

THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH ON THE GRIDIRON

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COLUMBIA HIGH
ON THE DIAMOND," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

OUT FOR PRACTICE

"Oh, what a splendid kick!"

The yellow pigskin football went whizzing through the air, turning over and over in its erratic flight.

"Wow! Look at old Sorreltop run, will you?"

"He's bound to get under it, too. That's going some, fellows! Oh, shucks!"

"Ha! ha! a fumble and a muff, after all! That's too bad, after such a great gallop. Now Clack's got the ball, and a clear field ahead for a run! Go it, you wild broncho! Say, look there, will you, Tony; Ralph West thinks he can tackle that flying tornado!"

"Will he? Maybe, maybe not, fellows!" called out the ever-skeptical Jack Eastwick, as he watched the rapidly nearing figures. Jack was on the regular team, but not playing that afternoon.

"There, he's done it! Wasn't that tackle a screamer, though? That man West belongs with the regulars. He's too good for the scrub team. Mark my words, when we go up against Clifford he'll be doing duty with Columbia's eleven!"

"Bah!" sneered Tony Gilpin. "He's still only a greeny; never saw a football till he came here last year. Bones Shaddock taught him all he knows about the game. Take him away from his teacher, and the little boy would be hopelessly foundered, and you know it, too, Herman Hooker."

Herman was Columbia's "cheer captain." His sonorous voice aroused more enthusiasm among the struggling athletes when the prospects seemed dark and forbidding, than all other elements combined. As soon as it boomed out over a hotly-contested field, every Columbia fellow seemed to take on fresh confidence, and in many instances that meant a new determination to win the victory.

Herman looked at the last speaker, and smiled broadly. It was well known among the students of Columbia High School that Tony Gilpin still entertained great hopes of holding his place on the regular team; but his play was not up to the standard of the preceding year, and dark hints had gone abroad that in all probability he would be dropped, for "a dark horse."

As this latter must of necessity be taken from the scrub team, it can be easily understood why Tony showed so much concern over the playing of the newcomer, Ralph West.

"Why ain't you practicing with your team this P. M., instead of loafing around here watching the scrub eleven do things." remarked Charlie Scott, one of the group. "It can't be possible that a seasoned veteran of two years' experience can pick up points from a come-on?"

"I strained my leg a bit yesterday, and the coach advised me to give it a rest for a day. When I tackle I'm apt to go at a man without regard to consequences; and sometimes the jar is fierce," explained Tony, sneeringly.

"Well, if you can beat that work of Ralph West, you're going some, now; take it from me, son," commented Herman, with fatherly interest, and simply a desire to see the best man on the regular team when the auspicious day dawned that lined Columbia's eleven up against the warriors of Clifford.

Tony made no verbal reply, but his brow grew dark, as he once again shot a look of hatred toward the player who had made that brilliant flying tackle.

The big town of Columbia was situated on the Harrapin River, with Clifford nearly four miles above, and the manufacturing town of Bellport twice that distance down-stream.

Of course, as each of these bustling places boasted of a high school, the consequent rivalries of the students had blossomed out into a league. In various sports they were determined rivals, and the summer just passed had witnessed a bitter fight between the baseball clubs of the three towns, in which Columbia won out after a fierce contest.

Among the Columbia students there were also strivings after supremacy in many gymnastic feats, as well as between the several classes, each of which was jealous of the others when it came to giving spreads. Many of the deeply interesting happenings along this line that marked the preceding Winter and Spring have been chronicled in the first volume of this series, called: "The Boys of Columbia High; or, The All-Around Rivals of the School."

With the coming of the season for outdoor sports, there was baseball in the air from morning to night, in preparation for the carnival of games mapped out for the schedule between the three schools. What thrilling contests took place, and with what final results, can be found in the second story of this series, bearing the title, "The Boys of Columbia High on the Diamond; or, Winning Out by Pluck."

When the Glorious Fourth came along, the river that flowed past the three towns was the scene of a most remarkable gathering; for the annual regatta between the boat clubs of the high schools had been set down for observance. To enjoy the humor of the tub races, and experience the thrills that accompanied the flight of the rival four-oared and eight-oared shells over the scheduled course, the reader must peruse the third volume, called: "The Boys of Columbia High on the River; or, The Boat Race 'Plot That Failed."

And now vacation having ended, and school being once more under full swing, with the dropping of the highly-colored leaves from the woods along the banks of the picturesque Harrapin, there was heard little save football talk on the campus, and wherever the sons of old Columbia High congregated.

A well-to-do widow, in memory of her boy, Wallace Todd, who had died the preceding year while a student at the high school, had offered a beautiful silver cup to the victor in the football

contests, the winning team to hold it for an entire season.

It was to be known as the Wallace Cup, and every day crowds stood before the window of the silversmith's store in Columbia, admiring its magnificent proportions.

Squads of boys even came by trolley from Bellport, and openly boasted as to their intention to carry that same trophy home with them after the struggles on the gridiron had been finished.

The group of lads watching the work of the scrub team consisted of various types among the students and town fellows.

Presently, however, Tony Gilpin nudged another fellow and beckoned him away. He knew full well that Asa Barnes, now a senior, and a class ahead of him, had only bitter feelings for several in that scrub team, and chief of all the captain, Bones Shadduck.

Lately both Tony and Asa had taken a notion that they would like to join the Delta Pi fraternity. To their disgust, however, they were blackballed, some among the members objecting to receiving fellows with their known reputation for mischief and evil-doing.

In some way they conceived the idea that Bones Shadduck was primarily responsible for their humiliation. They never accused him of it, but nursed their fancied grievance, and planned to have revenge in some fashion.

Tony was looking more than ordinarily ugly as he strolled away with Asa Barnes.

The broad hint which one of his companions had advanced regarding his rather poor chances of holding down his position as a Columbia half-back against the aspirations of Ralph West, the boy from Paulding, had fired his heart anew with a fierce desire to take matters into his own hands, and remedy them.

"Well, what's your opinion, Asa?" demanded Tony, as they sauntered along. "You said you'd be square with me. What d'ye think of that dub's playing? Is he going to make it, and knock me off the earth?"

Asa Barnes was nothing, if not a sneak. Throughout his entire career at school he had been looked upon as a species of snake, and had few friends. Even those who did go with him, on account of his having unlimited spending money, always kept a cautious eye out for treachery.

"Oh, you're going to get it where the chicken did—in the neck!" he replied cheerfully, with a grin that told of secret pleasure,

for he liked to see others suffer.

"No kidding now, but tell me the truth for once. Is Ralph West the wonder they make out? Can he play half-back better than I do? I'm not from Missouri, but, all the same, I want to know; for it's going to settle a question I've had in my mind a long time. Cut in, now!" exclaimed Tony, wrathfully.

"He's all to the good," replied the other, grimly, "and when I say that, disliking the fellow as I do, you can understand it means something. I never saw a quicker half-back in my life; and when it comes to making a tackle, the fellow doesn't really know what fear is! If they put him on the regulars, there's going to be something doing among those long-legged chaps from Clifford."

Tony growled like a bear with a sore head; he also cast a side look at his companion, as though questioning his sincerity. Asa liked to see anyone squirm, and often did and said things just for that privilege. His companions had long ago declared that he was cut out for a surgeon—or a butcher, like his father.

"Once for all, do you mean that?" hissed the enraged boy, laying a quivering hand on his comrade's arm.

"I certainly do. He's got the Indian sign on you, Tony, for fair. Mark my words, when I predict that, unless something unusual happens between now and next Saturday, when we play Clifford, Ralph West is going to take your place at left half-back!"

The other fairly glared at him.

"Well, you're awful plain about it, Asa," he muttered.

"You told me to be, and I'm giving you my honest opinion. But, all the same now, I don't think this disaster will happen," Asa added, with a grin at the other.

"Oh, you don't, eh? What's going to prevent it?" demanded Tony.

"You are, unless I'm mighty much mistaken in your make-up," said the other boy, promptly. "Remember what we agreed to do about that Bones Shaddock, for getting us knocked down with that measly old Delta Pi business? Well, there's a pair of 'em now!"

"Do you mean it. Will you stick with me if I try to knock West out, so he won't be able to play football again for weeks? Are you game, or do you mean to egg me on to the last ditch, and then sidestep, leaving me to shoulder all the blame?"

Tony's face was eager, and the light in his eyes told of a fierce desire to do something mean that would accomplish the desire of his heart.

His companion laughed as though it might be a joke. Asa was so used to others suspecting his honesty of purpose that he never seemed to get offended when they doubted his word. Another boy might have shown temper, but Asa never did this. He might grit his teeth behind a fellow's back, and vow to get even for an insult; but to his face he was either smiling or sneering, as the humor seized him.

"Yes, I'll help you out. Remember, it isn't because I feel for you," he said, quickly, as though he feared lest he should actually be considered as possessing any consideration for a comrade. "I've got my own little axe to grind, you see. The fellow happens to be sweet on Helen Allen, and once on a time she used to go with me to parties and the like. You understand, don't you, Tony?"

"Sure. And there's nothing that burns so deep as that. Then it's settled that we're going to lay for both Ralph and Bones at the very first chance, with some fellows we can depend on, and do them up? That's the programme, Asa?"

"I leave the particulars to you. Meanwhile I'll drum up a few recruits to make the crowd. Just now I know of three bully fellows who happen to have it in for either Ralph or Bones. You get as many, and then there's going to be some fun doing," and Asa laughed in the cold-blooded fashion that made so many dislike him.

"Well, when a fellow is bruised to beat the band, not to speak of possibly a broken rib or two, he ain't going to play football in a hurry," grunted Tony.

The other cast a quick look at his companion.

"You don't want to go too far, old chap. If he happened to be seriously hurt, we might be called on to explain before Professor Parke," he observed.

So talking, they sauntered along the road again, having paused to exchange the significant remarks as to their intentions.

Hardly had they gone twenty feet away, than a head was cautiously raised above an old log that lay just within the edge of the woods, and a white face looked rather fearfully after the pair of plotters.

CHAPTER II

ON THE ROAD TO TOWN

"Hello, Ralph, through practice here? Then walk home with me, and take supper at the house, won't you? I've got some things I want to talk over with you."

"Yes, we're done working, and I'll be glad to walk with you; but if I'm to sit down at your table, you'll have to wait for me to dress and clean myself. Will we have time?" And Ralph's face told how much he appreciated a chance to spend an evening at the home of Frank Allen, his friend and chum; for his boarding house room did look a bit cheerless at night time.

"Plenty of time, old fellow. How did the practice go to-day? Getting in trim, do you think?" asked Frank, who, as a senior, and the captain and full-back of the regular football squad, was supposed to have an intense interest in everything that took place on the practice field day by day.

"Oh, pretty well, I think. I'm not wholly satisfied with myself, but I believe I'm improving every day," replied the other, modestly.

Frank looked sideways at his friend, and smiled. He had just been talking with the coach, and heard what he had to say about the scrub team. It was already understood between them that two of the regulars must give way to better men who shone as stars on the scrub. Columbia wanted her best sons in front, regardless of any favoritism.

Coach Willoughby was back again, visiting at the home of Buster Billings' folks. He said the "lure of the leather" was too much for him, bringing back those dear old college days when he played on the Princeton eleven, and carried the ball over Yale's line for a hard-fought victory.

And so he had consented to take charge of the Columbia players, and help them get in condition for the work ahead, when they were to meet the brawny cohorts of Clifford, and those others from Bellport.

Frank and Ralph had not gone more than fifty yards down the dusty road leading from the recreation field to the town center, perhaps a full mile away, when Ralph felt a sharp tug at his arm.

"Hello! what's this?" he said, looking down at a small girl, who

seemed so shy that her face was covered with blushes as she pulled at his sleeve.

"Please, Mr. West, I'd like to say something to you," she said, hesitatingly.

"Why, it's Madge Smalling, Mary's older sister!" exclaimed Ralph, showing new interest.

In the Spring he had been instrumental in finding a little girl who had hurt herself seriously, in the woods. At the time, Ralph was on his way to the recreation field, where he was expected to pitch a game against a rival school. Still, as he could not think of leaving the child there to suffer, he had carried her to the mill where her father was employed.

Since that time, he had been a welcome visitor at the home of the Smallings, and, of course, was well known to this girl of nine, who had been away at the time of Mary's adventure.

"Shall I walk on," asked Frank, with a wink, "because, you know, there are times when two is company, three none."

"None of your joshing, now," said Ralph, and then, turning to the child, he continued: "I hope nothing is wrong over at your house, Madge?"

"Oh, no, sir. It wasn't that. I heard something about you, and I wanted to tell you right away, 'cause I'm afraid of that bad boy. Once he threw water on me, and laughed when I cried. Then he put a nasty cold frog in my hand, and made me hold it ever so long."

Ralph looked at his friend. "Whoever can she mean, and what has that got to do with me?" he said, wonderingly.

"The other boy called him Asa," remarked Madge, quickly.

"Oh, now I begin to see light. And was the second chap called Tony?" Ralph asked.

"Oh, yes, that was it. I saw them coming along the road, and I was afraid that he had another nasty frog. So I hid behind a log," the child went on, her face showing the deep interest she felt in her own recital.

"Say, Frank, this grows exciting. Tony and Asa walking along with their heads close together means trouble for someone, perhaps even me. And this little girl, hiding behind a log, hears them plotting. Now, what d'ye think of that for thrilling a fellow's nerve? What did they say, Madge? Can you remember?" he asked,

looking down into the girl's face reassuringly, and stroking her tangled hair.

"Oh, I didn't understand it all, but they hated you, and said they must get some other bad boys to beat you, so you couldn't play ball again. If you only saw his face when he said that! It was so fierce I just shivered. I hope they don't do it to you, Mr. West. It would be worse than a nasty, cold frog."

Again the two lads exchanged glances.

"Aha!" chuckled Frank, "the plot thickens. Tony feels the chill of coming events, and wants to make sure that you will never displace him on the regular team. I'm not so much surprised, though. It wouldn't be the first time a candidate has been marked for assault in the hope of putting him out of the running. An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. And since we know now what is in the wind, we must be doubly on our guard. I suspected that some of them, Lef Seller and his crowd, perhaps, might have it in for me, but it seems that you are the goat, Ralph."

"Well, I'm ever so much obliged to Madge here for telling me. And next time I come out to her house I'm going to fetch along a box of candy to pay the debt," said Ralph, kindly.

"You always do that, anyway," declared the child, promptly, at which Frank burst into another laugh.

"Oh, all your secrets will come out, one by one, old fellow. I think I'll have to post my sister Helen on your double dealing. She might be jealous of Mary and Madge," he declared.

