

Stratemeyer Edward

**The Putnam Hall Encampment:
or, The Secret of
the Old Mill**



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«Public Domain»

Stratemeyer E.

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E. Stratemeyer — «Public Domain»,

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Arthur M. Winfield

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INTRODUCTION

My Dear Boys:

This story is complete in itself but forms the fifth volume in a line issued under the general title of "Putnam Hall Series."

As I have mentioned several times, this series was started at the solicitation of those who had read some of my "Rover Boys" books and who wanted to know something about what took place at Putnam Hall military academy before the Rovers went there.

In my first volume, called, "The Putnam Hall Cadets," I told how Captain Putnam happened to organize that famous school, and how Jack Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore came to be among his first pupils. The boys made a host of friends and also some enemies, and proved their worth on more than one occasion.

In the second volume, "The Putnam Hall Rivals," I related the outcome of several contests on the field of sports, and also gave the particulars of a thrilling balloon ride and of a strange discovery in the woods. Then came "The Putnam Hall Champions," with more contests, in one of which Jack Ruddy's enemies played him a foul trick.

Ever since the opening of the school there had been trouble with an overbearing teacher named Crabtree. When Crabtree and another teacher were left in sole charge of the school during the master's absence, this trouble reached its climax, as related in "The Putnam Hall Rebellion." The boys ran away and would not go back to school until Captain Putnam appeared to smooth matters out.

In the present volume are related the things that occurred during a long encampment, when the cadets marched from the academy to a beautiful spot on the shore of a lake. Not far away was an old mill, and at this place some of the lads fell in with a most unusual mystery. What that mystery was, and what it led to, I leave the pages which follow to explain.

Again I thank my former readers, young and old, for the nice things they have said about my stories. I trust the present volume affords you equal pleasure in the reading.

*Affectionately and sincerely yours,
Arthur M. Winfield.*

CHAPTER I IN THE BELFRY

“I say, Jack!”

“What’s the matter now, Pepper?” demanded Major Jack Ruddy, for the cry was a startling one.

“We are locked in!” answered Pepper Ditmore.

“Locked in?” repeated the young major of the Putnam Hall battalion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that the trap door is fastened. I can’t budge it.”

“Oh, it must be stuck,” said Jack, as he started to climb down a ladder upon which he stood. “Why, there is nobody in the belfry but ourselves.”

“Don’t be so sure of that, Jack. Some of the other fellows may have followed us,” answered Pepper. He was down on his knees on the floor, pulling at an iron ring with all his strength. “Maybe you want to try this,” he added, as he gave an additional tug.

The young major of the school cadets leaped from the bottom of the ladder and took hold of the iron ring, which was set in the edge of a heavy trap door. He pulled with might and main, but the trap door refused to budge.

“Regular tug-of-war!” he panted. “Say, if we can’t get this door open what are we to do?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“It’s the only way out of the belfry, Pep.”

“I know that – unless we climb out of one of the windows.”

“Ugh! I don’t care to risk my neck in that manner.” And Jack Ruddy gave a slight shiver as he spoke.

“Well, we’ve got to get out somehow,” continued Pepper, making a wry face. “We don’t want to stay here all night.”

“If some of the other fellows played this trick on us – ”

“They ought to be hammered for it.”

“Right you are. Maybe it was Reff Ritter.”

“Say, that’s so! Don’t you remember, we saw him and his cronies on their way to the Hall when we came here? Maybe they followed us, came up the stairs on the sly, and bolted the trap from the under side. I shut the door myself – so that we wouldn’t fall through the hole in the dark.”

“Well, if Reff Ritter & Company did this thing we’ll have an account to settle with them – when we get free.”

“Right you are. But before we talk about getting square let us get this trap door open and get out of here.”

The scene was the tall tower of a village church. The time was about nine o’clock of a fine moon-light night, and on all sides everything was quiet and serene.

An hour before, the two boys already introduced had left the school which they attended on a “dare” from some of their chums. The dare involved visiting the Cedarville Union Church. The boys were to steal into the edifice by way of a side window, usually left open to admit fresh air. They were to make their way into the gallery and thence to the tower where hung a big bell. They were to remove the clapper of the bell and bring it back to the school with them. If they accomplished the feat the other students were to get up a feast in their honor.

To those who have read the previous volumes of this “Putnam Hall Series” the two lads will need no special introduction. But for the benefit of others let me state that Jack Ruddy and Pepper Ditmore were chums living, when at home, in the western part of New York state. Jack was a little

the older of the two, and was of a more or less serious turn of mind. Pepper was full of fun, and was frequently called The Imp, a nickname that fitted him well.

As related in the first volume of this series, called “The Putnam Hall Cadets,” the boys had been sent to a new institution of learning, located on Cayuga Lake. This military academy was presided over by Captain Victor Putnam, a retired army officer, who ran the place somewhat on the lines of our National school at West Point. The place was a large one, consisting of the school building proper, the gymnasium, the boathouse, and several other buildings. The captain was a strict disciplinarian, but he had a kindly manner about him, and the majority of the students liked him very much.

When Jack and Pepper came to the Hall everything was, of course, new to them. But it did not take them long to make some good friends, including Andy Snow, who was of an acrobatic turn, Stuffer Singleton, who preferred eating to studying, Dale Blackmore, who was a great football player, Joseph Hogan, who, because of his Irish accent, was usually called Emerald, and Joe Nelson, a lad who was the best scholar in the academy. They also made some enemies, including Reff Ritter, already mentioned by them, and his cronies, Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton.

At first the cadets were given their regular school studies and taught how to drill and march, but when they could do creditable duty as cadets Captain Putnam allowed them to ballot for their officers. This election resulted in Jack becoming major of the Putnam Hall Battalion, with Henry Lee captain of Company A and Bart Conners captain of Company B. Jack wanted Pepper to try for an officer’s position, but The Imp declined.

“I’ll continue to be a high private in the rear rank,” said Pepper, with a wink. “I can have more fun that way – especially if I have a major over me who knows when to keep his eyes shut.”

“Humph! I expect to have fun myself, even if I am a major,” had been Jack’s answer.

There had been a keen contest over the election of officers. An overbearing youth named Dan Baxter had wanted to be major, and he had bribed Gus Coulter and some others to vote for him, but without success. Baxter was now away on a vacation, and Jack and Pepper hoped he would remain away for good.

Following the election of officers, the chums had had several adventures, not the least of which was their aiding in the rescue of George Strong, one of the teachers, who had been made a prisoner in a hut in the woods by some insane relatives.

The teacher’s ancestry dated back to the Revolution, and he told the boys of a treasure buried by his relatives during war times. How the lads unearthed the treasure has been related in detail in the second volume of this series entitled, “The Putnam Hall Rivals.”

With the coming of summer, the cadets turned their attention to sports in the field and on the lake. Jack’s uncle had presented him with a fine sloop, and in this the youthful major sailed several races, as told about in “The Putnam Hall Champions.” The boys also had a bicycle race and a hill-climbing contest, and likewise went bowling against a rival institution of learning called Pornell Academy. At Pornell at the time was a youth named Fred Century, but this lad became so disgusted at the actions of some of the boys, and at Doctor Pornell, that he left the school and came to Putnam Hall.

As time went on Reff Ritter showed up as the worst boy at Putnam Hall. He did all in his power to get Jack and Pepper and their chums into trouble, and even dosed the young major with some French powders that made Jack violently sick. But this trick was eventually exposed and Ritter came close to being expelled. It was Jack who asked Captain Putnam to give the wayward youth another chance to reform, but Ritter did not appreciate his rival’s generosity.

