forbidden any one, under pain of being fed to the sacred crocodile, from taking the green bull frog from the pool.”

“He’s crazy,” whispered Bart.

“But we’re after fish, not bull frogs,” interposed Frank, who seemed inclined to humor the strange man.

“Oh, in that case, don’t forget to bait your hooks with soft soap,” said the old man, as he held up a warning finger. “Now remember, not a word to the King of Paprica if you meet him. He knows I’m here on guard, so don’t tell him,” and with that the old man, winking at Frank as though there was a good joke between them, vanished amid the bushes.

“Well, of all queer things,” said Ned softly.

“He’s daffy,” spoke Bart. “Escaped from some asylum, I suppose. However he looks harmless. Come on, we don’t want to get mixed up with him. We’re out for fish.”

“I’d like to find out more about him,” came from Frank. “He winked at me as though it was some sort of a trick.”

“Yes, the kind Ned played yesterday,” exclaimed Frank.

“No more from yours truly,” uttered the perpetrator of the wrong slide. “No more jokes for a while. I’m going fishing. Come on.”

CHAPTER IV

A HUT IN THE WOODS

The boys tried to learn in which direction the old man had gone, but he was not in sight. They listened to hear if he was tramping through the bushes, but there was not a sound.

"Looks as though he went through a hole in the earth," spoke Fenn. "But never mind. His keepers are probably after him. He seems harmless enough."

"Sometimes that's the worst kind," commented Ned. "We had better be on the lookout for him. He might come upon us unexpectedly."

But the boys reached the Riffles a little while after this, and, in the excitement of hauling out a number of fish, for the sport was good, they forgot about the queer old man.

"I wonder who he could have been?" asked Frank, after a silence of half an hour following the landing of several chub and perch.

"Who?" asked Ned.

"The King of Paprica."

"Oh, him. I'd forgotten all about it. What makes you keep thinking of it?"

"I can't help it," replied Frank, so solemnly that his chums looked at him in some surprise.

"I believe there is something about that man which will bear investigating. No one ever heard of a crazy person being loose in these woods before, and there's no lunatic asylum near by from which he could have escaped. I tell you it looks queer."

"Sometimes lunatics travel hundreds of miles," put in Bart. "I read of one, once, that escaped, and was found a good while afterward in some place in Europe."

"Say, did we come here to talk about odd folks or to fish?" asked Ned somewhat sharply. "If we're going to fish let's do it. All this talk will scare 'em away."

"That's what I say," added Fenn. "Let's finish up and go home."

"Got a date to take a walk and gather wild flowers with some girl, Stumpy?" asked Frank.

"Well, it's as much fun as talking about a crazy man," retorted Fenn.

"Whoop! I've got a big one!" ejaculated Ned, and he pulled a wiggling beauty ashore.

It was the best catch so far, and the other boys congratulated Ned on his luck. Several other large-sized fish were pulled out after that until the boys' baskets were nearly full.

"Haven't we got plenty?" asked Frank. "Let's quit and eat."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Bart. "I've got a vacancy just beneath my belt," and he patted the region of his stomach in a suggestive manner.

Frank, who had charge of the lunch basket, into which the boys had put what they had brought from home, opened it. As he was handing around the sandwiches there was a noise in the bushes behind where the lads were seated. They started, thinking it might be the strange man again, but they were relieved when they saw it was Jim Nelson, who had the reputation of being the laziest boy in town.

"Hello, Jim," called Ned.

"Um," grunted Jim. It seemed too much of an effort to speak. "Bait?" he asked, with a motion toward his own fishing tackle which he carried over his shoulder.

"Well, if you aren't the limit!" exclaimed Ned. "You started off fishing and depended on finding some one to lend you the bait. Too lazy to dig it, I suppose?"

"Tired," responded Jim, as if that explained it all. "Throw over," he added, which the boys construed into a request that the bait can be passed over, since Jim had flopped down in a comfortable attitude on the bank.