"Don't you worry. Helen has walked out there with me more than once. They're all very fond of your sister, Frank," declared Ralph, blushing a little.

"Well, you don't blame them, do you?" asked the brother, promptly; which caused his friend to bend down to shake hands and bid the little maid good-by.

As the two boys tramped along toward Frank's home, they naturally talked again of the unpleasant news that had been brought to their attention in so singular a way.

"I wish I knew just what to do about it," said Frank, frowning with displeasure, "It's certainly a most unsportsmanlike spirit to show, knocking your school colors, because you can't play. I call that a rule-or-ruin policy. Do you suppose, if we told the boys, it would put a stop to the nasty game?"

"We have no proof, for they wouldn't be apt to take a child's word for much. So I'm afraid it wouldn't be just the wisest thing to tell it broadcast," answered the serious Ralph.

"Anyhow, I mean to take a few of my special friends into council, and warn them what we're up against. From this time on you need a guardian squad, Ralph," the other went on.

"Why me more than any other fellow?" asked Ralph.

"I'll tell you, though I meant to keep it until to-night. Coach Willoughby finally made up his mind, though nobody knows it but myself. He means to drop two fellows off the team to-morrow—Tony Gilpin and George Andersen; the former because he fails to come up to the scratch, and George on account of that old injury to his leg, which is cropping up again. He was our star player last year, and we are going to miss him a heap."

"Yes, I supposed poor George would have to go, but expected Tony would hold on," remarked Ralph, quietly.

"And the coach has decided that you are to take the place of Tony as left half-back. I'm awful glad of it! I purposely kept my hands off, because I wanted merit and not favoritism to bring the change about. Shake on it, Ralph!"

"And I'm glad, too," remarked the other, his voice quivering a little with his emotion; "not that I like to supplant any other fellow, but I believe it's only right that every one of Columbia's sons should cherish an earnest desire to make the best of what there is in him. I only hope the coach isn't making a serious mistake, that's all."

"I know he isn't, and the other fellows will say so, too, when they hear. Tony isn't a popular player at all, and when there is dissension in a baseball nine or a football eleven, it's going to make trouble. 'Beware the worm i' the bud,' you know. But these cowards may find that they're up against a tougher proposition than they suspect, before they're done with it."

Frank was even more indignant at the possibility of peril overhanging the head of his chum, than if it had threatened himself. That is ever the way with generous souls.

"Three days more, and then comes Clifford after our scalp," remarked Ralph, desirous of dropping the unpleasant subject for the time being.

"Yes, and although Bellport beat them last Saturday 17 to 4, we

mustn't imagine Clifford is going to be an easy mark for us. Perhaps they may fancy our style of play, and rub it all over us. Nobody can say until we've met, and fought it out," was Frank's sagacious remark.

"I agree with you on that score," declared his companion: "Clifford was unfortunate in many ways. She lost three of her best men through accidents, while Bellport did not. Then some people hint that her secret signals were given away, because the Bellport players seemed to be ready to meet every sudden move Clifford made."

"Yes, I heard that, too, and while I hate to believe any fellow could be so low as to betray his school to the enemy, it's been done before. We must be doubly on our guard against such a thing. I've been thinking up a little scheme that would upset anything like that. But we haven't started with signals yet, keeping that until to-morrow, when the real team as selected will come together."

"I can guess what you've got in mind, Frank, but I'm not asking questions. Only I do hope nothing prevents me from going into that game. Somehow, all my life I've just longed to be a football player. There's something about the game that seems to just stir me up, as even baseball couldn't. And yet nobody would call me a scrapper either," remarked Ralph.

"Oh, it isn't that always. Lots of good football players are quiet, modest fellows, ready to mind their own business, if let alone. I guess it must be something in a fellow's nature that makes him long to buck up against difficulties, and down them. And seeing that you've always been so quiet and unassuming a fellow, I hardly know how to apply that to you, either. It's just born in a man, that's what," and Frank clapped his hand affectionately on his chum's shoulder.

Others were streaming along the road at the same time, homeward bound.

"Look out, here comes a vehicle back of us," said Ralph presently, when they were about half-way to Columbia Center.

They stepped to the side of the road, to allow the carriage to pass.

"Why, it's Minnie Cuthbert and a friend!" said Ralph, suddenly.

At that Frank turned hastily, the color flying to his face like magic; for that same name always had a wonderful influence over him, since he and Minnie had long been the warmest of friends.

The pretty girl who held the reins urged her horse on. There was a look in her face that Frank had never seen there before. She stared straight at him, as he took off his cap and bowed, but not by the slightest sign did she give any evidence of being aware that such a person as Frank Allen existed.

It was the cut direct!

Ralph uttered an exclamation of amazement. Quickly he glanced at his chum, to see that Frank had gone deadly white, and his eyes glittered with sudden spasm of pain that seized upon him.

He drew a long breath, and tried to get a grip on himself.

"Say, that hurt some, I tell you, Ralph. I never expected to be cut by Minnie Cuthbert, that's sure," he said, between his set teeth.

Ralph was sorely puzzled. He remembered that Minnie really owed her life to the wonderful presence of mind of Frank, when a runaway horse had threatened to bring disaster down upon her.

"What's happened?" he asked, eyeing his friend.

"You know as much as I do. It's a mystery to me," returned Frank.

"Perhaps Lef Seller could tell; he's just back of us, and I heard him laugh as he saw Minnie drive past without speaking," suggested the other, meaningly.

"I wonder now if history has a habit of repeating itself," ventured Frank. "But what can I do but grin and bear it? Sooner or later she'll find out the truth. I'll never ask for an explanation, knowing that I've done nothing to make her act so. Now, forget it, and let's talk about your affairs, Ralph."

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGE HISTORY OF RALPH

"If you don't mind, Frank, I'd like to go out of my way a few steps, so as to stop at the post-office. There's a late mail comes in after the last delivery by carrier," observed Ralph, after they had reached town.

"Why, certainly," returned the other, quickly, as he glanced at Ralph, who smiled half sadly and nodded.

"I keep hoping to hear something from your Uncle Jim. It may come any day now, unless the very worst has happened, and they're all lost over in that big wild country," said Ralph, drawing a long breath.

"When did you hear from him last?" asked his friend, as they turned the corner into the main street of Columbia.

"A month ago. You know, from England they had gone to India. He wrote me from there that he had just missed Mr. Arnold Musgrove and his widowed sister, Mrs. John Langworthy, who had sailed for China."

"Yes, I remember all that. The lady has always been a very great traveler, and something of an explorer. You told me she was intending to do something that few strong men had ever attempted," remarked Frank, wonderfully interested in all that pertained to the strange history of this boy friend.

Ralph had been brought up as the son of the Wests, living in the village of Paulding. Then there had come a letter by mail, accompanying bank notes to the extent of fifty dollars, and telling him that a friend, knowing of his great ambition to get an education above what the little country school could afford, wished him to accept this gift, which would be duplicated every month.

Ralph, with the assistance of his good friend, Frank, had learned that the money came through a lawyer in New York, really an uncle of young Allen. Then, later on, it was found that Ralph was only an adopted son of the Wests, who had taken him from a poorhouse.

By degrees, it came out that the man who had left this sum with the lawyer, Mr. Arnold Musgrove, must be an uncle of the boy, who was, in all probability, a son of the rich widow.

Judge Jim had immediately set out for Europe, to confront Musgrove, and tell the lady that her child was not dead, as she believed, but could be restored to her. And, as Ralph had just said, the legal gentleman soon found that he was going to have the time of his life overtaking the energetic couple.

"Well," remarked Ralph, in answer to the inquiry of his chum, "she and her brother actually started with a caravan overland across China, skirting Thibet, and aiming to head northeast, so as to pass through a portion of Siberia, and after that reach Russia. They have been gone a long time now, and I wonder if I will ever

see her face. Sometimes it seems too good to be true.”

There was no letter at the post-office for Ralph. He was getting used to this daily disappointment. Still, Frank could see the look of pain that flashed across Ralph’s fine face, though he tried to conceal it with a little laugh.

Arrived at his boarding place, the boys entered. It did not take Ralph long to take a bath, and get into his ordinary clothes, after which they hurried to the Allen home, where Frank followed suit.

Although Frank said nothing more about the strange actions of Minnie, it was very plain to his friend that he felt the snub deeply.

”If I thought he wouldn’t be mad with me, I’d be tempted to try and find out from Minnie what she meant,” Ralph was saying to himself, as he sat opposite his chum at the table, and noticed the little frown that occasionally came upon the open countenance of the one he had in mind.

But he knew Frank’s ways, and that the other would not like any meddling in his own private affairs.

”Better let him settle it in his own fashion,” was the conclusion Ralph reached. ”But if Lef Seller has had anything to do with it, I’m sorry for him, that’s all. Once Frank makes up his mind that these pranks of Lef have reached a limit, he’s going to give him an awful licking; and I know it.”

Frank had been watching his sister Helen at supper. He knew that there was something worrying her, too, and the strange thought came that perhaps it might be along the same lines as his own vexation.

”I wonder, now, could that be possible?” was the question that kept confronting him.

Having once given way to this suspicion, he could not refrain from trying to find out the truth. Helen had gone upstairs, on some small excuse. He was surprised to find her in her room, and with traces of tears in her beautiful eyes.

”Why, what’s the matter, sister mine? Has anyone been abusing you? I wonder if I could guess. Is it about Minnie?” he asked, gently, for Frank was very fond of his only sister, but two years younger than himself.

She looked at him in surprise.

"Why, Frank, however did you guess?" she exclaimed.

"Because," he replied, steadily, "she gave me the cut direct when Ralph and myself were heading home from the athletic field this evening. She and Dottie Warren were in the carriage, and Minnie looked right through me when I bowed. Whew! it gave me a shock, I tell you."

"The mean thing, to carry it to you! I suppose I've said something or other to give her offense, although I tried in vain to remember any cause; but since she chooses to include all my family in her resentment, I'm not going to do the least thing in the way of an apology," exclaimed Helen, warmly.

"I'm of the impression that it's me who's to blame, though I don't know what I've done," said Frank, immediately. "If I did, I'd apologize decently, and have it over with, whether she accepted it or not. But Ralph suggests that perhaps it's the work of some outsider, who wants to make trouble between Minnie and the Allens."

"Oh, how mean! And from the way you talk, I can imagine who it is you have in mind. That wouldn't be the first time Lef Seller has been guilty of meddling!" exclaimed the girl, indignantly.

"It was Ralph who said that. He heard Lef laugh when she cut me, as if it tickled him. If I could only get proof that he's been telling yarns about me, I'd soon settle old scores with him. But you won't try to make up, will you Helen?"

"Certainly not! I'm the innocent party. Minnie chose to give me to understand that she'd prefer to go out with Dottie this afternoon. I just turned away and came straight home. I think she called out after me, but I wouldn't turn my head an inch. I shall decline to ever speak to her again until the time comes when she apologizes. There!" and Helen stamped her little foot on the floor, for emphasis.

Frank sighed, and went back to the library, where Ralph was chatting with Mr. Allen, always deeply interested in the strange life story of the boy from Paulding.

Three times that evening Frank went to the telephone and held a little confab with some unknown parties. Each time when he came back he would be smiling in a way that mystified his friend, who wondered what the particular business could be that took up so much of his time.

But then, a captain of a school football eleven, on the eve of a great struggle, must have no end of difficulties to straighten out; and doubtless Frank found much to talk about with the various members of his team.

Helen had come down again, and showed nothing of the dreadful shock her feelings had sustained when her one particular chum so basely deserted her.

She sang for Ralph, and the three of them also joined their voices in many of the school songs dear to the heart of all Columbia students.

"Ten o'clock, and time I was getting away to my little den," remarked Ralph, at last; for even the best of evenings must come to an end.

"Wait just a few minutes," said Frank, mysteriously.

"What's all this? You're up to something or other," laughed the other.

"I'm waiting, that's all," returned Frank, calmly.

"Waiting for what?"

"To hear the signal—there it is!" as three distinct knocks sounded on the outside of the house.

"Why, whatever does it mean, Frank," asked the visitor, as he arose to get his cap: for they were again in the little den Frank called his sanctum, where he kept all his beloved traps connected with the sports he delighted in, most of them decorating the walls.

"They're all on deck, thank goodness! And now it's safe for you to go home," was the rather startling remark of the other.

Ralph looked at the speaker a moment, and then, as a light dawned upon his comprehension, he burst out into a genuine, hearty, boyish laugh.

"Say, you don't mean to tell me you've gone and got a bodyguard to escort me to my own dear little home, do you, Frank? Well, of all the pranks, this certainly takes the cake! What do you think, that they're already getting down to their fine little work, and mean to kidnap me?" he exclaimed, greatly amused.

"No, but I know that crowd better than you do. When two sneaks like Tony Gilpin and Asa Barnes make up their minds to gather a

bunch of skunks after their own stripe, and waylay a fellow they hate, they lose no time about it. There's only one more day between now and Saturday, when we play Clifford; and I saw them turning to notice whether we kept on together. They know you are here, sure."

"But I might slip out the back way, and give them the merry ha! ha!" suggested Ralph; "though I hate to crawl that way from such cowards, not one of them willing to face me outright."

"But that isn't it. We have talked it over, and come to the conclusion that half of the fun would be lost unless those whelps were treated to a dose of their own medicine. They need a good sound licking, and I give you my word for it, they're due for one if they try to tackle you on the road home to-night," and Frank, as he spoke, brought his fist down sharply on his knee.

"Who did you invite to the party?" inquired Ralph, still laughing at the absurdity of his requiring a bodyguard.

"Let me see," replied Frank. "There's Lanky Wallace, for one; Buster Billings, for the second, and Paul Bird, for the third."

"Three good men, and true. I see that I'll be well protected on my journey of half a dozen blocks!" cried Ralph.

"Oh, that's only a beginning. Each one of them agreed to get two other fellows belonging to the team, if possible; for they want all the practice they can get. So there will be nine in the bunch that follows after you; ten, counting myself!"

"Oh, splash! That's an army! Why so many, Frank, when I'd be willing to go anywhere with just you along for company," demanded the other.

"Thanks for the compliment; but, you see, everybody wanted to go, and bring others, and so I had to let 'em have their way. Now, you'll probably never see a sign of our crowd as you walk along, whistling and seeming to be unsuspecting. But at the first sign of trouble, lift your sweet voice and sing out the rallying cry we all know, 'Columbiad!' That will fetch us on the jump, Ralph. Hold them off as best you can for a dozen seconds, and then prepare to laugh."