For a short while matters ran along smoothly at Putnam Hall, but then came a happening far out of the ordinary, as related in full in “The Putnam Hall Rebellion.” During the absence of the head of the institution, and of George Strong, the Hall was left in charge of Josiah Crabtree, a teacher hated by nearly all the cadets, and a new assistant named Cuddle. Cuddle was a peculiar

man who did not believe in hearty food for boys, and he almost starved the cadets, so that they had to rebel. For this they were locked in their dormitories. But they escaped at night, and went off to camp in the woods. Here the crowd split in two, Reff Ritter heading the insurgents. Ritter did all he could to annoy the crowd under Jack, and there might have been a pitched battle had not Captain Putnam put in an appearance. He made the cadets march back to the Hall, and there held some interesting interviews with all connected with the rebellion. As a consequence the students were allowed to return to their studies and Cuddle was pre-emptorily dismissed from the institution, while Josiah Crabtree escaped with a lecture.

The Ritter crowd did not come back to the Hall until after a severe storm had drenched all to the skin. They were in far from a good humor and many of them blamed Reff for the discomforts they had suffered, and gave their former crony the cold shoulder.

"It's all that Jack Ruddy's fault," growled Ritter. "He and Pep Ditmore want to run everything. If I had had my say from the start we would have had a fine time." But only Coulter, Paxton and a few others believed this. The others said very frankly they thought Ritter had made a mess of it when he got them to run away from the main body of the rebelling cadets.

With the return of Captain Putnam and George Strong, the students settled down once more to their studies. The dictatorial Josiah Crabtree was, for the time being, much subdued, yet the cadets knew that sooner or later he would become as harsh as ever. The one point in his favor was that he was a learned man and could teach well when he put his mind to it.

It was Andy Snow who had proposed the trip to the belfry of the Cedarville church, located about a mile and a half from the Hall. He had dared Jack and Pepper to make the trip with him, and the talk had been taken up by Stuffer Singleton, Fred Century, Dale Blackmore, and half a dozen others.

"They won't dare to do it," said Dale. "I'll bet an apple pie on it."

"And I'll wager ice-cream for the crowd," added Stuffer.

"With most of the ice-cream for Stuffer himself," put in Pepper.

"I'm willing to try it," declared Jack.

"So am I," added Pepper. "We owe the sexton of that church one anyway, for chasing us from Mr. Dalter's orchard when he had no right to do it."

"Let us get the clapper and hide it in old Crabtree's bed," said Andy. But just then he was called away by one of the monitors. Then he sent a note back stating Captain Putnam wished him to do an errand, so he could not make the trip.

"I suppose that ends it," said Dale Blackmore.

"Nobody dares to go," said another cadet.

"Yes, I'll go," said Pepper promptly.

"So will I," came from Jack. "But mum's the word, remember. We don't want any of the teachers to learn what is going on."

"We'll be as silent as oysters in a stew," said Stuffer.

"Sure an' 'twill be a great sphort to put the clapper in ould Crabtree's bed," said Emerald Hogan.

"Who is going to do that?" asked another.

"I'll do it – if Pep and Jack get the clapper," answered the Irish cadet promptly.

A little later Jack and Pepper set off on their quest, stealing away from Putnam Hall campus unobserved. They got half way to the church and then passed Reff Ritter and his cronies, who went by without speaking.

"This is dead easy," remarked Jack, as they climbed in the church window. They had a lantern with them, and lighting this, mounted the stairs to the gallery, and then ascended the long ladder leading to the belfry floor. Here they opened the trap door and then closed it again, as already stated.

The bell was close at hand and it was a comparatively easy matter to detach the iron clapper. Pepper came down the ladder with it and then made the startling discovery with which our story opens. The trap door had been bolted from the under side and the two cadets were prisoners in the belfry, at a distance of seventy-five feet from the ground.

CHAPTER II

JACK IN PERIL

“We are in for it, Jack.”

“So it would seem, Pep. Do you really think Reff Ritter and his crowd came back here and fastened the trap door?”

“I think Reff came back. I don’t know about the others. You’ll remember Reff is just aching to do something to get us into trouble.”

“Wonder if we can’t pry the door up in some way.”

“We can try. But what is there to work with?”

Cautiously the two cadets allowed the light from the lantern to flash around the interior of the belfry. They had to be careful, for fear somebody below would see the light and wonder what it meant, for the belfry was never illuminated. An investigation by the sexton or some officers of the church might lead to arrest. Once some students from Pornell Academy had painted the porch of the church red and this had caused a great commotion in the community, and arrests might have been made had not one of the pupils’ fathers come forward, paid for repainting the porch, and made the church a handsome donation in the bargain. But even with this, some folks were still “sore,” and ready to pounce down on any boys who might do the property an injury.

Jack and Pepper knew well enough that they had no right to touch the bell clapper, and I am not upholding them in their actions. But they were wide-awake boys, always ready for fun, and saw no great harm in what they proposed to do. Sooner or later the clapper would be returned to its proper place – in fact it looked now as if it would be returned much quicker than originally intended.

The two boys allowed the rays from the lantern to sweep the floor and walls of the belfry, but without bringing to view anything with which to pry up the trap door. Then they set the lantern down and both got hold of the iron ring in the door.

“Pull with all your might!” exclaimed the young major.

“All right, here goes!” cried Pepper.

Both gave “a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether.” At first there was no result, then of a sudden the iron ring broke from the door. The cadets were not prepared for this, and over both went backwards. Pepper landed on the lantern, knocking it over and breaking the glass and bending the top. Fortunately the light went out, so there was no danger of fire.

“Wow!” spluttered the mischievous youth, as he rolled over. “Oh, what luck!”

“Are you hurt?” questioned the young major quickly. “Did the glass cut you?”

“I guess not, but I’ve got some of it in my jacket, Jack. I didn’t think the ring would break away like that; did you?”

“No.”

The broken glass had scattered all over the floor and the belfry was now dark excepting for the light from the moon that shone in the window.

“Got a match?” asked Jack, after a brief pause, during which he searched his pockets in vain for what he wanted.

His chum felt in first one pocket and then another.

“Nary a one,” he answered. “But what’s the use anyway? The lantern is busted, we can’t use it.”

“We might get a little light.”

“Well, I haven’t even a piece of a match. I meant to bring a pocketful, but I forgot it.”

With caution, the two cadets moved around the now semi-dark belfry. At every step the glass crunched under their feet.

“With the ring gone we can’t get any hold on the trap door,” sighed Pepper. “Jack, it looks as if we were booked to stay here for some time.”

“That’s so. But don’t you think the others will come to our aid, if we don’t get back to the Hall soon?”

“Maybe – but they may wait longer than we want them to.”

“Wonder if we can’t climb down from the outside? We could use the bell rope.”

The boys approached the window into which the moonlight was streaming and peered out. All they could see was the church roof and the roadway some distance from the building, for the edge of the roof cut off a sight of the ground directly below.

“I think I’ll try the rope,” said Jack.

“If we only had Andy along he’d go down the rope like a monkey,” returned Pepper, remembering Andy Snow’s acrobatic cleverness.

The bell rope ran from the bell down through a hole in the floor to the lower vestibule of the church. The boys pulled on it and it came up a length of probably sixty feet. Then it stuck fast.

“Must be a knot in it, too big to slip through the hole,” was Pepper’s comment, after both had pulled with all their might.

“I reckon there is enough of it anyway,” answered the young major. “We’ll cut it off and try it.”

“If we do that we may have to pay for a new rope.”

“Oh, the rope can be spliced. Maybe it’s spliced already.”

Jack got out his knife and the rope was soon cut in two. They heard the lower end drop down to a flooring below.

Making certain that the top end of the rope was well secured to the bell, so that it could not break away, and testing the strands to see if they would sustain his weight, Jack, aided by Pepper, lowered the rope out of the front window, first, however, putting several knots in it. It slid down over the edge of the roof and both boys kept lowering it until there was no more to pay out.

“Now for the great climb!” exclaimed the young major of the Putnam Hall cadets. “If I get down safely, Pepper, I’ll be up in a jiffy and open that trap door for you.”

“Be careful, Jack. I rather hate to see you trust yourself on that rope.”

“Oh, I guess it is safe enough – and I’ve gone down on a rope in the gym many a time, as you know.”

With caution Jack climbed out of the belfry window and took hold of the rope. Then down he went, hand under hand, with his legs twisted around the rope at the same time. Pepper watched him with keen interest and almost held his breath as he saw his chum disappear over the edge of the broad-guttered roof.