“The very nerve of you makes you a delight,” spoke Bart as he tossed the tin can where Jim could get it. The bait fell a little out of the lazy lad’s reach. Instead of getting up for it he looked around in search of a stick with which he could poke it toward himself. There was one near his foot.

Jim reached out until he could touch the tree branch with the toe of his shoe. Then he manipulated the little club until he could get his fingers on it, which took several minutes. Once it was in his hands he managed to reach the bait can and drew it toward him. All this while he was stretched out on his back.

Still in this position he baited his hook and then, without looking to see where it landed, he threw the weighted line in the direction of the river. The hook struck just on the edge of the bank on which Jim reclined, but he could not see this and thought it had dropped into the water. The chums looked on at this exhibition of laziness, though it was no new thing to them.

“Think you’ll catch anything, Jim?” asked Frank.

“Hope not, have to pull it in, and I’m tired,” responded the recumbent lad.

“Oh, we’ll do it for you,” said Bart.

“Um,” grunted Jim, that probably being his thanks.

The four comrades were munching their sandwiches, and once in a while Jim would turn his head and look at them. He was hungry but too lazy to ask for something to eat.

“Watch me,” whispered Ned to his companions, and then he prepared to tantalize Jim.

Ned took a piece of cake and tied it to a string. The cord he fastened to the end of his fishing pole and then, moving silently through the bushes, he took a position directly behind Jim, and some distance away.

Slowly Ned raised the pole with its dangling string and bit of cake until the latter was poised right over Jim’s head. Then he slowly lowered the dainty until it was within a few inches of Jim’s mouth.

“A new way to feed lazy folks,” observed Bart in a low tone.

The cake was held there a few minutes, but Jim seemed unaware of its presence. Ned could not understand it. Then Fenn looked over and saw that Jim was asleep.

“Can’t have the trick spoiled that way,” murmured Frank, and tossed a little pebble that hit Jim on the face. The lazy boy opened his eyes, and saw the choice bit of cake directly over his mouth. It was coming right down to him, after the manner in which cocoanuts, bananas and oranges are said to drop into the hands of the happy dwellers in tropical climes.

“Now for some fun,” whispered Fenn.

The cake was almost in Jim’s mouth. He opened his jaws. A happy look came over his face. He had his lips on the dainty, when, with a quick motion, Ned jerked it away.

Jim was so surprised he did not know what to do. The disgusted look on his face made the other boys burst into a roar of laughter. Jim raised himself on his elbow and looked at the conspirators.

“Um!” he ejaculated. He was too lazy to get mad. Then he went off in another doze.

Ned went back to join his companions, all of them still laughing at the joke.

“Let’s make him believe he’s caught something,” suggested Fenn. “Tie something to his line.”

“It’s your turn,” spoke Ned, and Fenn nodded assent.

He made his way quietly down the bank until he could pull Jim’s hook from the water which just touched it. He fastened something to it and then gave the line a sudden yank. Jim had the pole tied to his wrist to prevent a possible big fish from taking it away from him as he slept, and Fenn’s jerk awakened him.

“Got one,” announced Jim, not bothering to sit up straight. Then he began to pull in. The line came up with a suddenness that surprised him, as Fenn let go, and an old rubber boot, that Stumpy had attached, flew over and struck the lazy lad in the face.

“It’s a whopper!” he cried until he saw what it was. Then, with a disgusted look at the plotters he turned over and went to sleep again.

“What can you do with a fellow like that?” asked Ned appealing to his chums.

“Death will never overtake him,” replied Frank. “It will pass him on the road, thinking Jim has already passed in. He certainly is the last word in laziness.”

The four comrades decided they had enough fishing for the day, so, putting away their tackle and adding some fresh wet grass to the baskets of fish in order to keep them cool, they started for home.

“Let’s take the short cut,” suggested Frank. “Right through the woods.”