"All right, seeing that it's your joke. Honestly, I don't think they'll pay any attention to poor me; but since Coach Willoughby believes I ought to play with the regulars, and any hurt to one is an injury to all, I'll accept the guard of honor; only _please_ don't tell anyone about it to-morrow, unless you want me to be the butt of ridicule for the whole school."

"Wait and see," was all Frank would say; and with this Ralph had to be content.

The two friends separated at the door. Frank rather ostentatiously bade his visitor good-night, and Ralph sauntered down the walk to the gate, as the door closed.

Although he looked around once or twice, and thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of several flitting figures, Ralph walked bravely on his way, whistling merrily, as though he had not a care or trouble in the wide world.

When he had gone a couple of blocks, he came to a portion of the road when the shadows were densest. Here the trees grew close to the thoroughfare, and this fact made it a splendid hiding place for anyone so inclined. There was a legend told of a peddler who had, once upon a time, been set upon by tramps at this point, and robbed and beaten, so that he died of his hurts.

Even bold people were wont to hurry their steps a trifle when passing this ill-omened place. Ralph, however, kept on at his customary pace, still whistling one of the songs he had so lately sung with Frank and Helen Allen.

Just as he was half-way past the shadowy spot, he heard a sudden shrill sound, not unlike a referee's whistle on the football gridiron. Dark figures immediately sprang up close by, and the rush of many feet told that the danger anticipated by Frank was about to materialize.

Ralph at once threw himself into a position of self defense, and at the same time shouted out the call for assistance so well known to all the sons of Columbia High.

CHAPTER IV

TREACHERY IN THE CAMP

"Columbiad! Columbiad!"

It was the call for assistance, known to, and respected by, every boy who loved the name of Columbia High School—a rallying cry in time of emergency, when the enemy had carried the ball down close to the home goal, and almost supernatural efforts were needed, in order to beat back the rising tide.

Never did the old familiar yell of "Hey, Rube!" appeal more positively to canvasmen connected with a traveling circus, when set upon by rowdies in some wayside town, than did this shout.

Ralph had no time for more. From three sides he found himself attacked by unknown foes. Some had their hats drawn far over their faces, in order to conceal their identity, while others had gone still further, and tied handkerchiefs over the lower half, with the same purpose in view.

A jargon of angry cries arose, each assailant seeming desirous of venting his especial method for showing dislike.

"Down him, boys!"

"Spank the cub!"

"Send him back where he belongs; we don't want poorhouse brats here!"

"Do him up! Butt in, fellows! Make a clean sweep of it now!"

Among all these outcries, only that one concerning the "poorhouse" stung the ears of the boy at bay. It was so cruel, so mean, so utterly uncalled for, that his whole body seemed to quiver with indignation, and a burning fire shot through his veins.

He had thrown himself into an attitude of self defense, with his back against a tree. In this way he was able to avoid considerable punishment, since the attacking force could not completely surround him, the tree being an unusually big one.

[Illustration: HE HAD THROWN HIMSELF INTO AN ATTITUDE OF SELF-DEFENSE.]

So far as he could see, there were at least half a dozen opposed to him. Evidently Tony and Asa did not mean to take any chances when trying to put the new candidate for honors on the regular team out of the running.

What with all the row connected with their rush, the cowardly assailants were themselves unable to hear the patter of swiftly-approaching footsteps, coming from the rear. They evidently shouted, in order to keep their courage up, and prevent Ralph from recognizing any one particular voice.

The beleaguered boy was himself fighting like a cat at bay. He had no positive assurance that friends were near, and with so many eager hands striving to reach his face and body, he had to

retaliate, giving blow for blow.

Once he managed to dash his clenched fist into the face of a fellow who, in his eagerness, had rushed in too close.

"Wow!" bellowed the stricken party, and somehow it seemed to Ralph that the voice was that of Tony Gilpin.

More than once he was himself the recipient of blows, some severe and others of a glancing nature. For a brief period of time there was a constant maelstrom of hands flying back and forth, accompanied with shouts, jeers and grunts.

"Oh, you cowards!" called Ralph, as a blow struck him on the back of the head, and almost stunned him for a second; one of the crowd, not daring to face the boy at bay, having crept alongside the tree to watch his chance.

He could easily believe that this was Asa Barnes. Immediately a mad desire possessed him to pounce upon that sneak and return the blow with interest. Despite the array of threatening fists that formed a half-circle in front, Ralph threw himself around to one side of the tree, eager to come in contact with the object of his especial contempt.

So speedy were his movements that the treacherous one could not get out of the way, nor was he, anticipating such a bold act on the part of the boy who had been held up on the road.

Just as Ralph pounced vigorously upon him, he caught sight of a number of dark figures jumping into the fray. At the same instant new shouts arose, a volume of sound that made the welkin ring, and brought satisfaction to the heart of the one in peril.

He knew then that his call for assistance had been heard—that Frank and his football comrades had reached the spot, and were in the act of practicing their gridiron tactics upon the unfortunates who had fallen into the very trap they had themselves set.

"Help! help! fellows, take him off!" shrieked the one against whom the angry Ralph had collided; for both of them had gone down in a scrambling, kicking heap.

Fear caused the under dog to make frantic efforts to escape; and while Ralph was able to get a little satisfaction out of his attack, he found it utterly impossible to hang on to the squirming figure, which, eluding his grasp, presently rolled over and over, bounded to his feet, and fled like the wind.

Meanwhile there was taking place a furious fight. The disguised

crowd found itself outnumbered two to one, and while they struck back whenever possible, the one thought in their minds was escape.

"Cut it!" shouted the one who seemed to be a leader.

"Don't let them get away! Take 'em prisoners!" whooped a tall lad, who was doing his share of the mauling.

But that was easier said than done. The now sadly demoralized enemy scattered in every direction, some running wildly down the road, and others vanishing in the darkness of the wood.

"They're gone!" cried Lanky Wallace, in disgust, as he found that the fellow he had embraced was no other than his fat friend, Buster Billings.

"Let me go, hang it! You've squeezed the last breath out of me! I'd had that dub, only for your interference. Such rotten luck!" gasped the stout one, as he shook himself free from Lanky's encircling arms.

Frank was at the side of the boy they had rescued just in time.

"How is it, Ralph, did they pummel you hard?" he asked, solicitously.

"I gave 'em more than I took; but my head sings a bit from the nasty knock that sneak Asa Barnes gave me from behind!" replied the other.

"From behind!" echoed Lanky, indignantly; "well, wouldn't that jar you some now? But what else could you expect from that snake in the grass? He never fought fair in all his life. I hope you got one or two in back on him, Ralph."

"Didn't you hear him howl for help?" replied the other, quickly. "That was when I nailed him. I guess his head rings about as much as mine does. But, boys, you came just in time. I was in a tight box. And I'm ever so much obliged for the help."

"Don't mention it, old chap. We really needed the exercise, and the only thing I complain of is that it all happened too fast. Why, I don't believe I really got my windmill working freely when I was threshing the air. Zip! and they were gone," and Paul Bird laughed heartily at the hasty way in which the enemy had vanished.

"You're sure they didn't get you?" persisted Frank.

"I guess I'm all right," laughed the other, as he swung both arms back and forth, and bent his body to test his muscles; "you see,

there wasn't time enough for them to do much damage. And they were all so mighty anxious to reach me they really interfered with each other."

"As we came up on the run, I thought I heard one fellow give a whoop of pain, as if he had run up against something. Was that your fault, Ralph?" demanded Lanky.

"Sure. And what's more, I expect it was Tony. If he shows a black eye to-morrow, give me credit for one goal kicked, boys," replied the party addressed.

Bones Shadduck was lighting a match.

"Hello! What's that for?" asked Jack Eastwick.

"I picked up a hat just now, and the idea struck me that possibly there might be some more headgear lying around. We'd like to know who these pirates are, you see, and here's a chance to get a line on 'em," explained the other, as he bent low to scan the ground in the immediate vicinity.

"Matches—who's got any? Pass 'em around, fellows!" called Buster.

Immediately there was quite an illumination around that part of the road, half a dozen tiny torches burning at once, as eager eyes scanned the ground. Twice cries of satisfaction announced that a find had rewarded the search, but the supply of matches gave out, and, besides, it seemed that there were no more hats or caps to be gathered in.

"Three times, and out, boys! Now we'll be able to learn who some of the crowd must have been. I think I ought to nail this gay old cap. Nobody but Bill Klemm ever dared wear such a screamer as that," announced Lanky, holding the object of his derision aloft.

"And this looks like the hat I turned over to Jay Tweedle the time I accidentally knocked his off in the river, and it sank. I know it is, fellows!" exclaimed Frank, who had been one of the lucky discoverers.

"Well, we're getting a line on the bunch, all right," laughed Jack.

"If only Ralph marked both Tony and Asa, and we've got the hats of three more, it looks good to me," chirped Lanky.

"Fall in, fellows!" called Bones Shadduck, assuming the air of a drum major, as he waved an imaginary baton in the air.

With considerable talking and laughter, the squad gathered around Ralph.

"Here, what's all this mean?" laughed Ralph. "Want to make me a high muckamuck, a grand sachem surrounded by his valiant bodyguard? I object. I'm only a common worm, like the rest of you, and not fit for these great honors. Take Frank there, and put him in the center of the bunch; he's the captain of the crew!"

"Worms! Hear him rant, fellows, will you? Compares us to the lowly angleworm of commerce. And this is the reward we get for sacrificing our sleep to rescue the perishing! I call it base ingratitude, that's what!" cried one.

"But just now you're the guest of honor, Ralph; the one bright particular star that has attracted the attention of all the meaner ones. Just hold your row, and let us run this funeral, will you?" declared Buster.

"Oh, well, have it your own way, fellows. You're a good lot, anyhow, to pull my chestnuts out of the fire for me," concluded the one upon whom all these attentions were being showered.

And so they marched through the streets singing one of their school songs. The good people of Columbia were quite accustomed to such "stunts" on the part of the students, especially when there was a day of sport close by. At such times the thriving town on the bank of the Harrapin was wont to assume all the airs of a college center, and enthusiasm run rampant.

So, while many heads were thrust from doorways or windows as the procession trailed along, no adverse comments arose. Many of those same men were old graduates themselves, and such patriotic songs only served to awaken the spirit that never could be wholly eradicated from their systems.

In such fashion was Ralph West conducted to his humble boarding place. And hearty were the "good nights" that accompanied the scattering of the band of defenders.

Frank and Lanky walked home together.

"That job's done, anyhow," remarked Frank, with evident satisfaction.

"And well done, too. Only one more night to consider, and the glee club has its regular meeting then. We must keep a close watch on Ralph. Those chumps mean to get him yet if they can. I only hope I have just one more whack at some of that bunch. I never hit a fellow with more vim in my life than to-night, when I came up against that chap with the handkerchief across his face."

"I heard him grunt," observed Frank, with a chuckle, "and really I felt sorry for him. I think you struck him with both fists together in the excitement. But it's a shame that Columbia fellows are fighting among themselves just now, when we ought to be united, and showing a common front against the enemy."

"Oh, these represent only a tail-end fragment. Don't count them as much. Outside of possibly a dozen students, I firmly believe the school is united, and that you possess the confidence of the whole town. This is our lucky year. I tell you we just can't lose," and Lanky emphasized his words with a smack of one hand in the palm of the other.

"I feel the same way," said Frank, "but, all the same, I'll be better satisfied when the game has been played. There's many a slip, you know. An accident might mar the finest play the gridiron ever knew. And then the treachery of these fellows always annoys me. An open foe I can meet boldly, but deliver me from the snake in the grass that steals up in the rear to upset your calculations."

"Never mind, it'll be all right, Frank; but here we are at your gate, so good night," and Lanky hurried on.

CHAPTER V

THE SIGNAL PRACTICE

The next day was Friday.

And with that battle of the gridiron gladiators looming up just ahead, it can be readily understood that Mr. Amos Wellington, not to mention Mr. Oswald, and the women teachers in Columbia High School, found it a most difficult task to get any satisfaction out of the many classes before them that day.

Football was in the air! The very tang of the frosty morning seemed to suggest ideal weather conditions for the coming struggle. Wherever boys congregated, on the campus before the morning session, or down in the lunch room during intermission, when they sampled the various types of sandwiches and pies supplied by Mrs. Loudon, nothing was talked of but the chances of Columbia against the seasoned players of Clifford.

"They're heavier than our men," one would lament.

"But the day of weight in football is gone," cried another, quickly.

"Yes, for the game as played to-day calls for agility and pertinacity more than heft. And we've got the boys who can do stunts, believe me, fellows!" remarked a third deeply-interested student.

"They practice for the last time this afternoon, don't they?"

"Yes, but mostly on signals, I understand. Now the team has been selected, they want to work in harmony," remarked the fellow who seemed to know, because he had a big brother on the eleven, and that was a great honor for the entire family.

"There's one weak spot," grumbled another prophet of evil.

"Name it, Sandy."

"Yes, tell us where it is. I've gone over the whole bunch ever so many times, and with the new men I think it couldn't possibly be improved."

"That's just it; you've put your finger on the sore the first thing. Now, don't all jump on me at once, and say I'm knocking, for I'm not. I think a heap both of Ralph West's playing and that of Bones Shaddock. They're cracker jacks, and far superior to the fellows they displaced."

"Then what are you kicking about, Sandy?" demanded Molly Manners, the dudish student, who, while no athlete himself, always felt a decided interest in the accomplishments of his more muscular comrades.

"Lack of practice in common will bankrupt us. That's what worries me. You see, Bones and Ralph haven't worked with the rest, to any extent, at least. How can they fill their parts in the machine? I'm dubious, that's all, even while hoping for the best," went on the croaker.

"Well, now, don't let that keep you awake tonight. Coach Willoughby has been training the scrub just as he did the regular team. They know the same plays, and once the signals are decided on the whole thing will move along like a well greased machine. He's done wonders with the raw material. And if Columbia wins this year, much of the credit belongs to the trainer, our old Princeton grad."

"Hear! hear! Three cheers for Coach Willoughby!"

And they were given with a will.

Frank and Ralph came together at intermission. While they munched a bit of lunch, they naturally fell into conversation, and, of course, their talk must be in connection with the stirring events of the preceding night.

"Have you met Tony?" asked Frank, with a chuckle of amusement.

"No. You see, he's a junior and I'm only a soph, so we run in different grooves. What about him, Frank?" asked the other, eagerly.

"I was sent into Miss Condit's room with a message from Mr. Wellington, and, of course, I felt a little curious to know how Tony looked. While I waited for an answer to the note I carried, I glanced over to where he sat. Would you believe it, he had turned deliberately around in his seat, so that his back was toward me."