“He’ll have a pretty big drop I’m thinking, if that rope doesn’t reach,” mused The Imp, as he waited in the belfry. “We ought to have measured the rope – to see how long it was. Maybe it won’t come to within twenty feet of the ground.”

Several minutes passed – they seemed hours to Pepper – and he waited anxiously for some call from his chum.

“Jack! Are you down?” he cried finally.

“No!” was the surprising answer. “I’m stuck!”

“Stuck!”

“Yes. A knot on the lower end of the rope has caught on some kind of a brace, and I’m stuck.”

“Where?”

“Down here, on the front of the church!”

“Can’t you climb back?”

“N – no, I – ain’t go – got th – the – strength!”

The words came in jerks and showed that the young major was all but exhausted. He had done what he could to loosen the lower end of the rope but without success. Climbing back to the tower had proved equally difficult. Now he was sitting astride of the rope, clutching it with both hands and leaning against the building for support.

Pepper was frantic, but could do nothing to aid his chum. Had the lower end of the rope been loose he might have raised Jack to the belfry. He climbed out of the window as far as he dared and looked over the edge of the roof.

“Jack, can I do anything?” he asked, frantically.

“I – I do – don’t know,” was the gasped-out reply.

“Can’t you get that end of the rope loose somehow?”

“No, it won’t budge.”

It made Pepper a little dizzy to look directly downward over the edge of the gutter and for a moment he allowed his gaze to stray to the roadway beyond the church. In the moonlight he saw the figure of a man or boy approaching.

“Here comes somebody!” he cried. “I’m going to call for help.”

“We’ll be caught,” faltered Jack.

“I don’t care. I am not going to keep quiet and see you run the risk of breaking your neck.”

Pepper set up a loud call. At first the person in the road paid no attention, but presently he stopped short and looked upward in wonder.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, as he came closer.

“We are in trouble and we want you to help us,” answered Pepper. “Hurry up, before my friend tumbles down and kills himself.”

“Why, you are on a rope, aren’t you?” asked the person below, and now Pepper and Jack saw that he was a boy, very tall and thin.

“Yes, and I am caught fast,” answered Jack.

“How did you get there, this time of night? What do you want me to do?” fired back the tall boy.

“Come into the church, run up to the belfry, and unfasten the trap door!” called Pepper. “I am a prisoner, otherwise I’d go to my friend’s aid.”

“How can I get in?” asked the strange boy, noting that the church doors were closed.

“Climb through the side window which is open.”

The newcomer started for the side of the building, but suddenly halted.

“See here, this is a mighty queer proceedings,” he said slowly. “I don’t know but what you are thieves. Maybe I had better go for outside help.”

“We are not thieves – we are military school cadets, out on a lark,” answered Jack. “Can’t you see my uniform? Help me to get down and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Yes, I can see your buttons,” answered the tall boy, and without another word he ran for the window and disappeared inside the church. He knocked around in the darkness but soon found the way upstairs and to the belfry ladder. Then Pepper heard him fumbling at the fastening of the trap door. Soon the door came up with a bang.

“There you are!” cried the stranger. “Now, if you want to help your friend you had better be quick about it.”

“Thank you for opening the trap door!” answered Pepper. He started down the ladder after the other lad. “Will you help me? We’ll pay you well.”

“I don’t want any pay for helping to save a fellow’s life,” was the quick response.

It did not take either of the boys long to reach the yard beside the church. In the rear was a long shed, where horses were tied up during services. Pepper knew that the sexton kept a ladder in this shed and he mentioned the fact to the stranger. The ladder was found, and both boys ran with it to the side of the church and started to raise it up at the spot where Jack was still astride of the rope.

It was no mean task to raise the long and heavy ladder. But both Pepper and the stranger realized that Jack's life hung in the balance and they worked with a strength born of despair. With a bang the top of the ladder struck the side of the church, directly under the young major's legs.

"Can you reach it, Jack?" questioned Pepper anxiously.

"I – guess – so!" panted Jack, and let himself down at arms' length on the rope. His feet struck the top rung of the ladder, and in a few seconds more he came down to the ground. He staggered as he struck the grass, and then, lurching into Pepper's arms, he fainted dead away.

CHAPTER III

REFF RITTER'S CONFESSION

"He got down just in time," said the strange boy, as he assisted Pepper in making Jack comfortable on the grass. "Is there a well handy? If there is I'll get some water."

"There is a well back of the church," answered Pepper. "But I reckon my chum needs a chance to get back his wind more than anything else," he added.

The strange youth ran off, to return presently with a large tin dipper full of water. With this he and Pepper bathed the young major's face and gave him a drink. Jack soon opened his eyes and sat up.

"Did I – I fall?" he stammered.

"Not until you were on the ground," answered Pepper.

"You held out just long enough and no longer," said the strange boy, with a short laugh. "You were plucky to hold out as long as you did."

"It was a terrible experience," answered Jack soberly. "I thought at one time I'd surely lose my grip and break my neck!"

"You keep quiet awhile," advised Pepper. "You need a chance to rest and get back your nerve, that's all."

"He certainly had nerve!" said the strange youth, with a grin. "But, say, you promised to tell me what it was all about. I know there is a military school near here called Putnam Hall? Do you go there?"

"Yes," answered Pepper. "But – er – would you mind helping me put that ladder back before we talk? We don't want to be spotted if we can help it."

"Sure, I'll help you," cried the stranger, and soon he and The Imp had the ladder down and back to the shed. By this time Jack had recovered sufficiently to stand up. He was still a bit dizzy but his strength was coming back fast.

"I am Pepper Ditmore," said that youth to the stranger. "And this is my chum, Jack Ruddy. I am only a private at the Hall but Jack is an officer."

"And I am Bert Field," said the stranger, and extended his hand, which both of the other boys shook. "I am just stopping in Cedarville for a day or two on business which – er – but that won't interest you," he added hastily. "It was a lark, eh, climbing into the belfry?"

"Yes, we intended to take away the bell clapper," answered Pepper. "Some of the other cadets dared us to do it."

"But how did you get locked in?"

"We think one of the other cadets – who is down on us – followed us and fastened the trap door. I suppose he thinks we are up there yet."

"I want to thank you for what you did for me, Field," said Jack, earnestly.

"Oh, that's all right."

"If you'll – er – accept a gift, I'll be pleased –"

"No, thank you just the same, Ruddy. I don't want a thing."

"But we'd like to do something for you – to show you we appreciate your coming to our assistance," put in Pepper.

"Maybe you'd like to visit our school?" suggested the young major.

"Thanks, but I haven't time just now. But tell me, do you know a man living in these parts named Jabez Trask?" went on Bert Field, eagerly.

"No," answered Jack, and Pepper shook his head.

"Never heard of him?"

“No,” said Pepper.

“Too bad! I thought maybe you boys knew about everybody living in this neighborhood.”

“Is it somebody you want to find?” questioned Jack.

“Yes, but – er – well, never mind. Don’t you bother your head about it.”

“The postmaster might be able to tell you where this Jabez Trask lives,” said the young major. “Why not ask him?”

“Well, – er – I don’t want to ask too many questions in public,” stammered Bert Field. “You see I – that is – can I trust you with my secret? You’ve trusted me with yours.”

“Certainly,” came from both of the Putnam Hall cadets.

“Well then, I want to find this Jabez Trask without his knowing anything about it.”

“Why, what in the world – ” began Pepper, for he scented a mystery connected with the youth with whom he and his chum had just become acquainted.

“I can’t explain it – or at least I don’t wish to, now,” answered Bert Field, quickly. “Please don’t say anything about it to anybody.” He pulled a silver watch from his pocket. “Phew! after ten o’clock! I’ll have to be going! Goodbye! Maybe we’ll meet again!”

“Good-bye!” answered Pepper.

“Much obliged!” added Jack. And then the tall, thin boy turned out of the churchyard and hurried along the country road, some bushes and trees soon hiding him from view. The young major gazed after him curiously and so did Pepper.