“Do you know it?” asked Ned. “I nearly got lost once, going that way.”

“I guess I can pick it out.”

So they began their tramp. But they had not gone more than a mile along the half-discernable path before Frank, who was in the lead, uttered an exclamation.

“See a snake?” asked Bart.

“No, but here’s a hut that I never noticed before,” was Frank’s answer. “I wonder if I am on the wrong path. It looks right but I never saw this shack.”

The boys gathered around him. On one side of the path, in a little clearing, half hidden among the trees, was a small log cabin. It looked as though it had always been there, but the boys were sure it must have been erected recently.

“There’s something painted over the door,” said Bart.

The boys looked. There, in brilliant red letters, were the words:

KING OF PAPRICA

CHAPTER V

THE CHALLENGE

“Well what do you think of that?” asked Ned. “Talk about queer coincidences, here’s one! Now if only the crazy man would appear we – ”

“Some one is coming,” exclaimed Frank, as a noise was heard near the hut.

The next instant a short stout man, with black hair and a blacker moustache, came around the corner of the hut. On his head he wore a little gilt crown.

“There’s the King of Paprica!” whispered Bart, but not so low as to prevent the man hearing him.

“At your service,” replied the man, with a bow.

For a few seconds the boys did not know whether to laugh or run. It was certainly a very strange affair, coupled with what the old man had said to them.

“Are you really – ” began Fenn, when the man held up a warning hand.

“Please don’t speak of it,” he said in a mild voice. “I am here for a certain purpose. Have you seen an old man in these woods? Rather a strange character.”

“Something like yourself,” said Ned, but in the faintest whisper.

“Yes, we did,” replied Frank, who seemed somewhat excited over the sight of the man with the gilt crown. “He said you would know he was on guard. He also – ”

“Yes, I know all about it,” was the quick answer. “It’s very unfortunate. I beg of you not to mention it to any one. I may rely upon you?”

“You may,” said Frank so earnestly that his chums wondered whether he knew more about the queer happenings than they did. “We will say nothing.”

“It will all come out right in the end,” went on the man with the crown. “Which way was he going?”

“He seemed headed in this direction,” replied Fenn.

“Then he will arrive in time for the audience,” said the King of Paprica. “I must bid you farewell now,” and with that he went into the hut and closed the door after him.

The boys stood for a few seconds gazing at the silent cabin with its odd inscription, and then Bart exclaimed:

“Come on! Let’s get out of here. First thing you know we’ll be getting crazy ourselves. This place isn’t safe!”

He hurried on through the woods and the others followed.

“What do you make of it?” asked Ned.

“Why, it’s plain enough,” spoke Frank. “The old man we met first is crazy, and this one is his keeper. He’s brought him out here into the woods to cure him, and he probably has to humor him by pretending to be a king. That’s all there is to it. I’ve often read of such cases.”

“Seems to me you’re fond of reading about lunatics,” said Bart.

“I am. I read all I can on such cases. It is very fascinating.”

“Excuse me,” broke in Ned. “I’d rather have something cheerful.”

“Oh, but you have no idea what strange fancies some of the unfortunates have,” said Frank earnestly. In his eyes there glowed a strange light, and his chums, looking at him, felt he had more than ever that queer air of mystery about him.

“Well, we’d better be moving faster than this or we’ll be held up again by the King of Paprica’s guard,” spoke Ned. “I think you’re wrong about it, Frank.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think both those chaps are crazy. It’s a puzzle to tell which one is worse.”

"I agree with you," said Bart. "I wouldn't want to meet either one of them here alone in the woods after dark."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Frank. "Why, a lunatic is the easiest person in the world to get along with. All you have to do is to humor him."

"Let him kill you if he feels so disposed?" suggested Fenn.

"No, but if you should meet one, and he asks you to let him shoot you, fall in with his idea."

"Hand him a gun, eh, Frank?" asked Bart.