"Then perhaps I did put my mark on him?" suggested Ralph, eagerly.

"Well, now, you certainly did. As I glanced further along I saw a mirror at the side of the room, and just then discovered that he was facing it. He turned fiery red when he caught my look, for I really couldn't keep from grinning, because, as sure as you live, my boy, our friend Tony is nursing a most beautiful black eye!"

"It serves him right. He had no business to bother me so. I only struck in self-defense, and everyone is entitled to that privilege," declared Ralph.

"Well, I should say so," remarked his friend, quickly, "and I hope you did as well by that sneak of an Asa. But he was wise enough to stay home to-day. When you get that fellow off his guard you can catch a weasel asleep."

The ending of the recess brought their conversation to a close, but after school, Ralph, possessed by a sort of fascination to behold his work, haunted the campus until Tony appeared, surrounded by several of his set.

The two rivals met face to face at the exit of the grounds. Tony glared at the author of his woes, and his two chums made threatening gestures; but, of course, they did not dare place a finger on Ralph at such a time.

But, at any rate, Frank had certainly not understated the facts, for Tony was the possessor of a fine black eye. Of course, it was easy for him to invent a plausible excuse for this mishap; he had run slap against a door when getting up in the dark. And, of

course, nobody believed him, though only a select few understood the true origin of his damaged optic.

Ralph said never a word; but he could not keep from smiling a bit as he turned away; and this must have been gall and wormwood to the other fellow.

An hour later and the chosen eleven, together with the substitutes, gathered on the field for their last instructions, and the trial of the signal code. Frank and the coach were frequently in secret confab, and the others regarded this as having more or less significance.

"What did your investigation result in, Mr. Willoughby?" Frank was asking.

"Just what we expected. I have learned beyond a shadow of a doubt that the secret signals of Clifford were given to Bellport by some traitor. A dozen people I interviewed were positive in that belief. For while there is as yet no proof, they declare that on no other grounds could the Bellports know just what play was coming every time the other captain called out his numbers," replied the coach, in a firm voice.

"Well, it is what may happen to us, unless we change backward at the last minute. That would confuse Clifford, and set them on the wrong track," remarked Frank.

"Just so, and the advantage would be with us. If they can down you boys squarely and fairly, I'll be the last one to knock, but this thing of trickery makes me angry. Because they feel that they were fooled by Bellport is no reason they should want to pass it along, and defeat you unfairly. I'm surprised that there is no clean-minded fellow on their team who will positively refuse to take advantage of such a mean game."

"If Cuthbert Lee was still on the Bellport team," said Frank, "I'm sure he'd never have listened to such a thing. It would be just like him to go to the other side and tell them to change their signals, as they had been betrayed. He was a lover of clean sport."

"Then I only wish there were more like him, Frank. The trouble is, too many boys, yes, and young men, too, believe that anything is fair that promises to bring the advantages to their side. Love of school is all very good, but it should never step in the way of honest dealing," observed the Princeton man, soberly.

"Then we'll go on with the signals as they have been used?" asked the other.

"To-day, yes, but in the morning we'll get the boys together early, and change the whole order, so that things mean just the opposite of what they are now. You get my meaning, don't you, Frank?"

"Yes, and think it a capital idea. I've always been told that the truly wise man is he who grapples with adversities, and makes them work to his advantage. And that is what you propose to do now. Watch Lanky; he's up to some mischief or other. I can tell it in his actions. There he goes after the ball that he purposely kicked into those bushes, I believe."

"Well, he's got it all right, and is calling to Substitute Buster that it's up to him to try for a field goal," commented the coach, smiling. "Yes; notice, however, that Lanky makes no effort to hold the ball for the kick, but has set it there on the ground," continued Frank, who knew the joking propensities of his chum so well that he could quickly guess when the other had any lark coming.

"I suppose Lanky doesn't want to take chances of a bad kick, and, considering how near the game is, you can hardly blame him. Perhaps he's had some experience with Buster's kicking before. There he goes now!"

"Look at Lanky, sir, with his fingers in his ears!"

Hardly had Frank spoken when Buster, swooping down, with all sail set, on the inoffensive oval, brought his right foot against the ball with a tremendous effort. The result was certainly astonishing, for there was a sudden heavy detonation, and the football arose about ten feet, in a sadly flattened condition, while the kicker sat down heavily on the ground, looking dazed.

Lanky had substituted some cleverly constructed gas balloon, placed in an old cover, for the genuine article, having previously hidden the fraudulent contraption in those bushes until the chance came to utilize the same.

There was a brief silence, and then a shout went up from the husky band of players, who caught on to the joke. All but the dazed Buster, who, still sitting there and gaping at the seeming remains of a once fine oval football, shook his head and turned appealingly toward the coach, called out:

"Say, that wasn't my fault, Mr. Willoughby. Now, who pays for that ball, anyhow?" which remark brought out renewed shrieks from the others, some of whom fairly fell over with the violence of their merriment.

When the joke was explained to the fat boy, of course he laughed heartily, for his nature could not take offense at anything.

Then the work began in earnest. The efficient coach drilled the players in all the various plays that were apt to come up during the course of the game. He expressed his pleasure at the masterly way these were carried out.

"I'm satisfied that the changes I made have vastly strengthened the whole team," he said, as he and Frank came together during a period of rest, after a fierce foray, in which every player worked systematically, and really clever passes and runs were made around imaginary hostile forces.

In other days they had rubbed up against the scrub team, and practiced all their arts against real foes, but this last practice was to be in secret. Signal work and the drilling of Ralph and Bones in their respective positions, must occupy much of the afternoon.

To keep spectators away from the field, several dozen boys had volunteered to patrol the neighborhood, completely surrounding the open. Thus it would seem that there could be no one close enough to overhear when the signal numbers were deliberately called by the captain.

"Still, I'm under the impression that there may be someone hidden in those bushes, or in a hollow tree, watching our work, and drinking in all we say. When fellows descend to such low practices as betraying their schoolmates to the enemy, they become very crafty. On the whole, it will be better to change the code just before the game to-morrow," remarked the coach, later on, during another rest.

Frank said no more. Secretly, however, he was planning to find out, if it could be possible, that this idea of Mr. Willoughby had reason back of it. In other words, he had made up his mind that when the crowd of players went back to town, he would find some opportunity to drop behind, and keep watch over that field.

For the third and last time, play was resumed. Again did the coach follow the carefully arranged maneuvers. Up to the present he had found it necessary to stop them in the midst of the play to start afresh, because of some inaccuracy. Not once did this occur now.

"Well, sir, how was that?" asked Frank, as, with disheveled hair and soiled clothes, he came out of the fracas and sought the side of the man who knew.

There was hardly any need to ask. Coach Willoughby's bronzed face was all smiles.

"Fine! I never saw the thing executed better, even by the leading colleges. Depend on it, my boy, if you and your men do as well as that to-morrow, and there's no treachery shown, you're going to mow Clifford down far worse than she suffered at the hands of Bellport. I congratulate you, every one, for the fine form you show. It does my heart good to see it. And now, home, lads, and see to it that you don't overeat to-night, and go to bed at a reasonable hour. That's all from me, and I feel that my work is well done!"

The afternoon had worn away while they strained and labored, trying for the last time some of the plays by means of which they hoped to carry the ball into Clifford territory during the coming game.

Each member of the team felt more or less weary when the coach declared that they had done enough, and dismissed them for the day.

"Don't forget the secret directions given for an early morning meet in the place selected, to go over the changed signals," was spoken in the ear of every fellow before they started back to town.

Frank held out behind the rest, pretending to be busy with a number of things that fell to his lot as captain of the eleven. He had whispered his intentions to Lanky, and the latter, while laughing at his fears, promised to keep any of the others from returning to look for the leader, should they notice his absence.

Watching his chance, Frank dropped behind some bushes. Then, without wasting any time, he started to crawl back to where he might have a view of the wooded side of the athletic field.

Perhaps, after all, the fears of the coach had been groundless. He would spend a short time watching, and then, if nothing developed, he could hasten home.

At the same time, the thought of how Clifford had been deceived and beaten by the too free handling of their secret code, gave Frank an uneasy feeling.

When he had gained a position that would allow him to observe the ground he deemed most suspicious, he waited for developments.

"What was that?" he asked himself in another minute; for it seemed to him that he had heard a sharp crack, as of a rotten branch

giving way.

Then his attention was attracted toward a certain spot, where something had undoubtedly fallen to the ground. Eagerly he riveted his eyes on the place, and in this way became aware of the fact that something was certainly moving up among the branches of the pine tree.

Then an object came heavily to the ground, rolled over once or twice, and scrambled half erect. Though some little distance away, Frank could see that this was no animal, but a human being, a boy at that, who was rubbing his elbow furiously, as though it had been smartly tapped in his fall.

No need to put a label on this fellow to signify what his presence meant. Frank knew that he was looking on a spy, who had been perched among the thick branches of that pine tree during the better part of the afternoon, making notes of the signal play of the Columbia eleven!

And he was now moving off, possessed of information that was of tremendous value to the Clifford team!

CHAPTER VI

AT THE SINGING SCHOOL

Frank did not hesitate a minute. He believed that it was his duty, if possible, to overtake the spy, and not only learn his identity, but in some fashion make him promise not to reveal what he had seen and heard.

He started as fast as he could, making allowances for the fact that he did not wish to alarm the fellow too soon. The shades of evening were not far away, since night comes early in mid-November, and try as he would, he found it impossible to decide as to whether the other was someone he knew or a stranger.

As he ran quickly over in his mind the list of those who would come under the head of suspicion, he put them aside, one after another. It was certainly not Lef Seller or Bill Klemm; another look, and he was just as positive that it could not be either Asa Barnes or Tony Gilpin.

Perhaps, after all, this cunning spy might be some enthusiast from Clifford, who, believing that his team had suffered through

treachery on the preceding Saturday, when Bellport overwhelmed them, wished to even matters by picking up Columbia's signals.

"As if two wrongs ever yet made a right," said Frank bitterly, as he continued to chase after the unknown.

He was gaining rapidly. Still, in order to do so, he had to keep his eyes fixed for the most part on the moving figure ahead, and in this way was unable to properly watch his footsteps.

Consequently, it was not at all surprising when he suddenly stepped on a stick that broke with a sharp twang. And, before he could dodge behind a tree, the fellow beyond had turned his head.

Frank knew instantly that he was discovered. He had stood perfectly still, in the hope that he might escape observation; but when he saw the other take to his heels, he realized that it was now destined to be a stern chase. So he, too, started to run at top speed, which meant a hot pace, since Frank was something of a sprinter on the cinder path.

At least, that turn on the part of the other had told him one thing—it was no Columbia fellow who had played this miserable trick upon the football squad; so undoubtedly he must belong in Clifford.

Despite the efforts of the school authorities, there was always more or less laying of wagers on these games. Driven away from the racetracks by recent strict State legislation, it seemed that those who made books were seeking all manner of sports, in order to carry on their games of chance.

So Frank consoled himself in the belief that this might be some agent of these gamesters, rather than a Clifford schoolboy intending to take a mean advantage of the rival team.

He was outrunning the fugitive, and it looked as though, if the chase were continued five minutes more, Frank was sure to overtake him.

Then the road leading north toward the river was reached. To Frank's disgust, he saw the other drag a bicycle out of some bushes, and, while he made a swift rush, hoping to yet come upon the fellow before he got away, it was only to see his intended quarry spin off along the road.

Frank followed a short distance, still cherishing a faint hope that something might happen to upset the other, but gradually the figure of the fleeing spy began to vanish, and he had to give it up.

The last he heard from the fellow was a sharp howl of derision. Evidently his sudden coming on the scene had given the coward a great scare, and he was now rejoicing over his narrow escape.

"Too bad that he got away," thought Frank, as he started across a field to take a short-cut that would save him considerable in his walk home. "I don't even know who he is. But, at any rate, this settles the question of signals. We wouldn't dare use the old ones now."

He made direct for the home of Buster Billings, where Coach Willoughby was stopping, he being an old friend of the family.

"Hello, how did you make out?" was the way he greeted Frank when the football captain was ushered into his room, where he was dressing for dinner.

"You guessed right, sir," answered Frank, gloomily.

"Then there was a spy around to pick up our signals?" asked the coach, smiling.

"He was hidden up in that big dense pine tree, and I guess he could see everything we did, as well as hear my signals. It's a shame that we have to go up against such trickery as that, sir," declared Frank, warmly.

"That's all right. Remember what we concluded would come out of this thing. If those Clifford players are small enough to take advantage of this find, let them, that's all. We'll fix it so that they'll make some tremendous blunders before they decide that honesty is the best policy. But I'm glad you found out. Now, tell me all about it, Frank," and the coach put both hands on the shoulders of the young athlete, in whom he had taken great interest.

Frank made a wry face.

"There isn't much to tell. No veni, vidi, vici, about this, for, while I came, and saw, I didn't conquer by a long shot. The fellow dropped down out of the tree, and made off, with me tagging behind. Then he discovered me, and ran. I followed suit, and was rapidly overtaking him, when we reached the road that turns toward the one along the river bank leading to the Clifford bridge."

"Yes, and then?" continued the coach, expectantly.

"I lost him! He had a wheel hidden in the bushes, and pedaled away, giving me the laugh as he went out of sight. That's all,

sir," concluded Frank.

"Did you get a square look at the fellow?" inquired Mr. Willoughby.

"Enough to make sure that he didn't belong in Columbia, so far as I could tell. I guess he came from Clifford, all right, sir."

"Well, it makes little difference, so long as we know the signals are off. Forewarned is forearmed, they say. Forget all about it, my boy, and we'll fix matters so that we can profit from our seeming misfortunes."

So Frank went home to clean himself, and eat his supper. The consolation given by Coach Willoughby did much to cheer him up, and he managed to put the ugly business out of his mind.

Indeed, he had a host of other things to bother him. The game on the morrow, of course, meant much to an enthusiast like Frank. Then, again, there was that strange matter in connection with Minnie Cuthbert. Frank thought a good deal of Minnie, and they had been great friends for a long time. To have her cut him dead was bad enough, but to act as she did toward his sister Helen seemed outrageous.

"There is something wrong about it," Frank said, as he dressed. "Minnie isn't the kind of a girl to do such a thing unless she believes she has a mighty good excuse. Well, I can't do anything to bridge the gap. It must go on until something happens to bring about an explanation. Until then it is my policy to simply leave matters alone, and pay attention to my own affairs."