“That’s a strange fellow,” was Jack’s comment. “But he certainly did us a good turn.”

“He sure did,” answered Pepper. “Wonder what he wants of this Jabez Trask?”

“Something important, you may be certain of that, or he wouldn’t be so secret about it.”

The two cadets walked to the roadway and then both stopped short and looked at each other. The same thought had occurred to each.

“We came for that clapper and we might as well have it,” declared Pepper. “I’ll go back and get it, Jack. You can rest behind the bushes, where nobody will see you.”

“All right – and I’ll watch out, – that nobody comes up to fasten that trap door again.”

“By jove! that’s so! Maybe the Ritter crowd is hanging around yet!”

“If they are, it was mighty mean of them not to come to my assistance when I was in peril of my life!”

“Maybe they were too scared and ran away.”

Jack found a convenient spot behind some bushes and Pepper disappeared once more inside the church. In less than ten minutes The Imp reappeared with both the bell clapper and the battered lantern.

“I shoved the broken glass into a corner with my foot,” he said. “And I pulled the rope back into the belfry. The lower end came loose easily when I pulled it up.”

“To be sure,” answered Jack. “A knot was caught in a crotch and that is why it held when the pull was downward. But come on, we’d better be getting back, or we’ll have trouble getting into the Hall.”

“I am not going to carry this busted lantern,” said Pepper, and threw the thing behind some bushes. Then, with the clapper of the bell done up in a newspaper he had brought along, he struck out for Putnam Hall, with Jack beside him.

“There will be a big row when they find the clapper gone, that’s certain,” mused the young major.

“Maybe they’ll lay it to the Pornell fellows,” answered Pepper, with a broad grin. “Hope they do! It will pay back Roy Bock and his crowd for their meanness to us.”

Jack had now fully recovered his strength and both boys kept up a rapid gait until more than half the distance to Putnam Hall had been covered. Then, of a sudden, the young major called a halt.

“What’s the trouble?” demanded his chum.

“Somebody is coming! Maybe some of the teachers!”

Both of the cadets leaped from the roadway to some convenient bushes. It was after hours and they well knew that to be caught by Captain Putnam or any of his assistants would mean severe punishment. Jack might even be reduced to the ranks, something that would have hurt the major’s feelings exceedingly.

A whistle arose on the air, a peculiar whistle, thrice repeated. Pepper answered it at once, and he and Jack stepped back to the roadway. In a moment they were confronted by Andy Snow and Stuffer Singleton.

“Did you get it?” demanded Andy, eagerly.

“What kept you so long?” added Stuffer. “We made up our minds something had gone wrong and we were coming to find out.”

“Something did go wrong,” burst out Pepper. “Somebody locked us in the belfry.” And then he and his chum told their story.

“It must have been Ritter and his crowd,” declared Stuffer. “None of us did it. I was with Dale and the others all the time, and Andy was on his errand for Captain Putnam.”

“If I was certain it was Ritter I’d give him a piece of my mind!” declared Jack. “It was a mean piece of business on his part – after what I did for him a few weeks ago. He might have been expelled from this school if I had not asked the captain to give him another chance.”

“Oh, you can’t rely on Ritter,” came from the cadet who loved to eat. “Why, yesterday, I had an extra piece of pie hidden in a closet, to eat after lessons, and he came along and gobbled it down! He ought to have the daylight’s hammered out of him!”

“Well, we got the clapper anyway,” said Pepper, grimly. “And it’s up to you, Stuffer, to treat to that ice-cream, and for Dale to find that apple pie that was promised.”

“I’ll keep my promise the first time we go to town, never fear,” answered Stuffer. “But just now I think the best thing all of us can do is to sneak into the school and get to bed, before we are found out.”

“And before Ritter plays some more of his dirty tricks,” added Andy.

The four cadets walked in the direction of the school, but before arriving at the campus turned into a side road bordering the lake.

“No use of going in by the regular entrance,” said Jack. “We’d be sure to be spotted – especially if Ritter or his cronies have told one of the teachers that we are out.”

“I know where Snuggers keeps his key to the kitchen door,” said Andy. “Maybe I can get that.” He referred to Peleg Snuggers, a general utility man around Putnam Hall, who divided his time between the school building and the stables.

“Where is the key?” asked Pepper.

“On a nail in the washshed. I saw him put it there one evening.”

“Then we had better go in by the back way – if we can get the key,” said Stuffer.

With caution the boys skirted the edge of the lake. As they passed the boathouse they heard a murmur of voices. They were about to set off on a run, thinking some teachers were in the building, when Jack called a halt.

“It’s Reff Ritter talking!” he cried, in a low voice, and a few seconds later there issued from the boathouse the forms of the school bully and his two particular cronies, Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton. As soon as the three saw the other cadets they started to walk away rapidly.

“Stop, Ritter! I want to talk to you!” cried Jack, in a low but steady tone.

“What do you want?” snapped back Reff Ritter, coming to a halt and wheeling around. It was after hours, so he did not take the trouble to salute the young major.

“I want to talk to you, – and I want to talk to Coulter and Paxton, too.”

“What about?” and now the seven students came together close to the side of the boathouse. “Don’t give me any of your long-winded speeches, Ruddy, for I am sleepy and want to get to bed.”

“Ritter, you and your gang played a mean trick on me and Ditmore to-night.”

“Did we?” sneered the bully.

“You did.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Maybe you think you weren’t seen near the church?” put in Pepper, meaningly.

“Say, who – er – who saw us?” faltered Coulter.

“Ha, so you admit you were at the church!” cried Jack.

“Coulter, can’t you hold your jaw?” demanded Reff Ritter, angrily.

“Ritter, answer me straight,” said Jack, in a determined voice. “Were you at the church to-night or not.”

“Well, since you want to know so badly, I was,” answered the bully. “Now then, what of it?”

“You fastened the trap door of the belfry, did you?” put in Pepper.

“I did.”

CHAPTER IV

PUNISHING A BULLY

After the frank confession of the bully of Putnam Hall that he had fastened the trap door of the church belfry, there was a moment of intense silence. He faced Jack and Pepper with a sickly grin on his face.

"It was a joke on you all right enough," he continued. "You were lucky to get away as quickly as you did. What did you do, – force the trap door open in spite of the bolt?"

"Ritter, I think you are about the worst boy that ever came to this school," said Pepper.

"Oh, you needn't preach to me, Ditmore."

"I wouldn't say so much if you had played that trick on me alone," went on The Imp calmly. "But to play it on Jack – after all he did to save you from being expelled – well, it's beyond me. I guess you don't know what a conscience is."

"If you are going to talk to me like that I'll smash you one in the jaw!" fired back the bully. "I know what I am doing, and it's not for you to teach me manners."

"Do you know that Jack came close to losing his life at the church and all because you locked us in the belfry?" added Pepper.

"Humph! What are you trying to do, scare me? It didn't hurt you to be locked in."

"Ritter, you listen to me," broke in the young major, and now his voice was so cold and uncompromising that all in the crowd held their breath. "You admit that you locked us in the belfry, don't you? You know what it would have meant for me if I had been caught there, and you know what it would have meant for the school. It was mean, dirt mean. I thought you were going to turn over a new leaf – be like the rest of the fellows. Now – well, I think I'll teach you a lesson."

"Me, a lesson?" faltered Reff Ritter.

"Exactly. I made a mistake when I didn't let Captain Putnam expel you. The whole school would have been better off for it. Take off your jacket and cap."

"Why?"

"Because I am going to give you a sound thrashing – and do it before we go to bed."

"Humph! Want to fight, eh?"

"No, I didn't say anything about a fight, I said I was going to give you a sound thrashing."

"If you fight we'll all be caught!" cried Nick Paxton, in alarm. "Put it off till to-morrow."

"Yes, let us get to bed!" added Coulter. "I won't say a word about your being at the church."

"You bet you won't – not unless you want a big licking," cried Pepper.