"No, but, after he sees you are not going to oppose him, incidentally suggest that the moon is in the wrong quarter for a successful killing, or that the hour has not yet arrived, or that you have nine lives like a cat and that he had much better murder some one who has only one life. Ten chances to one he'll agree with you and let you alone."

"I guess that one chance would fall to me," observed Fenn, "and I'll give the lunatics a wide berth. You can have 'em all, Frank."

"Well, I've read that's the best way to act."

"Oh, you and your reading!" exclaimed Ned. "Let's talk about something cheerful."

The boys hurried on through the woods. More than once they got off the path and had to spend some minutes finding it again, so they did not get home until nearly supper time.

"See you Monday," called Frank to his chums, as he took the road that led to his uncle's house.

"There'll be a ball game next week, I guess," came from Bart. "You may get a chance to play."

"All right," and Frank was off down the road.

"I'd like to see the inside of that hut," observed Ned as he and the other two boys walked on.

"Still harping on that, eh?" asked Fenn. "I want to forget it."

"Think we'd better mention anything about the queer men we saw?" asked Bart, as he and Fenn strolled through the shopping district, which was always a lively place on Saturday nights.

"Who to?"

"The police, of course."

"I don't see as it's any of their affair. The men are harmless."

"But they're lunatics at large."

"I guess it's as Frank says, one is the other's keeper. We'd better mind our own affairs. Besides Frank promised, for us, that we'd keep quiet."

"Then I suppose we'd better. But maybe something will happen."

"What, for instance?"

"They might murder some one."

"Say, have you been reading any five-cent libraries lately?"

"No, but –"

"Forget it," counseled Fenn. "Ah, good evening," he added, bowing to a pretty girl who passed them. "Excuse me, Bart. I want to speak to Jennie," and Fenn left his chum.

"That's the way," growled Bart. "A fellow's no good once he gets girls on the brain," and he walked on alone, and quite disgusted with Stumpy.

"Oh, Fenn!" exclaimed Jennie Smith, as the boy joined her. "Isn't it just like a play to see all the lights and the people hurrying back and forth? 'All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.' I think that's just grand! Oh I wish I could thrill large audiences!" she added, for her secret desire was to become an actress. "What is this I see before me! Is it a dagger, the handle –!"

But just then Jennie collided with a fat man in front of her. He turned, good-naturedly and remarked:

"No, young lady, I'm not a dagger, though I'd like to get thin enough to be taken for one."

Jennie blushed, and Fenn was a little embarrassed. Soon after that Fenn bade Jennie goodnight.

Monday morning when the chums reached school there was a buzz of excitement among those gathered on the campus waiting for the nine o'clock gong to ring.

"Here they come now," called some one. "We'll see what they say."

"What's up?" asked Bart, as he saw the crowd of boys hurrying toward him and his chums.

"We've got a challenge!" exclaimed Lem Gordon, pitcher of the school nine, of which Bart was catcher.

"Who from?" asked Bart.

"The Lakeville Prep. school. It's for Thursday. Dare we take 'em on?"

"We dare do all that may become our school," paraphrased Frank. "Why not?" He did not play on the regular nine.

"They're out of our class," said Lem. "Haven't lost a game this year, and they're way ahead of us. Have better grounds and more time to practice."

"Well, we don't want to show the white feather," said Fenn. "Maybe we'll have a chance."

"We sure will if Lem pitches as he did in the game two weeks ago," spoke Bart. "That certainly won the game for us if anything did."

"Your catching had a lot to do with it," put in Lem, "and so did Ned's fielding."

"To say nothing of Stumpy's work at short," added Bart. "I say let's give 'em a game. They can't any more than wallop us!"

"Hurrah!" yelled the crowd of boys. "Three cheers for Bart!"

"Cut it out!" said Bart. "Think I'm a political candidate? We'll go in with the idea of winning!"