But when he got to thinking of how Lef Seller had on one other occasion played a trick that, for a time, made trouble between Minnie and himself, he shook his head wrath fully, and muttered threats that boded no good to that prank-lover, should he prove to be guilty in this present instance.

Helen, being a girl, knew how to disguise her feelings. She seemed quite herself, and Frank could not help wondering if, after all, she had cared more for Minnie than she did for Flo Dempsey, with whom she intended seeing the great game on the morrow.

"Going to the meeting of the glee club to-night, Helen?" he asked, after supper.

She looked at him with a smile.

"Why not? I'm just as fond of singing as ever. I hope you don't mean to stay away for any reason, Frank?" came her quick reply.

That decided Frank. Any hesitation on the part of his sister, and he meant to remain at home; for, somehow, he felt that he hardly cared to mingle with the crowd, where Minnie must assuredly be, since she was one of the leading singers.

"Why, sure. I guess a little relaxation from the strain will do all of the team good. Some of the other fellows are going to come in a bunch, with Ralph and Bones."

"What is that for?" asked Helen, who could see from the smile that crossed his face that there was a reason.

"Oh, it's just like the class spreads, where they want to break the jollification up by kidnapping the president; some fellows are after our two new recruits, that's all," he replied.

"But this is different. Why should any Columbia boy want to kidnap Ralph? It would spoil the game to-morrow, and perhaps defeat our school."

"And that's just what these fellows would like to see. A case of sour grapes with them. But we're going to protect our men to the limit," declared Frank.

"How mean and contemptible of them! They ought to be ashamed of themselves."

"Well," said Frank, soothingly, as he saw how the indignant girl took it to heart in connection with Ralph, "Never mind now, but go and get your things on. We might as well make a start now. You know, we don't practice to-night at the school, because they're fixing the ceiling in the assembly room. It's to be at Dyckman's Hall."

"I promised that we would drop around and take Flo with us," remarked Helen, with a quick look upward, and a little smile.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter; that is, it won't take us much out of our way," returned Frank.

"No, it isn't so far as the Cuthbert's," and with this parting shot, Helen ran upstairs, leaving Frank to ponder over her meaning.

The glee club usually met in the hall at the high school. It was connected with the educational department, in that the school authorities encouraged its existence, for the study of music was along the lines of the ordinary duties of the classes.

Of course, when fifty or more young people come together of an evening, they are bound to make merry. Consequently there was always an air of jollity connected with these weekly singing society meetings throughout the winter months.

Both Bones Shadduck and Ralph West were present. They showed up with a bunch of others, and secretly Ralph reported to Frank that they had seen no sign of the enemy while on the way thither.

"But don't let that make you careless," retorted the other, "for these chaps are as cunning as Indians, who always attack, they say, just before dawn, when the men on guard are apt to be sleepy. Watch out, Ralph. We need you too much to have you taking chances."

But the evening passed quickly, with the customary songs and merriment. Minnie was, of course, present. She had come with Dottie Warren, and once, when it chanced that she and Frank met face to face, she looked annoyed because she had to speak. However, Frank's nod was just as cold as her own.

He sang with even more vim than customary, just to show her that he was not caring in the least. Still, there were curious eyes that noted the breach, and more than one group of girls commented on the fact.

"They've certainly had a falling out," said Emily Dodsworth, the primp, and she tried to look horrified, even while secretly pleased, because she was herself very fond of Frank. "Isn't it dreadful, girls? But then I thought their friendship was too sudden to last long. Perhaps Frank may understand now that 'old friends are sure, old ties endure.'"

It was nearly ten o'clock, when the singing school was supposed to close. Frank found himself wishing that it were over with. Somehow, he felt very tired, though suspecting that his weariness might be more of the mind than the body. Still, with that great game to be won on the morrow, he believed that he ought to get between the sheets as soon as possible now.

It was just at this time he saw Lanky Wallace heading toward him. Lanky was not in the least a diplomat. Whenever he had anything worrying him, the fact seemed to stick out all over his face, bringing wrinkles to his usually placid brow.

It was so now. Immediately Frank began to scent trouble, though, for the life of him, he could not understand just how it could come while the boys were still at the singing school. Surely, none of those schemers would dare sneak into the hall and kidnap either of the two new recruits.

He hastily glanced around and heaved a sigh of relief when his eyes fell on the figure of Ralph close by, as he chatted with Helen and Flo. At least it could not be him.

"What's ailing you, Lanky?" he demanded, as the other rushed up to him.

"It's Bones—they can't find him anywhere, and I guess he's been carried off by some of those disgruntled chaps!" exclaimed the other, with a look of dismay.

CHAPTER VII

THE ABDUCTION OF "BONES"

"What's that?" demanded Buster Billings, who happened to be nearby.

"Goodness, they are saying poor Bones Shadduck has been kidnapped!" exclaimed a shuddering girl, and the news was flashed all through the several groups.

The singing for the evening was done. The Columbia High School Glee Club had never before been so well attended. Time was when it consisted of a baker's dozen of students, but there were an unusually large number of good voices in the various classes this year.

Frank was, of course, much worried by the news.

"Are you sure, Lanky? Perhaps he's just stepped out to saunter around with one of the girls, like some of the others have done," he observed.

"Well, we thought of that, and hunted high and low. Why, even Allie Sawyer, who generally takes up so much of his time, hasn't seen him for ten minutes."

"So long as that?" answered Frank, with a smile; "but we must get busy, and learn if any one saw Bones go out."

"I did!" spoke up a girl just then.

"When was this?" asked Frank, turning on her quickly.

"Not more than seven or eight minutes ago. I was standing in the doorway, and had to move aside for him. And he spoke to me, too," came the reply. "And what did he say?" continued the other.

"Why, you know Bones has a dog?"

"Yes, a bulldog named Kaiser."

"He brought him along to the hall to-night," continued the girl.

"That's a fact, Frank; for the ugly brute came near taking a hunk out of my leg when, by the merest chance in the world, I happened to rub up against him!" declared Tom Budd, the boy gymnast, who was constantly doing stunts, as though possessed of an insatiable desire to stand on his head, walk on his hands, or throw somersaults.

"The dog was howling, oh, so mournfully," continued the girl. "I heard him, and it really got on my nerves. Well, I guess it acted the same way with Bones, for he said that he was going out and remonstrate with Kaiser."

Frank and Lanky exchanged glances.

"Told you so!" declared the latter, triumphantly.

"Well, it certainly looks as though there might be something in it. Bones must have forgotten the warning, in his sudden desire to stop the howling of the dog. He went out, and as he hasn't come back, we'd better be looking after him. Come along, some of you fellows. If they've carried him off, it's up to us to rescue our right guard!"

There was an immediate rush made for the door of the hall. Dyckman's was situated just on the outskirts of the town. It had once been some sort of church, and was now used for a variety of purposes connected with the life of the community, from political meetings to dancing classes.

As the stream of boys poured out of the building, the howling of the bulldog nearby became more furious than ever. It immediately attracted the attention of the observant Frank.

"Hark!" he said, holding up his hand to indicate that silence would be necessary if they hoped to succeed in accomplishing anything worth while.

"What is it?" demanded Lanky, eagerly; "do you see Bones, or did you hear him shout for help?"

"Neither. I was thinking of his dog," was the reply.

"What of old Kaiser, Frank? How does he come in this game?" asked Buster.

"You can tell from the way he's acting that Bones has never been near him. More than that, I believe the smart dog knows that something has happened to his master, for he's just wild to get free!" declared Frank.

"Sure as you live! Just listen to him growl and bark. I never heard a bulldog do that before!" cried Ralph.

"Oh, Kaiser is only a half-breed mongrel, but looks like a full-blooded bull. But an idea just occurred to me, fellows."

"Then let's have it, Frank. We're short of ideas at present, just as we are of a bully good football player needed in to-morrow's game. What is it?" asked Molly Manners, unduly excited by these strange occurrences.

"Perhaps the dog might lead us to where Bones is!" said Frank.

"Say, now, that's just a crackerjack suggestion. Of course, he will, if someone could only hold him in by his leash!" exclaimed Lanky, with the light of anticipation shining on his face.

"Come on, let's try it!" shouted another fellow.

"But who's going to unfasten Kaiser, and hold him?" asked Frank, always practical, even at such moments as this.

"Here's Buster, he knows the dog better than anyone else," said Jack Eastwick, pushing the fat boy forward.

"Oh, yes, I've had an intimate acquaintance with him. He's tasted of me three different times," declared the unwilling candidate for honors.

"Still, he knows you?" said Jack, in a wheedling voice.

"Sure, and I think he likes me, which shows Kaiser has good taste. But I'm willing to be the victim, if you'll all promise to see that my remains are gathered up and given a fitting burial. Everyone who likes a good show, this way, now. The only and original dog-tamer is about to give an exhibition of how not to do it."

Kaiser was acting in a very ugly way, as they approached the spot where he had been tied up by his master, upon reaching the hall.

He jumped up and out in a furious manner, always in the one direction, Frank noticed.

"You see, fellows, he pays no attention to us. His growls are for someone else, and he is trying to break loose, in order that he may chase after them. I shouldn't be surprised if we had some success, after all. Do it, Buster. The whole world is looking to you now as the hero of the occasion."

Buster gave Frank a plaintive look, as he bent down, and began to speak soothingly to the furious dog.

"Listen to his soft soap talk, would you!"

"Buster knows how to lay it on; he's kissed the blarney stone!"

"Pat him, why don't you, old fellow; he likes the taste of you all right!"

But to none of these suggestions did Buster pay the least heed. He was working with the end of the rope all the time he talked so soothingly to the brute. Frank suspected what might happen if this suddenly came free when the dog was making one of his frantic plunges. Consequently, he made sure to be ready to seize hold, so as to assist the fat boy.

It was just as he thought. Only for the quick clutch he made, the dog must have sped away like the wind, and they would have been as badly off as before. But with the weight of the two boys on the rope, even the powerful Kaiser was not able to go faster than the crowd could follow.

"Ralph, keep close beside me!" called out Frank, who did not want a second disaster to overtake them while trying to remedy the first.

It was really a curious sight to see that crowd of boys rushing over the territory adjoining Dyckman's Hall, following the pair who pooled their strength in order to restrain the wildly eager dog.

Frank quickly took note of a certain fact.

"We're heading for the water, fellows!" he exclaimed, as well as he was able, while being tugged along by the erratic rushes of Kaiser.

Nearly everyone knew what he meant. It was that the abductors of Bones meant to duck him in the river, and treat him so harshly that

he would be in no condition to play in the morrow's game.

Still, that did not surprise anyone. They might easily have expected just such an ending to the affair, knowing as they did what conscienceless scamps were in all probability engineering the kidnaping affair.

The dog had led them in almost a bee line for the river. Several hundred yards had already been covered, without the least sign being seen of those whom they fully believed must be ahead somewhere.

"Ain't this fierce?" gasped Buster, as he held on to the rope with a desperate clutch; indeed, but for the sustaining hand of the more agile Frank, the fat boy must have fallen flat on his face more than once as he tripped over obstacles in the way.

"Kaiser'll eat 'em alive if he gets half a chance! Listen to him growl, will you? Don't let him loose, Frank, on your life, or he'll just murder some of them!" exclaimed Jack Eastwick, who was running alongside the two who gripped the leash.

"If Buster ever falls flat I'll never be able to hold on alone. Be ready, somebody, to take hold!" was what Frank cried in return, as he was dragged along by the furious rush of the dog, more eager now than before.

But no one appeared to be particularly anxious to extend a helping hand. The appearance of Kaiser was not at all reassuring, and none of the boys fancied being "liked," as Buster admitted he was.

"Listen!" called Molly Manners, suddenly.

Everyone strained his ears. It required some effort to catch any sound from beyond. Kaiser was making such terrible noises as he ran, and the rush of many feet over the ground rather deadened anything else. Still, between times they caught what seemed to be boisterous laughter, accompanied by a loud splashing, as of somebody being cast into the river, to be hauled out again, only to have the operation repeated.

"They're ducking Bones, that's what!" coughed Buster, in real indignation.

Just then he struck some sort of obstacle that caused him to fall flat on his stomach with a fierce grunt. Of course, the rope was torn from his hands. And as the shock was too much for Frank to stand, he, too, was compelled to release his clutch in order to save himself from a bad tumble.

There was a furious burst of savage satisfaction from the tugging dog at the end of the leash, and then he vanished from their sight, running like mad!

CHAPTER VIII

THE LINE-UP WITH CLIFFORD

"Oh, won't they get it now!" cried Jack Eastwick.

"Keep on running, fellows. Some of them may be half killed, if that dog gets hold of them! Faster, boys; faster!"

Frank himself increased his speed. He had no love for the miserable cowards who, in order to gratify their private spite, would cripple their school team until the enemy must have an easy victory on the morrow. And yet he did not like to imagine what terrible things might follow if Kaiser got in among the boys who were treating his master so shamefully.

Perhaps they deserved whatever befell them; but Frank was himself a boy, and in a position to understand the true meaning of such a prank as was now being pulled off.

There had come a decided change in the racket ahead. No longer was it hilarious shouting and jeering, such as indicated sport for the boys, but something else to the human frog. True, the sounds had even grown in volume, but they were of a more serious nature.

"Listen to 'em howl, would you?" cried Lanky.

"The shoe's on the other foot, now. Wow! ain't they getting nipped hard, though?" shouted Herman Hooker, hardly knowing whether to be pleased or frightened.

"Faster!" gritted Frank, between his teeth, for he did not like those shouts.

Possibly the boys had picked up clubs, and were trying to beat Kaiser off, in order to continue their cruel sport of tossing poor Bones into the water, and pulling him out again by means of a rope fastened around his ankles.

Now the runners were close upon the spot.

"They're scattering!" called Lanky, as the shouts appeared to come

from various localities.

"And I think Bones has got hold of the dog. I can hear someone speaking to him, and trying to quiet the brute!" gasped Paul Bird, who was also a keen runner, able to "keep up with the procession" as well as the next fellow.

"That's true. Hold on to him, Bones, old fellow!" Frank managed to shout.

A dozen seconds later, and they came upon the river bank. The half moon up in the western sky gave enough light to show them how matters stood.

"Hurrah! Kaiser cleared the decks! The last of the pirate horde has fled!" cried Amiel Tucker, whose reading was always along the old-time romances.

"And there's our friend Bones, all to the good, fondling that bristly terror! I say, three Bones for cheers!" shouted Red Huggins, known among his mates also as "Sorreltop," and who, when greatly excited, often became twisted in his mode of speech.

They clustered around, while Kaiser growled deeply, and licked the face of his young master. Jones was soaked to the skin, and already shivering, though possibly more from the nervous strain than the cold.