"Mum's the word on this, remember that, everybody," cried Andy.

"Remember it – or take the consequences," came from Stuffer.

While the others were talking Jack had shed his cadet jacket and his cap and thrown them on a nearby bench. He faced Ritter so determinedly that the bully backed away several steps.

"I want you to know –" began Ritter.

"Get ready, if you are going to," returned the young major. And then as Ritter put up his fists and stuck out his chin he leaped forward and caught the bully by one wrist. The grip was like that of steel and he whirled the fellow around bodily.

"Take that!" roared Ritter and struck out wildly. Jack dodged the blow with ease.

Then, with the quickness of lightning, the young major "sailed into" his opponent. He hit Ritter a sharp blow in the right cheek and followed this up by one on the nose. Then the pair clinched, and he got the bully's head under his arm and poked Ritter a hard one in the eye and a heavy one in the mouth that loosened several teeth.

"Le – let me g – g – go!" spluttered the bully.

“I’ll let you go when I am done with you!” returned Jack. “I am going to teach you a lesson you won’t forget in a hurry.”

“Break away!” cried Gus Coulter. “Fight him fair, Ruddy.”

“This isn’t a fight – I am merely giving him the thrashing he deserves,” answered the young major. “You keep out of it – or I’ll serve you the same,” he added, so sharply that Coulter stepped back in alarm.

How badly Jack might have damaged Ritter it is hard to state. He was thoroughly aroused and anxious to give the bully a “dressing down” he should never forget. But in the midst of the excitement a cry of alarm arose from Paxton, who had been looking anxiously towards the school building.

“Cheese it!” he called out. “Somebody is coming!”

“It’s old Crabtree!” exclaimed Stuffer. “Boys, we have got to leg it, unless we want to get caught,” he added, as the tall and angular form of the teacher was seen to emerge from the school building.

Jack had no more desire to be caught than anybody else and he quickly relinquished his hold on the bully and picked up his jacket and cap. Ritter was so dazed that he staggered for a second when let alone.

“Yo – you just wait, Jack Ruddy!” he muttered. “Just wait! I’ll get even, if it takes a lifetime to do it!”

“I’ll finish the thrashing some other time, Ritter,” answered the young officer, and then he and his chums ran in one direction while the bully and his cronies ran in another.

“Stop! stop!” came in the harsh, dictatorial voice of Josiah Crabtree, and he came rushing over the campus, cane in hand. “Stop, whoever you are!”

Fortunately for the cadets the moon, which had been shining clearly, now went under a heavy cloud, leaving the campus in darkness. The gloom was disastrous for the teacher, for in his hurry he did not see a low bench bordering the path. He bumped into the bench heavily, lost his balance, and went sprawling on his chest and face.

“Hi! hi! who did this? Who upset me?” he screamed wrathfully. “Stop, you young rascals! If you don’t stop I’ll have you all expelled!”

He picked himself up after an effort and got back his wind, but by that time all of the cadets were out of sight. The Ritter contingent went to an angle of the school building, where hung a rope running up to a dormitory. Jack, Pepper and Stuffer followed Andy to the washshed and there secured the key left by Peleg Snuggers.

“Hurry up, Andy,” cried Pepper, who was looking back to see if they were being followed. “Remember, old Crabtree is on the warpath!”

The kitchen door was quickly opened, the key being left in the lock, and up a back stairs sped the four cadets, Pepper leading the way.

“Wait a minute!” whispered The Imp, when the upper hallway was gained.

“What do you want?” questioned Stuffer.

“Here is the bell clapper. Crabtree is out of his room, and we might – ”

“Hurrah! just the thing!” cried Andy. “Give it to me, Pep. You have done enough for one night.”

“I’ll go with Andy,” put in Stuffer. “You and Jack go to bed.”

And while the young major and his chum sped for their dormitory Andy and Stuffer ran down a side hall leading to the apartment occupied by Josiah Crabtree. As expected, the door was unlocked and they quickly stepped inside the room.

“I’ll put it in his bureau drawer, among his shirts,” said Andy. “He’ll be sure to find it tomorrow.”

“Oh, say, I’ve got an idea!” cried the lad who loved to eat. “But it will rob me of my candy,” he added woefully.

“What is the idea, Stuffer?” asked Andy, who was placing the bell clapper between the teacher’s dress shirts in the bureau.

“I’ve got this molasses candy with me. Supposing I put some of it in the bed? He might – ”

“Have sweet dreams!” finished the acrobatic youth. “Good! Spread the candy out well, Stuffer. It’s a bit hard, I know. But the heat of old Crabtree’s body will fix it all right!”

The bell clapper disposed of, the two cadets spread the molasses candy, which was in thin, flat form, in the bed, between the sheets. Then they turned down the light as they had found it, and hurried forth and to their quarters. As they did this they heard a door below slammed shut and locked.

“Crabtree is coming in!” announced Pepper, who was on the watch. “I’ll wager he is as mad as a hornet for not catching us!”

Some of the other cadets had been told about what was going on, and at several dormitory doors heads peeped forth. But then sounded a peculiar whistle, coming from Emerald Hogan.

It was a signal that the teacher was coming around, inspecting the dormitories. Every cadet understood, and there was a wild scramble to put out the lights and leap into bed.

The only lad who did not escape was Gus Coulter. In the semi-darkness he ran into another cadet and was knocked flat. Before he could get up and reach his bed the door opened and Josiah Crabtree appeared. The light was burning brightly, for it was Coulter’s duty that week to put it out.

“Coulter, stand up!” cried the teacher, wrathfully, and the cadet arose sheepishly.

“What are you doing out of bed this time of night?” demanded Josiah Crabtree.

“I – er – I got up to – er – to get a drink,” answered the youth, stammeringly.

“Indeed!” was the sarcastic rejoinder. “And do you dress every time you want a drink?”

At this question there was a snicker from one of the beds. Josiah Crabtree whirled around to find out who was laughing at him. But every boy lay as if sound asleep.

“Who was laughing, I demand to know!” cried the teacher.

There was no answer.

“Coulter, were you outside a few minutes ago?” went on Josiah Crabtree.

“Me?” asked the cadet, in apparent astonishment. “I just got out of bed.”

“And dressed to get a drink of water, eh?”

Well, I – er – I didn’t feel well and I thought I might need a doctor. But I am better now.”

“Humph! a likely story,” growled the teacher. “I will attend to your case later.” And off he hurried, to find out, if possible, if any students in the other dormitories were up.

When he reached the room used by Jack and his friends he found the young major on his back snoring lustily. All the other boys seemed to be sleeping soundly, and their garments were hung up with care and their shoes placed exactly as the regulations of the school required. The teacher did not know that under the covers some of the boys had not yet taken off their socks and dress shirts, and that the shoes at Pepper’s chair were an extra pair and not the ones The Imp had been wearing all day, – those foot coverings being still on his feet.

Having looked around carefully, Josiah Crabtree retired and continued his inspection of the sleeping rooms. As soon as he was out of sight and hearing Pepper sat up and so did his chums.

“Just escaped and no more,” said Dale Blackmore. “Well, a miss is as good as four miles.”

“Sure, an’ somebody would have been caught had he looked at Pep’s feet!” came from Emerald. “Nixt toime take off your shoes, me b’y, ’tis safer.”

“I hadn’t time,” answered Pepper. “But I’ll take them off now,” he added. “Walking around the Hall at night in my socks is good enough for me.”

The boys had been told of what had been done with the sticky candy, and all waited impatiently for Josiah Crabtree to retire. Presently they heard the teacher enter his room, closing and locking the door after him.

“Now for a little more fun!” whispered The Imp. “Come on, but don’t make any noise!”

One after another the cadets stole out in the dimly-lit hallway and tiptoed their way to the teacher’s apartment. Listening at the door they heard Josiah Crabtree disrobe, put out the light, and crawl into bed.

“Now just wait!” whispered Stuffer. “There will be something doing in a few minutes, mark my words!”