CHAPTER VI

A GREAT GAME OF BALL

Word soon went around that Bart, who was captain of the nine, had decided to accept the challenge which had come to Harry Mathews as manager of the team. The challenge had only arrived that morning and there were few of the high school boys who believed their nine stood any chance of winning.

The Lakeville Preparatory School was a private institution located about three miles from Darewell. It was attended by youths who were fitted for college there, and the pupils were, on the average, older and larger than the Darewell High School lads. Their nine had an enviable reputation in local sporting circles.

The high school boys were so worked up over the prospect of the game, with rivals they had never yet ventured to play, that there was less attention to lessons than usual among the members of the nine, and their supporters, that morning.

Fenn must have been thinking quite seriously of the pending contest for, when answering in the ancient history class the question: "Who was Cæsar's greatest rival?" he replied solemnly:

"The Lakeville Prep. School!"

There was a burst of laughter in which even the instructor had to join.

"We'll have to practice for the next three days," said Bart at noon recess. "I'll have to get my new glove limbered up, and, Lem, you'll have to think up some new curves."

"Yes, I need practice all right," responded the pitcher. "Suppose we have a scrub game this afternoon?"

"That suits me," replied Bart.

When school was over a picked nine prepared to give battle to the regular one in order to bring out the weak points.

"Don't you think we ought to have a substitute pitcher?" asked Lem, as he prepared to go into the box.

"You aren't afraid of breaking down, are you?" asked Bart anxiously.

"No, only you never can tell what is going to happen."

"Here you go, Stumpy!" called Bart as his chum was tossing the ball to the right-fielder in the warming-up practice.

Fenn sent the leather spheroid toward the catcher with all the strength of his arm. Bart caught it on his heavy glove. As he did so he called in a low voice to Lem, and the two held a whispered conversation.

"Do you think he can do it?" Lem asked.

"Yes, if we spring it on him suddenly and don't give him a chance to get nervous. That's Stumpy's main fault. But I'm hoping there'll be no need for it."

"Well, I'll do my best," responded Lem.

The practice game was started, and several weak points developed in the regular high school nine. But Bart was not discouraged. There had been little opportunity for games, of late, and the boys were a trifle slow. He coached them along, suggesting improvements and offering words of advice to some players.

"Good!" cried the captain to Frank, who made a brilliant catch in center field. Frank was playing on the scrub nine. "You'll be a regular if you keep on."

Frank was not a natural baseball player. His forte was football, but once in a while he made brilliant plays on the nine, when he took some other player's place.

"A couple of days more like this and we'll be fit to give 'em all they want, to beat us," remarked Bart as the boys gathered up the balls, bats and gloves preparatory to going home.

"If we only could beat 'em!" exclaimed Ned.

"If we hold 'em to a tie I'll be satisfied," retorted Bart. "That's something no high school nine has ever done to 'em."

For the next two afternoons there was hard practice. On one occasion Bart called on Stumpy to take the pitcher's box, Lem making an excuse that he wanted to rest his arm. Stumpy wondered at this, as Sandy Merton was the one who usually substituted for Lem. But this time Sandy was left on third, his regular position.

Fenn had no idea he could pitch. He knew he could send in a straight ball, and he did this in practice. When Lem came back in the box on one occasion after Stumpy had been filling it, he asked in a low tone of Bart:

"Will he do?"

"I think so, but don't say anything."

The morning of the game the Darewell nine assembled before school, on the campus and indulged in some fast practice. The contest was to take place on the Preparatory school grounds, and in answer to a general petition Professor McCloud agreed to dismiss all classes an hour earlier that day to enable the journey to be made.

The nine and the substitutes went over in a big stage but the boys and girls who were to be spectators took trolley cars that ran close to the grounds.

"They're a husky looking lot," observed Bart as the stage dropped its load close to the diamond, and he observed the other nine on the field. "They play fast, snappy ball, and we've got our work cut out for us."