Frank immediately took off his own coat, and threw it over the shoulders of the boy who had been ducked again and again.

"What happened to you, Bones?" asked Lanky, who always wanted to know the full particulars, for he expected some day to branch out as a shining light in the legal profession, and believed he ought to practice while young.

"They jumped me, that's all," chattered the other, trying to laugh.

"When you went out to quiet your dog?"

"Yep. I hadn't gone half way when they pounced on me. Couldn't let out more'n a little peep when they covered my head with some sort of old horse blanket, and grabbed hold of me. After that it was all over. I heard good old Kaiser carrying on to beat the band. Oh, how I did wish he could break loose! Wouldn't he have scattered the bunch, though!" observed Bones, as he calmly accepted a second coat offered by another sympathizer.

"Which he did in the end, anyway. Say, what did he do to those sharks?" demanded Buster, coming panting up at this moment.

"You missed the sight of your life. They were having a grand good time dousing me in the drink, you see, when, all of a sudden, Kaiser burst among them. Such whooping and howling I never heard in all my life! You'd sure thought a lunatic asylum had broken loose, boys," and Bones laughed as well as he could between shivers.

"And then what?" persisted Lanky.

"Oh, they scooted like fun. Some went one way and others tumbled into the river, they were so badly scared. I think Kaiser nipped a few of the bunch before he ran over to lick my face, and I got a cinch hold on his collar. Only for that, he'd have gone back again, and mauled a few that couldn't run fast enough. But how did you come to think of putting him on the scent, fellows?"

"Give Frank here the credit for the bright thought," said Paul.

"Yes, he's all to the good when it comes to a question of doing something in an emergency. The balance of us were jumping around like so many chickens with their heads off, when he suggested that Kaiser would lead us to the place where you were. It was a grand idea, and it worked, too," remarked Lanky, warmly.

"Oh, piffle! Cut that out. If I hadn't thought of it, somebody else would have, in about a second. I just happened to get in first, that's all. But we must rush Bones home in a hurry, before he takes cold. A chill just now would knock him out of the game to-morrow, and hurt our chances of a win," with which Frank assisted the wet victim of the kidnapers to his feet.

Bones protested, but they would not listen to him. He was rubbed down with many willing hands, and patted and pounded in a way to start his circulation going at fever heat.

Kaiser hardly knew what to think of all this good-natured tussling, and many times growled his disapprobation, so that a word from his master was needed to influence him not to sink those gleaming teeth in the limbs of Buster or Lanky.

All the while they were making for town. Fortunately, Bones did not live a great distance off, and by making haste, they presently reached his house.

Buster volunteered to remain over with him and see that he was properly looked after.

"Somebody explain to Mattie King just why I can't get back!" he called out.

"Oh, don't bother yourself about that, Buster," remarked Jack Eastwick, coolly, "for I'd already made up my mind to see her home."

"You have? I've got half a notion—but, no, this once won't count. It isn't often you get a show, Jack, so improve the shining opportunity," answered Buster, from the stoop of the Shaddock home.

Of course, as the crowd wended its way back to the hall where the glee club had met for this one occasion, while the assembly room in high school was being repaired, the talk was wholly upon the late "unpleasantness."

"It certainly was that to those chumps," laughed Lanky. "Oh, how much we missed in not being on the spot! All Buster's faults for stumbling when he did, and letting go of the rope. Why under the sun didn't he hold on with a death grip?" demanded Tom Budd.

"Hold on? Goodness gracious, that dog would have dragged him over every rock and stump for a mile. A pretty sight he'd have been after that. I think Buster showed the finest judgment of his life in knowing when to let go!" said Lanky.

"Yes, that's so. They say a stitch in time saves nine. Think how many stitches would have been needed to sew Buster up if he needed mending," spoke up Sorreltop.

When finally they arrived at the hall, the girls, and those among the boys who had failed to join in the hunt, were, of course, just wild to hear about what had happened.

Everything else was, for the time being, forgotten, as they clustered around and excitedly demanded that the facts be given.

One told a portion, and another took up the recital. In this fashion, by degrees, the entire story was made known. Nor were the boys at all backward about giving the credit for the ingenious thought to Frank, who laughingly tried to declare that he deserved no more applause than the balance of the flock.

"They're all good fellows, every one, and as much deserving of your praise. We are of the opinion that there will be several limps noticeable at the game to-morrow, so if you happen to observe any fellow making a face as he walks, just whisper one word in his ear in passing. Do you know what that word is?" he asked.

"Kaiser!" they roared in concert.

"Oh, Kaiser, don't you want to buy a dog?" sang Jack Eastwick, and amid much laughter and merry exchange of talk, the glee club disbanded for that evening.

Ralph walked home with Frank and Helen. Others among the boys persisted in hovering near them, greatly to the annoyance of Ralph, and the amusement of the girl, who thought it something of a joke.

Frank had Flo Dempsey on his arm, and seemed to be unusually merry. To tell the truth, though, considerable of this was assumed. He happened to know that just back of them, Minnie Cuthbert and her new friend, Dottie Warren, were walking, and undoubtedly they could hear much that was being said.

That night, when alone in his room, Frank seemed to lose much of his merry demeanor. His face took on the grave look that had characterized it of late, ever since that minute when Minnie had given him the cruel cut direct.

"I wonder will I ever know what is the matter?" he mused, as he undressed, preparatory to tumbling into his inviting bed; "or must it always remain a deep mystery. I never thought she could treat a fellow that way, cutting him out without giving him the least chance to explain. But I'm not going to complain. They say there are as good fish in the sea as ever yet were caught."

With this philosophical reflection, he jumped into bed. Having a good control over himself, Frank was able to go to sleep. In this way, when he awoke in the early morning, he was refreshed and feeling splendid, so easily does youth recuperate.

"Anyhow, it's going to be a sharp day. That air feels like snow, only the sky is clear. Great football weather! I wonder how it will all come out," and hustling into his clothes, he immediately went out to the place arranged for the secret meeting to practice signal work.

The others were soon on hand, and under the coaching of the experienced old Princeton graduate, they went through all their paces with a cleverness that caused their trainer to nod his head in satisfaction.

"That's enough, boys," he said, warmly. "You've got your work cut out for you to-day, and it would be poor policy to tire you at this early hour. Back to the house now, and eat a breakfast such as I laid out for you; nothing more, mind. Everyone of you must

consider himself at the training table now, until that game with Bellport is over with on Thanksgiving morning. That's all!"

When, about ten o'clock, Frank reached the athletic grounds, clad in his soiled suit and with his entire bunch of players along, he found that a tremendous crowd had swarmed over the big field, fully equal to any that had witnessed the hard-fought baseball battles during the preceding Spring and early Summer.

It was an enthusiastic crowd, too, shouting until the sound was not unlike the roar of a tempest. Thousands of miniature flags were waving, representing both schools. There were also many from Bellport present, some to enjoy the game, others to get points with regard to the playing of the Columbia eleven, against which their own team expected soon to be pitted.

"Ain't this the greatest sight ever?" asked Lanky, as they came upon the field, and the waving flags and handkerchiefs made the grandstand look like a vast flower garden in a strong wind.

"Columbia! _Veni! vidi! vici!_ to-day we swallow the rooster!" came a concerted shout, as Herman Hooker got his cheer band in working order.

The emblem of the Clifford school was a rooster, while that of Columbia, like Princeton, was the tiger.

Immediately the Columbia fellows began booting an old ball about, and falling on it with reckless abandon, just as they had been taught to do by the coach.

"Look there, will you!" exclaimed a girl close to Minnie Cuthbert in the grandstand. "How nice and white the suits of Clifford seem, while our boys are dirty. They ought to be ashamed, I should think. We have just as good a laundry in Columbia as they have up above."

But to those who knew more about such things there was an atmosphere of strictly business about the soiled suits of Frank's team. They looked as though they were on the field for hard work, and not to show off, or "play to the gallery."

And the wise ones took stock of this fact. Some of the sporting men even began to hedge in their bets, and might have tried to even up all around, only that they happened to know of a secret upon which they were building great hopes.

And that secret concerned the signal practice of the Columbia eleven!

The Clifford boys were continually waving their hands to some people in the crowd they recognized. There was an air of assurance about them that seemed to loudly proclaim the fact that they anticipated no great trouble in putting the "Indian sign" on Columbia.

On the other hand, the home team seemed to notice nothing, save the fact that the ball was there to be shot around, and tumbled on heavily. They had a grim look, too, and in vain did the girls try to attract their attention, for it was rarely that one of the eleven so much as turned a look toward the spectators. All of their time was taken up in play, and observing their rivals.

"Just wait, and we'll dirty those sweet white suits some," chuckled Lanky, as he passed the ball like lightning to Shaddock.

Minnie was watching one player intently. For the first time in a long while he did not look along the rows of faces until he saw her waving wildly, and doff his cap, or in this case, wave his hand, since he had no cap to lift.

She trembled with secret delight as she finally saw Frank raise his head when the ball was in another quarter. But when he made a motion with his hand, it was in a different direction entirely, and looking over, Minnie saw that Helen and Flo Dempsey sat there.

"They're getting ready to line-up. See, the referee has the two captains over by him. It's going to be a toss for position," cried one eager spectator.

"Not much choice to-day, though, since the wind is light," returned another.

"But there always is one side better than the other. The sun will be in the eyes of the fellows who lose. That may count for something. And the breeze may grow stronger as the game goes on. There, Frank has won, for he's taking his men to the lower goal. But that gives Clifford the kick-off. That looks bad."

"Oh, I don't know. It will only spur them on to working a little harder. Wait and see. I've got a hunch that Frank Allen has a surprise or two up his sleeve for these gay white birds from up river. I'm not worrying. I've seen that boy on the baseball field, and on the river in the boat races. He is all there with the goods, and they're a full yard wide. You hear me!" and the enthusiast jumped to his feet, to flap his elbows as though they were wings, while he emitted a shrill crow that caused a laugh to break out in the immediate vicinity.

"Now we're going to see some fun!" called a fellow who was waving

the colors of Clifford with great vim.

And under the eyes of thousands of eager spectators, the rival elevens took the places assigned to them to await the signal for play.

CHAPTER IX

A HARD FOUGHT FIRST HALF

Although there might be changes at any time during the progress of a fiercely contested game, the line-up at the start was as follows:

COLUMBIA.

Comfort.

F.B.

Allen, Captain. West.

R.H.B. L.H.B.

Wallace.

Q.B.

Shaddock. Oakes. Harper. Bird. Daly. Eastwick. Morris.

R.E. R.T. R.G. Center. L.G. L.T. L.E.

CLIFFORD.

Evans. McQuirk. Roe. Gentle. Ross. Adkins. Smith.

L.E. L.T. L.G. Center. R.G. R.T. R.E.

Style.

Q.B.

Coots. Wentworth.

L.H.B. R.H.B.

Hastings, Captain.

F.B.

Clifford was to kick off.

Hastings, the big captain, stood there, poising himself for the effort, and every eye was glued upon his really fine figure. Hastings

knew it, and purposely lingered just a trifle longer than he would have done had there been no mass of spectators hedging in the field on all sides in a solid bank of humanity.

There was a shrill whistle, the referee's signal, and it called into life the twenty-two motionless figures that stood about the field. Big Hastings ran forward, glancing sharply about to see that his men were on the alert, and the next moment his shoe made a great dent in the side of the new yellow ball. Away it sailed into the air, far over toward Columbia's territory.

Straight toward Lanky Wallace, the plucky little quarter-back, it came, and Wallace was right under it. Into his arms, with a resounding "pung!" the spheroid landed, and, like a flash, the quarter passed it to Jack Comfort for a return kick.

Comfort's toe found the pigskin as if his shoe belonged there, and back through space went the twisting oval, in a long spiral curve, while the cohorts of both teams loosed the yells that had been long on tap.

"Oh, wow!"

"Pretty work!"

"That's the stuff, old man!"

"Fine footwork!"

These cries of encouragement to both sides were soon lost in the riot of cheers and appeals to the teams to "go in and win!"

Big Hastings once more had the ball, and booted down the field with a tremendous, smashing kick. Lanky and Oakes ran to get under it, with good intentions, but with misdirected energy, and collided forcefully, while the ball bounced from Lanky's shoulder and rolled along the ground, a prize for whoever could first get it.

"A miss!"

"By jove, our fellows have lost the ball!"

"Get to it, Columbia!"

Exclamations of dismay, and frantic appeals came from a thousand throats. Like mad the whole twenty-two players darted for the yellow spheroid.

There was a mixup, a confused mass of struggling forms, an indiscriminate whirlwind of waving arms and legs, and then, after

the frantic blowing of the referee's whistle, and when, slowly, player after player crawled off the heap, Frank emerged, somewhat bruised and dazed, but with the precious ball tucked under his arm.

"Oh, good!"

"Fine, old man!"

"Columbia's ball!"

"Frank's got it, all right! That's the stuff. Did you see him slide right in front of Ross, their husky right guard, and cover it? Say, this is a little bit of all right—all right!" cried an enthusiastic follower of Columbia.

It was on Columbia's twenty-five yard line now, rather closer to the goal than Captain Frank liked, but he resolved to get right into the play now, and called for the line-up. There was a whispered conference between Wallace and Allen, and then the quarter began calling the signal, emphasizing the first number. A thrill seemed to run through the Clifford players, and when Paul Bird snapped back the ball to the captain, instead of to the quarter, who, all along, had acted as if he meant to take it, there was a sudden rush on the part of Clifford, but it was too late.

They had prepared for a play around their left end, but Frank quickly passed the pigskin to Ralph West, the left half, who sprang forward on the jump, and tore through a hole made between the unsuspecting right guard and tackle of Columbia's opponents. Through Ralph plowed, heaving and plunging his way, aided by a splendid interference, knocking aside Wentworth, the opposing right half, and struggling forward for a good gain.

"Oh, look at that, would you! Look! Look! He'll get a touchdown!"

"Touchdown nothing!" growled a disgusted Cliffordite, "What's the matter with our fellows, anyhow, to be fooled like that?"

"Guess they read our signals wrong!" retorted the admirer of Columbia High, with a chuckle.

"Oh, wow! Look at that! Hastings nailed him that time!"

Ralph had gone down under a fierce tackle by the big opposing captain, but the plucky left half had made a good gain, and, as he rose and held his hand on the ball until Bird came up to take it, there was an outburst of cheers that warmed his heart.

"Good work, old man!" whispered Frank, as he ran up. "We fooled 'em that time!"