CHAPTER V

JOSIAH CRABTREE MAKES A FIND

With bated breaths the cadets awaited developments in the room occupied by the dictatorial Josiah Crabtree. They were not long in coming.

They heard the teacher turn over several times in bed. Then came a few seconds of silence and then a snort of disgust.

“What is this stuff?” they heard Josiah Crabtree mutter. “Is it glue, or what? I’m stuck full of it! It must be another trick of those confounded boys!”

Then the teacher bounced up out of bed. The sheets came up with him, and as he started to move toward the light, so that he might illuminate the scene, he got tangled up and fell to the floor with a crash, taking a stand full of books with him.

“Oh!” he groaned. “What is the matter with me, anyway? I am all tangled up! That must be glue, and I am full of it! Oh, those boys!” And then the lads heard him roll over and over in the darkness, trying to get out of the snarl of sticky bed sheets. Pepper burst out laughing, for he could hold in no longer.

“Hi, you young rascal, who are you?” roared the irate teacher. “What do you mean by treating me in such a fashion?”

“I hope you are having a sweet time of it, Professor!” called out Stuffer, in a deep bass voice.

“The candy is yours, for nothing!” added Pepper. “But don’t eat too much, it may give you indigestion.”

“Wait till I get hold of you!” cried Josiah Crabtree. “I’ll have you expelled from Putnam Hall!”

He arose to his feet at last and started towards the door. But by the time he had it open the cadets had fled and he found the hall deserted.

“The villains!” he murmured. “Oh, wait till I catch them! Just wait!”

“What is the trouble, Mr. Crabtree?” came in a voice from a side hall, and Captain Putnam appeared, attired in a dressing gown and slippers.

“The cadets – some of them have been playing tricks on me,” spluttered the teacher.

“Indeed! What sort of tricks?”

“They put molasses candy in my bed. I am stuck full of the sticky stuff!”

“Who did it?”

“I don’t know. But I am going to find out!” was the savage answer. “Some of them were out skylarking to-night and I went after them, but I didn’t catch them.”

“This skylarking at night must stop,” said the master of the Hall. “If you find out who is guilty, report to me,” and he went back to his room.

Safe in their dormitories, the cadets lost no time in disrobing and getting to bed. Some of them expected an immediate inspection, but it did not come. Josiah Crabtree visited a bathroom, to clear himself of the sticky candy, and by the time he had cleaned up it was too late to go after the boys who had played the joke.

“Mum’s the word, all around!” said Andy, after things had quieted down.

“Reff Ritter and his cronies may give us away,” said Pepper.

“If they do they had better look out!” answered one of the big students. “We want no tale-bearers in this school. I’ll warn them.” And, early in the morning he did so. It was a good move, for Coulter and Paxton were preparing to send a note to Captain Putnam, exposing Pepper, Jack and their chums.

“You do anything of the sort and you’ll catch it good and hot!” said the big student. “Remember, we haven’t forgot how you acted during the rebellion. If you don’t behave yourselves we’ll make it so uncomfortable for you that you’ll want to go home.” And then, in fright, Coulter and Paxton tore the note up.

By noon it was known throughout Cedarville that the church had been visited and the clapper of the bell taken. Some folks attributed the trick to the Pornell students, some to the Putnam Hall cadets, and still others to some village lads. A deacon of the church went to Pornell Academy and demanded the clapper, and got into a warm row with Doctor Pornell.

“My students are young gentlemen, they would not do such a thing!” cried the head of the academy, wrathfully. “It is an outrage to accuse them.”

“They weren’t any too good to paint the church porch red,” returned the deacon, pointedly. “If they have the clapper I want it.”

At this remark Dr. Pornell subsided and made some inquiries, but, of course, the clapper was not found.

It was not until evening that Josiah Crabtree went to his bureau drawer, to get out a clean dress shirt. He was still in a bad humor over the candy affair, and he hauled forth a shirt with no gentle hand.

The next instant he let out a cry of commingled pain and astonishment for the clapper had rolled from the shirt and fallen on his toes. He danced around on one foot, trying to nurse the other.

“Another trick!” he howled. “Oh my toes! The big one must be smashed to a jelly! And what is that iron thing?”

He nursed his foot for several minutes and then picked up the clapper and turned it over.

“A bell clapper! Ha! is it possible! It must be! The clapper belonging to the church! I must inform Captain Putnam of this at once!”

Down the stairs he hobbled as well as his injured foot permitted. He found the master of the school just preparing to take a drive.

“I have found it, sir!” cried the teacher. “It was hidden, where do you suppose? in one of my bureau drawers!”

“Found what?” asked Captain Putnam.

“The bell clapper belonging to the Union church.”

“Is it possible?” And now the Captain’s face took on a look of concern, for one of the church members had asked him about the clapper during the afternoon.

“I knew some of the boys were up to mischief last night,” went on Josiah Crabtree. “We ought to find out who is guilty.”

“You are right.”

“What of this bell clapper?”

“I’ll return it to the church at once.”

“And when will you investigate?”

“To-morrow morning, as soon as the school session begins,” answered Captain Putnam. “Give me the clapper. I’ll return it myself.” And the article was placed in his charge and he drove off with it. He left it at the home of the church sexton, and it was that evening restored to its original position in the belfry.

“We are in for trouble to-morrow,” said Pepper, late that evening, as he came in from a visit to the school library.

“On account of the clapper?” asked Jack.

“Yes. Captain Putnam is going to conduct a strict investigation to-morrow morning, as soon as school opens.”

“What will you do if he questions every cadet?” asked Dale.

“I’ll face the music,” answered Jack promptly.

“What do you think he’ll do if he finds out you took the clapper?” questioned Fred Century.

“I don’t know, I’m sure. Cut off our holidays perhaps, – or reduce me to the ranks.”

“I don’t want my holidays cut,” said Pepper. “And to have Jack’s official position taken from him would be too mean for anything.”

All of the boys who had had a part in taking the clapper and putting it in Josiah Crabtree’s room were very much worried although they tried not to show it. It was one thing to play a joke and quite another to take the consequences.

“How Reff Ritter and his crowd will laugh if we are found out and punished,” said Pepper to his intimate chums.

“If they laugh too loud I’ll punch ’em,” answered Andy.

“I believe what the captain does will depend upon what the church folks do,” put in Joe Nelson. “If they raise a big row he’ll have to investigate pretty thoroughly. It might be a good thing to smooth matters over with the church people.”

“And how would you do that?” asked Pepper.

“Oh, you might explain that it was only a bit of boyish fun, done on a dare – and you might propose to give the church an extra donation if the matter was dropped. I think Deacon Pelham would drop the matter if the extra donation was made – and he’s the head man in the church just now.”

“Deacon Pelham!” cried Fred Century. You mean Isaac Pelham, who lives up the lake shore near Grape Creek?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I know him well. I took him out in my boat once, – when he was in a great hurry to get a doctor from across the lake. He was very thankful and wanted to pay me for my services, but I told him I wasn’t running the *Ajax* for money. That was when I was a student at Pornell.”

“Then you are the one to go to Deacon Pelham and smooth matters over,” cried Stuffer. “Go ahead, Fred; it may aid Pep and Jack a good deal.”

“Fred needn’t to do it unless he feels like it,” said the young major of the Hall battalion.

“I’ve got a plan,” came from Dale. “Fred needn’t to mention any names, only state that some of the boys would like to hush the matter up and also want to make a contribution.”

The matter was talked over, and presently it was decided that Fred should pay the deacon a visit, accompanied by Dale. They carried with them a “contribution” amounting to six dollars.

“Might as well go on bicycles,” suggested Dale, and got out his machine. Fred used a machine belonging to Pepper, and as the road was good the distance to Deacon Pelham’s home was quickly covered. They found the deacon coming in from a day of labor in a distant field.

“How do you do, Deacon Pelham,” said Fred politely.

“Why, bless my soul, it’s Fred Century!” cried the deacon smiling. “How do you do!” And he held out his hand. “Who’s this with you, another young sodger, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir, my fellow cadet, Dale Blackmore.”