The Darewell team soon got into practice, their methods being closely watched by their rivals. Captain Benson, of the other club, greeted Bart, and the preliminaries were soon arranged.

"Play ball!" called the umpire, and the game was on.

The visitors had won the toss for innings, and in consequence Lem had to open the struggle. The first ball he pitched went wild, and the next one struck the batter, giving him his base.

"Rotten!" whispered Lem to himself, disgustedly.

"Take it easy," advised Bart, walking out to the pitcher's box. "Keep cool."

The advice did Lem good, and he struck out the next two men. Then they began to find his curves and he was hit for two single baggers and one three. At the end of the inning the game stood three runs in favor of the Preparatory school.

It was Bart's first turn at the bat, and he managed to get to first on balls. Then Ned lined out a nice two bagger, and Fenn planted one over in right field that enabled Bart and Ned to get in. The inning ended three to two in favor of the home team.

For the next four innings neither side scored. It was a pitchers' battle and Lem was doing fine work. But, on the other hand few of the Darewell boys could find the curves of the Preparatory school's pitcher.

The next inning the home team got in three more runs and the visitors two, making the score four to six, against the high school boys.

"We've got to do better than this," said Bart, as his team came to the bat for the eighth inning which had netted the Preparatory team one run, making their total seven.

The high school team seemed to "take a brace," for they made three runs by hard work.

"That ties 'em!" cried Bart excitedly, as he came to the bat. "Now to beat 'em."

As he spoke there was some sort of a commotion near the bench where the Darewell players were sitting. Then came a cry:

"Ouch! My wrist! Let up, Sandy!"

"What's the matter?" asked the captain, running over to where he saw a struggle.

“Oh, Sandy Merton tried to play a trick on Lem,” explained Ned. “He’s always up to some foolishness.”

“I was only showing a new wrestling hold,” said Sandy. “My foot slipped and I fell on him.”

“Are you hurt, Lem?” asked the captain.

“Wrist sprained, I guess,” and he extended his hand which was beginning to swell.

“That settles your pitching,” remarked Bart. “Pity you aren’t left handed. Well, it’s a good thing we provided for an emergency. Sandy, you ought to have better sense,” and he spoke sternly.

“Oh, if you’re going to act that way about it I’ll not play,” and Sandy started away.

“Suit yourself,” said Bart calmly. “Frank, you take third in Sandy’s place.”

“Who’ll pitch?” asked Ned.

“I’ll decide when the inning’s over,” replied Bart, as he went back to the bat.

Probably the little scene made Bart nervous, for he struck out, an unusual thing with him. That put the side out, the inning ending in the tie score. There was little apprehension in the ranks of the Preparatory team, but there were anxious hearts among the high school supporters. The cheering died away.

“Stumpy; you pitch,” called Bart.

“Me! Why I can’t pitch! I never pitched a regular game.”

“I’m captain, and you pitch,” said Bart decidedly, and much amazed at his selection Stumpy walked into the box.

The suddenness of it was just his salvation. He had no chance to get nervous.

“Can he do it?” asked Ned, as he started for his place.

“He’s got a fine, natural curve,” replied Bart. “I never noticed it until the other day. Discovered it by accident. I think he’ll make good.”

And Stumpy did. He hardly knew how he did it, but he had a knack of throwing the ball that fooled the best batters on the other team. He struck out the first two men, and there arose murmurs of anxiety among the rivals.

“Why didn’t they put him in first?” asked the captain of the home team of some of his men, wondering why so good a pitcher had been left to the last.

The third batter managed to plant the leather in a long flight in the direction of third base. But Frank was right on the alert. He made a splendid jump and caught it, putting the side out minus a run. There was a wild burst of cheering from the high school girls and boys.

“Only takes one run to beat ’em!” exclaimed Bart as his team went to the bat for the last time. “Somebody get it!”