Herman Hooker led his gallant band of shouters in an impromptu war-dance back of the grandstand, their frenzied shouts of joy at the splendid play sounding loud above the other yells.

Then came quiet, while the players again lined up, and the calling of the signals could plainly be heard across the gridiron. It was useless for Clifford to listen, if, perchance, she had sneakily obtained a line on the play system of Columbia, for Lanky was using the changed code, and only he and his men knew it. Slowly he called off. It was an indication for Frank to take the ball, on a try around right end.

Back came the oval with a clean snap, and the next moment Frank, with it firmly tucked under his arm, was circling around Evans, while Oakes, Harper and Shadduck had gotten into play on the jump, and had successfully pocketed their opposing end tackle and guard.

Forward leaped Frank, with Shadduck and Oakes forming splendid interference for him. Down the line they sprinted, while once more the frenzied shouts broke forth:

"Touchdown! Touchdown!"

"Go it, old man! Go it!"

It began to look as if Frank would score, for big Hastings was the only man available to tackle him, as the other two backs had played in so far that they were now hopelessly in the mixup of tangled figures.

"Go on! Go on!"

"Yes he will! Wait until Hastings tackles him!" this from a boastful Clifford player.

Hastings was waiting for the man with the ball, but Frank was running behind Shadduck and Oakes now, and they were on the alert. Hastings made a dive between them, seeking to come at Frank, and for one fearful moment there was fear in the hearts of his friends that the plucky right half would be downed. But Oakes fairly threw himself at the big opposing captain, and the two went tumbling in a heap, thus ending any chance Hastings had of tackling the man with the ball.

Amid such yells as were seldom heard on the gridiron, Frank, accompanied by Shadduck, whose interfering services were no longer needed, touched the ball down exactly in the middle of the line,

behind the two posts, while the straggling Clifford players straggled madly down the field, but too late. Behind them came their leaping, dancing and exulting opponents.

"Touchdown! Touchdown!"

"Oh, you, Allen!"

"Great work, old man! Great work!" And indeed it was a splendid run.

Such shouting and yelling as there was! Herman Hooker and his band of "Indians" were hoarse with their efforts thus early in the game, but gallantly they kept at it. There was a little silence while the Clifford players lined up back of their goal posts, and then Ralph West kicked goal, the ball sailing true between the posts, and making the score six to nothing in favor of Columbia.

"That's the stuff! That's going some! Keep it up, you Columbia Tigers, we're all proud of you!" hoarsely called a big man, stamping about and waving his cane adorned with Columbia colors. He had graduated from the old school twenty years before, and he had never lost his love for it, nor for her sons of the gridiron.

There was an exchange of punts on the next kick-off, and when that sort of playing was over, Clifford had the pigskin on Columbia's thirty-yard line.

"Now, fellows, go through 'em!" grimly called Hastings, and Style began to give the signals in a snappy voice. In another instant Wentworth, the Clifford right half, hit the line with a tremendous smash, going for a hole between Eastwick and Daly. Their mates rallied to their support, but there was smashing energy in the attack of Columbia's opponents, and hold as Frank and his players desperately tried to, they were shoved back, and Wentworth had gained four yards.

"Another like that!" called Hastings. "Go to 'em, now! Eat 'em up!"

Once more a smashing attack, and three yards more were reeled off around Shaddock's end.

"This won't do, fellows!" said Allen, seriously. "We've got to hold 'em!"

"How's that? Guess we're going some now, eh?" demanded a Clifford admirer, who sat next to Mr. Allen.

"Yes, you have a good team," was the answer. "But our boys are only letting you do this for encouragement."

"Oh, ho! They are, eh? Just watch."

Indeed, it looked a little dubious for Columbia. Her players were being shoved back for loss with heart-stilling regularity. There was no need for Clifford to kick, and all of Frank's frantic appeals to his men to hold seemed of no avail.

There was somewhat of a bitter feeling when, after some tremendous line-smashing, Coots, the left half, was shoved over the line for a touchdown, and that gave the cohorts of Clifford a chance to break loose. They did not kick the goal, however, and that was some encouragement for Columbia, since it left them one point to the good.

Once more came the kick-off, and then, when Columbia had the ball, and had lined up, she went at her opponents with such smash-bang tactics, such hammer-and-tongs work, that she tore big gaps in the wall of defense, and shoved player after player through. Frank was sent over for a seven-yard gain, then came a fine run on the part of Ralph, netting eighteen yards, while the crowd went wild. There was grim silence on the part of the Clifford adherents as the line-up came on the ten-yard mark, and then, amid a great silence, Comfort smashed through for another touchdown.

"Oh, wow! How's that? Going some, I guess, yes!" howled the big man, who had been a player in his youth. "Oh, pretty work!"

The goal was missed, for the ball had been touched down at a bad angle, but the score was now eleven to five in favor of Columbia, and there were still several minutes of play left in the first half.

There was only a chance for an exchange of kicks however, ere the referee's whistle blew, signifying that time was up, and the players, who were just ready for a scrimmage, with the ball in Clifford's possession on her opponent's fifteen-yard line, dissolved, and raced for their dressing rooms.

CHAPTER X

A SCENE NOT DOWN ON THE BILLS

Columbia enthusiasm broke out louder than ever when the

intermission between the two halves was called. Their boys had thus far not only held their own, but scored more than twice as heavily as the enemy.

Still, the Clifford enthusiasts did not appear to be downcast.

"Wait," they kept saying mysteriously on all sides, while shouts of encouragement went out to Hastings and his doughty warriors.

"What do they mean by that?" asked Mr. Allen, of the man from above, who sat near him on the bench of the grandstand.

"Well, Clifford is a slow team to get started. They always do better in the second half of a game. That with Bellport was a fake, because their signals had been given away. They learned this when the first half had been played. It made them savage. The result was Bellport didn't score again, and Clifford made a few points before the end came. They'll wake up presently!" was the confident reply.

Among the most enthusiastic of the vast crowd was Minnie Cuthbert. She waved her little banner and joined her voice in the general clamor, for the mad excitement had seized girls as well as boys and men.

And yet all the while she seemed to have eyes for no one but the agile captain of the Columbia team. Wherever he happened to be, her gaze was either openly or covertly upon him.

Again she saw Frank wave his hand cheerily, and looking in the direction where his attention seemed to be directed, she discovered that Helen and Flo Dempsey were flourishing bouquets of flowers made up of purple and gold, to illustrate the school emblem.

And, moreover, Minnie understood full well that these had undoubtedly come from the conservatory of the Allens. Somehow, it pained her to know it. From that time on she resolutely set her eyes toward anyone on the field, so long as it was not Frank.

There was much consultation during the rest spell. Coaches and captains had their heads together, trying to ascertain if it were possible to strengthen their teams by bringing in a fresh man as substitute.

Several had been more or less injured in the fierce mass plays, and were showing it, despite their efforts to appear natural. Not for worlds would anyone of them express a desire to be taken out of the game. If the captain decided against their continuing, well and good, for he was the sole judge of a man's fitness; but each

fellow believed he could still carry himself to the end.

The general excitement was such that a man might be seriously hurt and not be aware of it, buoyed up, as he was, with the wild desire to accomplish glorious things for the school he loved.

"How are you feeling, Bones? Any bad result from your immersion in the cool drink last night," asked Lanky, as he and the right guard came together.

"Not an atom, glad to say. You fellows saved me by your prompt action, and the general rubbing down I had after the rescue. True, my left wing feels sore to the touch after that slamming I got when I went down with the ball over their fifteen-yard line, and a dozen fellows piled on top; but I don't think it's broken, and I haven't said anything to Frank, because I'm afraid he'd yank me out."

Lanky carefully massaged the arm in question, eliciting a few grunts from the stoical player under the process.

"Only bruised, old fellow. By the way, have you noticed any limpers around this morning—among the spectators, I mean?" he remarked, whimsically.

"Sure, two of them, Jay Tweedle and Bill Klemm," laughed the other immediately. "They hustled away when they saw me looking, and it was all they could do to keep the agony off their faces. But it would have to be more than a mere dog bite to keep any fellow with red blood in his veins away from a scrap on the gridiron like this, though I reckon both of them are hoping to see Clifford win, hands down."

"Well, there's another poor chap limping somewhere around the grounds—Asa Barnes. Good old Kaiser must have put his teeth in his calf pretty sound, for you can see the tear in his trousers' leg. That was a great time, and I envy you the privilege of having seen it. What a scattering of the boasters, and all on account of one dog!"

"Yes, Lanky, but such a dog! He thinks the world of me. Why, I could hardly tear myself away from him this morning, he wanted to come with me so bad. After this you needn't ever think of giving me a guard; Kaiser can fill that position up to the limit," said Bones, proudly, as became the owner of such a wonderful canine.

"Time's nearly up. Are we going to bring any new horse out of the stable? Did any fellow make serious blunders? Is anyone hurt?" asked Lanky.

"If they are, they keep it to themselves. But there's Shay coming out, while Eastwick goes to the seats. I was a little afraid that Jack might prove too light as a tackler. Why, twice he failed to bring his man down, and was carried more than a few yards before another fellow caught on. Shay ought to be an improvement."

"What do you think, so far, Bones?"

"We've about held our own, that's comforting," was the reply.

"But the score isn't as big as I hoped it would be," expostulated Lanky.

"Yes, but we owe that first touchdown and goal to the fact that Clifford was confused with the signals you called. They thought they meant the old version, and rushed to meet the play. That gave us almost a clear field."

"I guess you're right," returned Lanky, thoughtfully.

"Now, see where we stand. They got a clear touchdown, and were over our fifteen-yard line when play was called. I tell you, we're going to have our work cut out to score again, and you can see that every fellow of the opposition is out for blood. To be licked by Bellport hurt; a second drubbing is next to unthinkable with them. Mark my words, they'll die hard!"

"Bones, you're right. We've got to do our level best in the second half. Once let us develop a weak spot, and they'll aim for that every rush. There's Frank calling to me again. Five minutes more, and we'll be at it, hammer and tongs," and Lanky hurried away to where the captain stood, with the very last word in the way of orders.

The line of play had been decided on long before. This had been arranged in accordance with what they knew about Clifford's line-up. Just as Lanky had declared, once let a weak place show, and from that minute on the opposition bends every effort toward pushing the ball in that quarter, until, finally, the defense gives way, and the oval is carried triumphantly across the line.

Gradually the players began to take their places again. Clifford, too, showed a new face; Hollingsworth being substituted in place of Evans, as right end, the other having been injured in a scrimmage, thought not enough to get out at the time.

It was Columbia's kick-off this time, and Jack Comfort was the one to do the honors which would inaugurate the second half of the game. Just as he stood there ready to make the first move, the

picture was one that would never be forgotten by the thousands who witnessed it.

Every breath seemed hushed. A mighty silence hung over the wide field, as eyes were riveted on the crouching figures, whose faces, so far as seen, because of the disfiguring head harness, showed the earnestness that possessed each soul.

It was at this critical moment that suddenly loud shouts arose. They seemed to come from behind the grandstand, and quickly swelled in volume, until it was a deafening roar that broke forth. Frank called out something, and the referee instantly blew his whistle, to signify that delay was imperative until the cause of all this row could be ascertained and the noise quelled. It was simply impossible to continue the game while so much racket held, as the players would be wholly unable to hear the signals.

But now the tenor of the wild cries began to be understood. Players looked at each other in blank dismay. Never before had they heard of a football game having been interrupted by such a strange and terrible cause.

"Mad dog! Mad dog!"

That was what the people were shrieking over and over. The entire mass of spectators seemed to be writhing as they leaped to their feet. Faces grew white with sudden fear. Women and children cried and shrieked, and hands were wrung in the abandon of despair.

It was easy to discover the immediate scene of the disturbance, for there the lines swayed more violently than elsewhere. People crushed back against each other, forgetting all else in the frenzy of fear that possessed them. What could be more terrifying than the coming of a mad dog in the midst of such an assemblage of merry-makers, out for a grand holiday?

"Run, you fellows; he's heading out on the field! Get a move on you!" roared a voice through a big megaphone.

It was, of course, the wonderful cheer captain, Herman Hooker, who thus gave warning of the coming peril. Indeed, his cry was hardly needed, for the two elevens could mark the passage of the terror by the swaying back of the lines upon lines of spectators, all of whom seemed to be possessed of a wild desire to climb up on the highest seats, so that the panic was fierce.

Then through the mass came the running beast, with his head close to the ground, and trailing a chain behind him. His actions were certainly queer, and well calculated to strike terror into the timid hearts of the helpless ones gathered there to witness the

spectacle of a football contest, and not a mad dog hunt.

And running valiantly after the brute came Officer Whalen, doubtless intending to attempt to shoot the animal when once he found a chance.

Suddenly the raging brute uttered a series of fearful sounds, and started directly for one of the players on the field, as though intending to attack him first. The vast crowd shrieked all manner of imploring directions, and unable to render assistance, just stood there and looked and prayed.

But Frank Allen neither started to run nor moved to the aid of the threatened player for he had discovered that the one who stood there was Bones Shadduck, and in the leaping dog he had recognized the persistent Kaiser!

CHAPTER XI

CLIFFORD'S LAST HOPE

"Why doesn't the fool run?" cried one man, quivering with suspense.

"It's too late now! See, he's going to tackle the brute! He's got his hands out ready! Gee! what nerve!" bellowed another, this time from Clifford.

A third laughed harshly, for the strain had been beat on everyone.

"Its all off, fellows. That's his dog!" he shouted.

"Well, I'll be hanged! Look at him jumping up to lick the boy's face, will you? Did you ever? This takes the cake!"

The crowd had by this time discovered that it was a false alarm, and by degrees the hysterical feeling wore off, though there were many who would not soon forget the awful sense of fear that had almost paralyzed their systems.

Kaiser had apparently broken loose long after Bones had left home, and determined to find his beloved master, had trailed him to the football field.

Possibly the faithful animal believed that there might be further need of his services, and that there were more fellows in need of

trimming.

Of course the game had to be delayed until Bones could lead Kaiser away, and secure him in a little room under the grandstand. The crowd howled and cheered as he went by, and Shadduck grinned in his usual happy fashion, feeling that for once at least he was in the exact limelight—thanks to Kaiser!

Once more the two opposing teams faced each other on the field. The rushers were crouched, ready to spring forward as soon as the ball had been put into play. Comfort prepared to send in his best kick, after which the whole field would be in motion in the mad endeavor to urge the ball toward the goal of the opposing side.

Jack was a famous punter and also a gilt-edged drop-kicker. He had a peculiar spiral kick that was calculated to be exceedingly puzzling to the enemy. And since much depended upon how far he sent the oval into the enemy's territory, all eyes were eagerly glued upon him now.