“Come into the house. My wife will be glad to see you – she’s much better than when I had to hurry for a doctor that time,” added the church man.

“We haven’t much time to spare, Mr. Pelham,” said Fred. He lowered his voice. “We came on a little business.”

“Is that so? What do you want?”

“You once said if you could do me a favor you would,” continued the owner of the *Ajax*.

“So I will.”

“I came to see you about that bell clapper that was brought back to the church this afternoon.”

“Ah!” Deacon Pelham’s face became a study. “Did you take it?”

“No, sir.”

“Glad to hear it. It was a scandalous piece of business. But what do you know about it?”

“I know that some of the cadets of Putnam Hall wish to hush the matter up. It was only a little joke and – ”

“A very bad joke, my boy.”

“Perhaps, but they thought that if you’d drop it they would make the church a contribution of this.”

Fred drew out the money – six new crisp one-dollar bills.

“Hum! Six dollars, eh? Well – er – the church needs money that is sure.”

“It will pay for the cut rope and more, sir. It was only a joke. If you’ll drop it, it will save some cadets a lot of trouble,” went on Fred earnestly. “All you’ve got to do is to send word to Captain Putnam that the matter has been adjusted. You’ll do that for me, won’t you Mr. Pelham?”

At first the deacon was obdurate, but in the end he weakened. The church was in a poor way and needed every dollar it could get. As head of the committee he promised to drop the matter, and wrote a note to that effect and signed it. Then Fred gave him the money.

“But, mind you, no more jokes,” said the deacon, as the cadets departed.

“Not that kind anyway,” answered Fred, and off he sped on his bicycle, with Dale beside him.

“It was easier than I thought,” said Dale. “Now to get that note to Captain Putnam in secret before he starts his investigation.”

CHAPTER VI

AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF IMPORTANCE

“I guess that note will do the business – and we’ll never be suspected.”

It was Reff Ritter who spoke and he addressed Gus Coulter and Nick Paxton. The three cronies were in a wing of the school, out of sight and hearing of the other pupils.

“What did you put in the note?” asked Paxton with interest.

“Oh, I wrote in a disguised hand and stated that I knew the cadets had banded together to keep mum about the bell clapper and the only way for Captain Putnam to get at the bottom of the affair was to ask each officer and private, starting from the major down. I put the note on the captain’s desk and he must have it by now.”

“Good!” chuckled Paxton. “If he starts in by questioning Ruddy he’ll soon get at the bottom of the matter, for the major won’t dare to tell a falsehood.”

“And more than likely he’ll lose his position,” put in Coulter. “I hope he does.”

“He ought to lose it,” answered Reff Ritter. Not for a moment did he give Jack credit for the good turn he had done him.

While the three lads were talking Captain Putnam had entered his office and taken up the note. He read it with interest and his brow contracted.

He was much disturbed, for since the open rebellion of the cadets, when they had refused to be starved into submission by Pluxton Cuddle, he had made the students promise not to band together in secret against the discipline of the school. Ritter knew this, and this was why he sent the note.

“I cannot permit this,” murmured the head of the school to himself. “I must make a complete investigation to-morrow, – and the guilty parties must be made to suffer.” And then he held a conference with Josiah Crabtree and George Strong. Crabtree was in favor of punishing nearly everybody, but George Strong, with his usual goodheartedness, counseled moderation.

“It most likely was merely a thoughtless prank,” said Mr. Strong. “The cadets meant no harm. Bell clappers, as you know, have been taken by students from times immemorial.” And at this Captain Putnam had to turn away with a smile, for in his younger days he himself had assisted at the removal of, not a clapper, but the bell of the boarding school he had attended.

“We’ll see in the morning,” said Captain Putnam, and there for the time being the matter rested.

It must be confessed that Jack, Pepper and their chums were somewhat worried that night, and the young major slept but little. Fred and Dale had reported the interview with Deacon Pelham and had seen to it that the note got into Captain Putnam’s hands.

Early in the morning Pepper was out on the campus when he saw Captain Putnam appear. A moment later one of the stablemen brought up the captain’s black horse and the head of the Hall vaulted into the saddle in true military style and was off.

“He’s in a hurry,” thought Pepper, and he wondered where the master of the school was going. He watched the captain turn into the lake road and then uttered a low whistle.

“I’ll bet a button he is going to visit Deacon Pelham!” he murmured. “Maybe he wants to learn if that note was genuine.”

The roll of the drum soon summoned all of the cadets to the campus, and with Jack at the head of the battalion, they went through the manual of arms and then marched around the Hall and into the messroom. Jack and Pepper both put on a bold front, yet each felt far from easy.

“They’ll catch it – just wait!” whispered Ritter to Coulter. “Before noon they’ll wish they had let that clapper alone!”

After breakfast the cadets went to chapel. The services here were almost over when Captain Putnam came in and took his place on the platform.

“Now you’ll hear something drop!” said Ritter gleefully, to his cronies.

“Ritter, stop your talking!” said George Strong, who was near.

“I – er – I only wanted the window closed,” stammered the bully. “I feel cold.”

“Couldn’t you close it yourself?”

“Coulter was right there – I thought he could do it.” Then the window was closed, and the conversation came to an end.

“I have a few words to say to you young gentlemen,” said Captain Putnam, coming to the front of the platform. His eyes swept the auditorium and Jack and Pepper felt something cold run up and down their backbones. “As you all know, the clapper of the bell of the Union Church was taken night before last, and the deed was done by some cadets of this institution.”

The captain paused, and the silence was so intense that the ticking of the clock could be plainly heard.

“The taking of the clapper was a foolish prank, and it was an equally foolish prank to place it where it was found,” continued Captain Putnam. “Yesterday I resolved to make a thorough investigation and punish the offenders.”

“Quite right, eminently proper,” murmured Josiah Crabtree.

“I heard, too, that a plan had been put through by you cadets to stand together – that everybody was to keep mum, as it is called. This you know is a violation of the agreement made after the – er – the unfortunate affair which – er – led to a rebellion among you.”

“I didn’t hear of that,” murmured one of the cadets.

“Nor I,” added another.

“What did you say, Farhaven?” asked the captain quickly.

“I didn’t hear of any agreement to keep mum,” replied the cadet addressed.

“Nor did I,” put in Bob Greenwood, the quartermaster of the battalion.

“Nor I,” came from several others.

At these words the captain’s face showed relief.

“All who have not agreed to band together will raise their hands,” said the captain loudly, and instantly nearly every cadet raised his hand.

“This is really gratifying,” went on Captain Putnam, with almost a smile on his face. “To my mind, to take the clapper was bad enough, but to band together to overthrow the discipline of the school would be much worse. I am glad to learn you young gentlemen have not done such a thing.”

Again the head of the school paused, and the boys wondered what was coming next.

“Now, to return to the clapper. I have received a communication from one of the officers of the church and he had made an earnest request that the whole matter be dropped. The church has the clapper back, and the ones who took it have expressed their regrets over the affair, and have made the church a donation which had been gratefully received. Under the circumstances, I am going to leave this matter in the hands of yourselves.”

“Wonder what he means by that?” murmured Dale to Andy.

“All in favor of dropping the matter will rise. Those wishing to see the culprits punished will remain seated,” went on Captain Putnam.

Almost instantly three-quarters of the cadets arose to their feet. More followed, until but half a dozen remained seated. These were Reff Ritter, Coulter, Paxton, and their cohorts.

“Get up, you fellows!” cried Bart Connors, captain of Company B. And somewhat shamefacedly Ritter and the others got up. The bully realized that his plan to have Jack and Pepper punished had fallen through.

“Three cheers for Captain Putnam!” cried Dale and before the head of the school could interfere, the cheers were given with a will. Then came a cheer for the teachers.

"I'll wager old Crabtree doesn't like this," whispered Andy to Joe Nelson, and he was right. Josiah Crabtree felt very much put out, for he had expected to see somebody punished, not only for putting the clapper in his bureau drawer but also for placing the molasses candy in his bed.