Somebody did. It was Ned, who came first to the plate. He lined a beauty just over the center fielder’s head, and got two bases on it. Joe Wright brought him in, and such a yell as went up from the high school crowd was seldom heard on that diamond.

“That does it!” yelled Bart, capering about. “Stumpy! you’re all to the good!”

“But Ned won the game,” objected Fenn.

“Your pitching held them down just when they would have walked away from us. You’re all to the good, Stumpy!”

“Three cheers for Stumpy!” called some one, and they came with a vim that made Fenn blush.

CHAPTER VII

ALICE HAS A CHANCE

The four chums were certainly regarded as the heroes of the school that day, for they had been instrumental in winning a victory that went down in the history of the institution as a most brilliant one.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Stumpy," said Ned, as the nine reached the high school grounds on the return trip.

"Me either," replied Fenn. "It sort of 'growed,' like Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"To think of beating the Preps," murmured Bart. "It's the finest thing that ever happened."

"How's your wrist, Lem?" asked Frank.

"Hurts like the mischief. Sandy came down on it with all his force."

"Say, I wonder if he meant that?" asked Fenn.

"Meant it? What do you mean?" asked Bart.

"Well it looked queer," went on Fenn. "There we were in a tie game and we needed every advantage we could get to hold it. Then Sandy gets up to one of his tricks, and he might have known something would happen. It always does when he tries his funny work."

"You don't mean to say you think he deliberately hurt me, do you?" asked Lem, winding his handkerchief around the swollen wrist.

"Well, I wouldn't want to accuse any one unjustly," Stumpy continued. "But I heard he was going around saying things about being done out of his place as substitute pitcher, in practice, by me. Maybe he thought he'd just hurt Lem a little so's he could have a chance to finish out the game."

"I'd hate to believe it of him," remarked the captain, "but he certainly did act rather strange. He went off angry, too. Well, it can't be helped. Guess we'd better not say anything about it unless he tries to do something else. Come on to the drug store, Lem, and we'll get some arnica for that wrist."

Most of the boys dispersed at the school campus where the stage had left them, but the four chums, with Lem in their midst, walked up the street together.

"I wouldn't be afraid to tackle 'em again," observed Ned. "We've got their measure now."

"Maybe they'll ask for a return game," said Bart. "Hello," he added, "here comes my sister and Jennie Smith. Look out, Stumpy, or Jennie will be doing the Juliet act to you."

"Guess not," spoke Fenn, and he started to walk away, but Ned held him.

"Don't desert in the face of the enemy," he said, and Fenn had to stay.

"Oh, is some one hurt?" cried Alice, as she saw the cloth around Lem's wrist. "How nice! I mean how fortunate I happened to meet you! Now I will have a chance to treat you!"

"Going to treat us to ice cream sodas?" asked her brother unfeelingly.

"Don't be foolish, Bart! What is it Lem; is your wrist broken?"

"Only sprained, I think."

"Let me look at it," demanded Alice, and, regardless of the crowd that gathered, when the five boys and two girls formed a group on the sidewalk, Alice proceeded to undo the handkerchief and other cloth Lem had wound about his wrist.

"Wait a minute," said Alice. "I must look at my book on first-aid-to-the-injured to make sure what it is," and she took a little volume from a bag she carried on her arm. Rapidly turning the pages she read:

"A sprain is the result of violent twisting, stretching or partial tearing of the ligaments about a joint, and there is often a fracture at the ends of the bones.' Are you sure there isn't a fracture, Lem? I'd love to treat a fracture as I never had a chance at one yet."

“I hope not,” murmured the disabled pitcher. “It’s bad enough as it is.”

He was rather uneasy under the pressure Alice brought to bear on his wrist as she turned it this way and that, in an endeavor to see if it was broken.

“Do I hurt you?” she asked.

“Well – er – that is – no!” and Lem shut his teeth tightly together.

“Come right over to the drug store,” spoke Alice, as she led Lem by the injured wrist. He tried not to show the pain she unconsciously caused him. “I will get some hot water and hold your hand in it for an hour and a half.”

“Half an hour’s enough,” Lem said. “I haven’t got time for any more.”

“I must go by the book,” Alice declared firmly. “A good nurse always does that.”

Alice walked into the drug store, leading Lem as though she had done that sort of thing all her life. The four chums followed.

“Some hot water please, in a deep basin,” requested Alice of the clerk, and, though the man behind the counter looked in wonder at the strange cavalcade, he brought out the basin full of the steaming liquid.

“Put your wrist in,” commanded Alice as she rolled up Lem’s sleeve.

He thrust his arm in, half way to the elbow.

“Ouch!” he yelled. “It’s hot!”

“Of course it is,” replied the girl coolly, “it has to be. Now while we are waiting the hour and a half let’s talk about the game. It will help you to forget the pain. Maybe Bart has money for some ice cream soda.”

“I’ll buy ’em,” said Lem, trying to get his uninjured hand into his pocket.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” decided Alice. “You’re a patient. Whoever heard of a patient standing treat?” and she motioned to her brother.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STRANGE BOATMAN

Bart went over to the soda fountain and ordered “something for all hands” as he expressed it. Meanwhile Alice remained at Lem’s side, holding his wrist down well under the hot water. Lem’s face had lost some of its pained look. The heat was reducing the swelling and, consequently, the pressure.

“Will you kindly get me some cotton and bandages ready?” asked Alice of the clerk, and he produced them at once.

“When you going to graduate as a trained nurse?” asked Bart, as he came back, a glass of soda in each hand.

“Little boys shouldn’t ask the nurse questions,” spoke Alice, with a laugh.

“I say, how’s Lem going to eat his?” asked Frank. “He’s only got one hand, and it’s hard work dishing up the cream with a long handled spoon if you don’t hold the glass.”

“You boys will have to hold mine and Lem’s,” said Alice. “We can eat with one hand then,” and so it was done. Bart held Lem’s glass and Fenn took charge of Alice’s. When they finished the boys who had acted as soda-bearers regaled themselves on the beverage.

“Say, Alice, how long before that’ll be done? It’s been boiling half an hour now,” remarked Bart.

“More hot water, please,” the girl requested of the clerk. “A little longer,” she added to her brother. “Then I’m going to bandage it and we can go.”

To give her credit Alice did bandage the sprained wrist quite well. She opened her first-aid book on the counter in front of her and followed a diagram showing how to fold the cloth. The druggist complimented her on her skill.

“This is my first big case,” said Alice with a smile. She was very much in earnest over it, however lightly the boys treated her ambition. “I hope I have some more soon.”

“Well, I hope it isn’t me,” said Lem.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” said Alice, looking a little offended.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that!” Lem hastened to add. “It feels ever so much better. I meant I hope I won’t get hurt again. The season is young yet and we’ve lots of games ahead of us.”

“Guess we’ll have to take Alice along to look after the wounded,” said Frank. “She’ll be the mascot.”

“Somebody was mascot to-day all right,” came from Bart. “We certainly were in luck. Stumpy, hereafter you’re the regular substitute pitcher. Sandy Merton can consider himself released.”

It was dusk when the little group left the drug store to go to their several homes.

“You must come and report to me to-morrow,” said Alice as she bade Lem good-bye. “Be careful to keep the bandage on.”

“I will,” he promised.

His house was in the opposite direction to that which the four chums took. The chums walked on slowly together, Alice and Jennie hurrying away to do an errand for Mrs. Keene. As the boys turned a corner they almost collided with a man who was walking quickly in the opposite direction.

“I beg pardon!” he muttered as he passed through the group of lads. They were too surprised to respond and when Bart did think to say, “certainly,” the man was several feet away hurrying up the street. The boys gazed after him.

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