"I have another important announcement to make," said Captain Putnam, after order and quietness had been restored. "As you know, we were to go on the term encampment two weeks from to-day. I have arranged to have some alterations made to this school by carpenters and masons, and they wish to start the work next week. Consequently, I am going to start the encampment next Tuesday – that is, we'll leave the Hall on that day."

"Hurrah!" came from the cadets, for they looked forward to the encampment with much pleasure. During that time there would be no studies.

"I have arranged for an outing up at Lake Caboy," continued Captain Putnam. "The spot will be not far from the Caboy River with its magnificent falls, and will be ideal in every respect. I camped there once some years ago, and I know the fishing is good and also the swimming."

"That suits me!" cried Pepper. He was much relieved to think the clapper affair had been dropped.

"I have hired a tract of land over a hundred acres in extent," went on Captain Putnam. "We'll go out as we did before, taking all our tents and our camping outfit with us."

"And how long will the encampment last?" asked Jack. He was as much relieved as Pepper over the outcome of the clapper affair.

"At least two weeks, Major Ruddy, and perhaps longer – if the carpenters and masons do not finish up here in time. I do not want the students to come back here until the alterations are complete. To-morrow I shall announce more of the details. The students will now go to their classes as usual."

As the boys poured forth from the chapel exercises Jack and Pepper worked their way over to Dale and Fred.

"Your visit to Deacon Pelham did the trick," whispered the young major. "I am a thousand times obliged to you."

"And so am I," added The Imp.

"I want to know about this banding together the captain mentioned," said Fred. "I never heard of it before."

"I think I can put you wise," came from Bob Greenwood, who was near. "I overheard Ritter and Coulter talking about it."

"It would be like Ritter to get up that report!" cried Pepper. "He would do anything to get our crowd into trouble."

"I know it," said Greenwood, who had once suffered greatly at the hands of the bully, as I have related in detail in "The Putnam Hall Rebellion."

"We'll have to watch Ritter as closely as we ever did," said Jack. "The trouble he got into a few weeks ago doesn't seem to have made him a bit better than he was before."

Ordinarily the clapper incident would have been the main topic of conversation among the cadets. But the announcement that the term encampment was to start in the near future turned the thoughts of the students in that direction.

"We'll have the time of our lives," declared Andy. "Just think of the fine swimming and fishing!"

"And no lessons!" put in Dale.

"And the baseball and track athletics!" said Stuffer.

"Thought you were going to say the eating," came slyly from Pepper. "When we talk about going camping you usually talk grub the first thing."

"Oh, of course, I expect to have plenty to eat," added Stuffer hastily.

"I know one thing will happen during the encampment," said one of the other cadets.

“What’s that?” asked Dale.

“There will be more or less hazing.”

“Right you are.”

“We ought to haze Ritter & Company,” cried Pepper. “They richly deserve it.”

“Right you are!” cried several.

“Maybe Ritter & Company will try to haze us,” said Fred.

“All right, let them try it,” answered Andy.

“I reckon we can give them as good as they send, every time!”

CHAPTER VII

WHAT THE GIRLS HAD TO TELL

“What do you say, Jack, to a spin on our wheels?”

“That suits me, Pepper. Shall we go alone, or ask some of the others?”

“I have already asked Andy and Dale.”

“Good enough.”

It was after school hours and still light. As the cadets had good bicycles they often took rides up and down the lake road, or out in the country back of Cedarville.

All of the cadets were soon ready for the spin, and off they went, Jack and Pepper abreast, with Andy and Dale close behind.

“Want a race?” asked Andy. “I feel as if I could ride like the wind.”

“Well, I’ll go you!” cried Pepper.

“I’m not stripped for racing, but I’ll join in for the fun of it,” said Dale.

“So will I,” added the young major.

Coming to a smooth portion of the road the four bicycle riders drew up abreast.

“How far is this race to be?” questioned Dale.

“Oh, to Boston and back,” cried Pepper, with a grin.

“Make it Hong Kong while you are at it,” added Jack gaily.

“We’ll race to the old white post,” said Andy. “That’s a mile and a half from here.”

“Done!” cried the others.

“All ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then go!”

Off shot the four cadets, keeping abreast for a distant of several rods. Then Andy pedalled to the front.

“Here is where I bid you good-bye!” sang out the acrobatic youth.

“Not much you don’t!” answered Pepper, and commenced to push on his pedals harder than ever. He soon ranged alongside of Andy, and away they went, side by side, with Dale and Jack dropping further and further behind.

“I can’t make time in this uniform,” said the young major. “Let them race it out.”

“Just what I say,” answered Dale. “I hate to get in a perspiration right before supper anyway.”

On and on went Andy and Pepper. The road was in excellent condition and so were the cadets. Each lad rode well and it remained a question as to who would come in ahead.

Half the distance to the post had been covered when the racers reached a turn. Around this they sped, and as they did so an unexpected scream reached their ears. It came from two girls in a buggy.

“Don’t run us down!” came the cry. And then the cadets saw that the girls had been in the act of turning their buggy around and that the turnout completely filled the road.

There was but one thing to do and that was to turn aside. Andy went to the right and Pepper to the left, and each brought up rather suddenly in a clump of bushes. Andy flew over his handle bars, and it was only his acrobatic agility that saved him from being seriously hurt.

Both of the girls screamed again, this time louder than ever.

“They are killed!” moaned one.

“Oh, how dreadful!” came from the other.

“It’s our fault, Flossie!”

“I know it, Laura!”

Their horse, greatly startled by the sudden appearance of the bicyclists, had begun to rear and plunge and for the moment the girls had to give all their attention to the animal in an effort to quiet it.

“Why, it’s Pepper Ditmore!” cried the older girl, as The Imp arose to his feet from the bushes.

“And Andy Snow,” added the other girl.

Still somewhat dazed the cadets looked again at the girls and now recognized two old acquaintances, Laura and Flossie Ford. They were the daughters of Rossmore Ford, a rich gentleman who had a fine summer home on a point of the lake shore. As related in “The Putnam Hall Cadets,” Andy, Jack and Pepper had once saved Laura and Flossie from drowning, and for this brave act the Fords were extremely grateful.

“How do you do, girls!” cried Pepper, with a grim smile.

“Oh, Pepper are you hurt?” queried Laura anxiously.

“Not much, scratched a little, that’s all.”

“And what of you, Andy?” questioned Flossie.

“Got a few bush leaves down my neck, that’s all,” answered Andy. His wrist was a good deal scratched but he kept it out of sight, not wishing to alarm the girls still more.

“Can we do anything for you?” questioned Laura.

“Might bake us a few pies, – as you did when we ran away from school,” answered Andy.

“How absurd!” cried Flossie, and gave a laugh. “Oh, I am so glad you didn’t hurt yourselves seriously.”

By this time Jack and Dale were coming up, and the situation was quickly explained. The young major shook hands with the girls and turned the horse around for them. The Ford girls were glad to meet the cadets but sorry that they had interrupted the race so disastrously.

“Oh, it was a tie anyway,” said Andy. “I don’t care, if Pep doesn’t.”

“It wasn’t much of a race anyway,” answered Pepper. “How have you been since we saw you last?” he added.

“Very well,” answered Laura. “How are matters at the school? We heard somebody had taken the clapper of the Union Church.”

“So we heard, too,” said Dale dryly. “But that’s a thing of the past now. We are getting ready to go into camp again – this time in the regular fashion, under Captain Putnam and the teachers, you know.”

“How delightful!” murmured Flossie. “And where are you going?”

“Up to Lake Caboy, near the river and the falls.”

“Well, of all things!”

“What makes you so surprised?” asked Dale.

“Why, we are going up to Lake Caboy ourselves – up to the new summer hotel there. Papa and mamma thought it would be a change for us.”

“Then we may see something of each other,” said Jack. “That will be fine.”

“We’ll come down to your camp – if you’ll allow visitors,” said Flossie.

“I guess Captain Putnam will have to allow them. Every time we go into camp the country folks come to see us. They like to see the tents and the uniforms, and like to see us drill.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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