"Plunk!"

Away sailed the ball with the most erratic motion the Clifford men had ever seen in all their experience. Some ran this way, and then suddenly changed their course, as they realized the deceiving nature of the ball's aerial flight. But the Columbia ends knew just how the full-back would send the ball, and they shot for the spot, determined to reach there almost as soon as the enemy, and cut short his advantage for a run.

Coots managed to catch the ball, and darted back with it, but was downed, almost in his tracks, by a fierce tackle on the part of Shadduck, who had slipped through the interference.

"Down!" howled Coots, after he had recovered his wind. The players lined up, while Style began calling off the signals. The Columbia players braced for the attack they knew would soon come. And come it did. Their line tottered and wavered under the smashing impact, but it held, and Wentworth was hurled back for a slight loss.

"That's the way to do it!" cried Frank, in delight. "Hold 'em again, fellows, and they'll have to kick!"

Once more Clifford, in desperation, for she wanted to keep the ball, tried for another advance, this time around her opponent's left end. But Morris and Shay were on hand, and nailed the player before he had gone two yards.

"They've got to kick!" came the cry, and indeed that was the only play left for Clifford. Still, it might be a fake one, and Frank

signalled this to his men, so that they might be on the alert. But Comfort ran away back, and it was well that he did, for the ball was booted well into the Columbia territory.

The full-back caught it and managed to rush back fifteen yards before he was fiercely downed.

"Now's our chance, fellows!" called Frank, while Paul Bird came up, took the pigskin and waited for Lanky to give the signal.

"I-m-p-o-r-t-a-n-c-e!" spelled out the quarter.

Instantly after the last letter was given, there was a sudden movement. The center had flashed the ball to Allen, who started furiously around the outside of the Clifford line. West was running diagonally, and passed him. Many did not notice that as they crossed Frank dexterously passed the ball to Ralph, but kept on running and dodging as though he still held it.

The trick was not a new one by any means, but when well done it was apt to deceive at least a portion of the rattled opposition; so that several of the Clifford players were, for the instant, really in doubt as to which of the two half-backs carried the ball.

Thus in the beginning the force of pursuers was divided. Ralph was a sprinter, and could avoid interference in a manner that was simply marvelous. He had the entire bunch against him, trying to block his play, but with wonderful skill managed to dodge each in turn, until when finally brought down he had reached the enemy's ten-yard line!

A burst of applause from the eager spectators; then again absolute silence, for once more the heavily breathing players had gathered in battle array. Again came a hot scrimmage. The ball was over the side lines now, and out of bounds. So it had to be brought in. Clifford had it for a change, but the conditions were desperate with them now, with their home goal close behind. Let a Columbia player once get his hands on the oval, and the chances were he could carry it over the line for a touchdown.

The man who did the thinking in this emergency knew his business. When the next scrimmage was on, many of the spectators were astonished to see a Clifford player jump away from the melee with the ball in his grasp, and hurl himself deliberately across his own line.

Immediately the crowd gave expression to their feelings. Some cheered, while others groaned, as the play was understood best.

"Why, that man is a traitor to his team!" exclaimed one indignant fellow.

A Columbia graduate, who happened to be sitting next to the speaker, gave him a look of contempt, as he remarked:

"On the contrary he proved to have an exceedingly clever head on him. Stop and think for just a minute. They were close up to Clifford's goal. The chances were ten to one in that scrimmage that Columbia would get the ball, and with the next play carry it across the line. That meant a touchdown. Then if they could kick a goal, as is likely, they would count six. As it is now, Columbia gets only two because that quick-witted fellow put it over his own line. More than that, the next play is back at the twenty-five yard line; so you see how easily Clifford gets out of a bad corner."

As little time as possible was lost getting in position again. So eager were both sides to accomplish things that they begrudged the fleeting seconds.

The tide of battle surged back and forth. Dozens of plays were pulled off that it would take many chapters to describe. But what cheered the enthusiasts of the home team was the fact that most of the work was being done on hostile territory!

In between times when there was no need of silence the raucous voice of Herman Hooker could be heard, as he led his band around back of the crowd, and shouted again and again in unison the thrilling yell of Columbia, with the intention of stirring the blood in the veins of each player, and investing him with renewed pluck and zeal.

As if it were needed, when each one of those sturdy champions had already been keyed up to top-notch speed. Time was slipping away, and despite the almost superhuman efforts of Clifford they could not seem to get the ball over that strenuously defended line of their opponents.

In vain did the rooters urge them on to renewed efforts. Columbia seemed to have thrown up a stone wall in front of her goal lines, and no matter what strenuous plays were called off they were met with a stubborn tenacity that robbed them of results.

Only seven more minutes remained of the second half. Columbia adherents were jubilant. They already began to discount a victory, and were winding up preparatory to making the air ring with their shouts.

The wise ones kept close watch of the play. They had known

occasions just like this when the winning team became over confident, and the last few minutes witnessed their utter rout.

Would it happen so in this case? Clifford was exerting every effort to bring about such a happy condition of affairs. Frank had warned his men against the slightest slackening of speed or vigilance. No game is won until the referee's signal announces that the end has come.

Now the determined Clifford hosts had carried the ball over into the territory of their rivals. Columbia was visibly weakening before these fearful plunges, and it seemed as though flesh and bone could not hold out against them. Seconds counted now. How desperately Frank and his backers fought to ward off the threatening evil. Every lawful tactic that would bring about delay was brought into bearing. Twice had the ball gone out of bounds, which necessitated a new alignment, and consequent passage of those precious seconds.

Columbia was on the defensive; but it was a splendid exhibition of harrying play they put up, thanks to the instructions of Coach Willoughby. On their fifteen-yard line they faced the Clifford crew for the last struggle. Despite the prediction of the man who had declared them a great second-half team, Clifford had failed to add to their score during the half hour that had elapsed, that lone touchdown standing to their credit.

"Boys, we want a bigger score than this!" called Captain Allen eagerly, when time was taken out to enable some wind to be pumped back into Style. "We've got thirteen points, and they have five. It's too close a margin. We've got time enough to make another touchdown."

"If we can get the ball," added West.

"We've got to get it!" cried the captain. "It's the first down. Hold 'em, and throw the man with the ball for a loss if you can. They may kick on the second down instead of waiting for the third. Then we'll have 'em."

The whistle blew and Style came slowly back into the line. He was pale and weak, as the manner in which he gave the signals showed. There were anxious looks on the faces of his mates, and glances of eager expectation on those of his opponents.

Wentworth came smashing for a hole he expected would be opened up between Daly and Shay, but Shay was ready and did more than his partner to block off the play. Wentworth was hurled back, and there was a net loss of two yards to Clifford.

"Look out for a kick!" warned Frank.

It came, for Clifford was desperately afraid, and Comfort got the ball. Tucking it under his arm, with head down, he started for the goal line, well protected. The enraged Clifford players managed to get at him, however, and he was downed after he had covered fifteen yards. But it was a good run back, and Columbia had the ball, and there were still several more minutes to play.

"At 'em now, fellows! Tear 'em apart!" cried Lanky Wallace.

He called for Ralph West to take the ball around Smith, as the quarter had noticed the weak defense the right end was putting up.

Around circled West, and he made a good gain before he was downed. Again came smashing plays—several of them, Columbia keeping possession of the ball. In vain did Clifford brace and hold. It was useless. She was being shoved right up the field. Her men were exhausted and discouraged. Columbia's were eager and triumphant.

"Touchdown! Touchdown!" came the insistent cries from the spectators. The ball was on Clifford's fifteen-yard line.

"Touchdown it is!" declared Wallace grimly.

He called his signal with snap and vim. Frank got the ball and made a desperate dive for a big gap that was opened up between Roe and McQuirk. Forward he staggered while Shadduck and Oakes managed to circle around to form interference for him.

"He's through! He's through!" came the cry, and indeed the captain was through the Clifford line, and legging it toward the goal. Hastings started after him, but slipped and fell. Then, like a flash, Wentworth emerged from the tangle of players and set off after Allen. He came on like the wind, and managed to slip past Shadduck, but Oakes was on the alert and tackled off the plucky Clifford right-half.

Then it was all over but the shouting. With the fall of Wentworth ended Clifford's hopes of preventing another touchdown, while as for her own hopes of making one they had vanished some time ago. Allen touched down the ball. Amid frenzied cheers the goal was kicked, making the score nineteen to five in favor of Columbia. There was preparation for another kick-off, but before it could be made the whistle blew; and the game had passed into history.

CHAPTER XII

DR. SHADDUCK FEARS AN EPIDEMIC

"There he is!"

"Cut him off; he's trying to dodge us!"

"No you don't, Frank; we're just bound to give you a ride around. These things don't happen every day. Up with him, fellows!"

Fully fifty wild Columbia students had gathered around the captain, effectually blocking his escape from the field. Frank, suspecting some such design, had tried his best to slip off unobserved; but hundreds of eyes were on him, and even his fellow players showed treachery, handing him over to the crowd.

He was immediately hoisted upon the shoulders of several brawny chaps, and with a motley crowd following, after they set out to parade the field, shouting the battle cry of the school, and singing the famous song that always thrilled the hearts of Columbia's patriotic sons and daughters.

Those who had remained in the grandstand cheered as the procession swept past, and among these was Minnie Cuthbert. Frank never looked that way once, she noted, and yet there had been a time, not so very far back, when he would have thought of her the first thing.

And yet Frank was perfectly conscious that she was standing there, leaning over the railing, and watching the fun with eagerness. Sometimes it is possible to see without looking direct.

When he could escape Frank hurried home. He was of course overjoyed to realize that his team had won the game; but the strain of those last ten minutes had been simply terrific. What would it be with the Bellport eleven, every member of which had undoubtedly been present, picking up points that would be useful in the big Thanksgiving Day game?

Of course there must a celebration that night. Victory deserved something of the sort, and the boys were bound to make the fact known to every citizen of the town. Fires would be blazing, horns tooting, firecrackers exploding, and a general hurrah taking place, with crowds of students, roaming around, and ringing the various college songs they loved so well.

Frank found a warm welcome at his home. His father declared he was

proud of the fact that he had a boy so well able to manage affairs of great moment. It was a great day at the Allen house, and Helen, for the time being, even forgot her grief in connection with the unexplained desertion of her once fondly loved chum, Minnie Cuthbert.

Just after lunch Frank was called to the telephone. Ralph had dropped in to talk over matters connected with the game, which, of course, must be the one important topic of conversation among the Columbia students until the concluding meeting came about that would settle the championship.

"Hello! who's this?" Frank asked, as he picked up the receiver, and placed it at his ear.

A laugh was the first sound he heard.

"That you, Bones?" he demanded, thinking he recognized a peculiarity about this chuckle that stamped the identity of the one who seemed so merry.

"Sure; that you, Frank? Say, it's an epidemic that's struck us!" called the one at the other end of the wire.

"What do you mean. Make it plainer; I'm all up in the air," answered Frank, who knew Bones was a great fellow for joking, and wondered what he had in hand now.

"They had my dad guessing some, I tell you. He began to think it was his duty to warn the town authorities so that they could take proper precautions; for honest now, it did look like the whole place was overrun with frisky canines, snapping at every one they met!"

"What's that you say?" asked Frank, pricking up his ears at the mention of dogs; for the memory of several recent experiences was fresh in his mind.

"Why, you see, every one's getting bitten. It's the latest fad. My dad had just three come to him early this morning to have wounds cauterized to make sure!"

"Good gracious! you don't say?" ejaculated Frank, waiting for further explanations, which he knew would not be long in coming.

"Yes, and the funny part of it is all of them were boys. The dogs seem to have taken a great fancy for the breed. Guess you could give a close hazard about who they were. Perhaps you know their limp, for they showed it plain enough at the game," went on Bones,

with another series of chuckles.

"I saw Bill Klemm rubbing his calf and talking to Jay Tweedle; yes, and when they walked off I thought each of them seemed to have a stiff leg. How about that; were they to see the doctor?" asked the captain of the football team, eagerly.

"Sure as you live, and Asa Barnes ditto. Asa said he was passing an empty lot last night when a brindle cur just deliberately jumped out and nabbed him. Of course he kicked the beast away, and it ran off howling; but his father, on being told the circumstances this morning, thought he ought to have a little caustic applied so as to take no chances. Think of it—a brindle cur, and that sneak kicked him! Oh! my!"

"And where did Bill say he got his dose from?"

"He's got a little bit of a poodle, you know. Well, he had the nerve to declare the baby beast bit him! Dad said he found it hard to believe, for judging from the marks of the teeth it was a jaw three times as big as Tiny's that did the business. Dad knows better now."

"Then you told him all about Kaiser's work last night?"

"Sure; I had to. He was for putting off to warn the town police to look out for all brindle dogs, and shoot 'em on the spot—which spot I don't know. But you see, somebody had told him about Kaiser acting that way at the field, and he was ready to order him massacred before he went mad too. So I had to relate the dreadful story of how Bill and Asa and Jay got their little tattoo marks."

"What did he say then?" asked Frank, greatly amused.

"Nearly took a fit laughing over it. Instead of being chloroformed or otherwise exterminated Kaiser is going to get a new collar now, dad's especial gift. Hurrah for Kaiser! He's the whole circus every time!"

"Yes," said Frank, quickly, "he came near getting his finish though to-day. Old Officer Whalen was on his trail and meant to fill him full of holes, if he could ever get close enough. It was a narrow escape for Kaiser."

"A narrower one for the crowd. Did you ever see Officer Whalen practice firing at a mark? Well, I have. The man couldn't hit a barn door thirty feet off. Can't you come over, Frank? I've got something to propose to you. The afternoon is too fine and bracing to stay cooped up in the house. We'll soon have to hibernate, you know. Come along!" called Bones.

"Ralph is with me."

"All right. Bring him along. Glad to have him."

"Look for us soon then. I've got something I want to ask you anyway. Good-bye," and Frank turned from the phone to explain to the wondering Ralph just why he had been so overcome with merriment.

Of course Ralph thought the joke a good one when he too heard the particulars of the sudden run upon the good doctor's supply of liquid caustic.

"No wonder they limped after all that; the remedy was worse than the disease, I reckon. I don't suppose anything serious will come out of those bites now?" he said, after he had stopped laughing.

"Oh! hardly. Thousands are bitten every year by angry dogs, and how few cases of hydrophobia you hear about. They'll limp around a little while and then forget all about it But Bones wants us to come over to his house, so if you have no objections we'll just saunter across lots and see what he's got going."

"Just as you say." remarked Ralph, rising immediately; "though unless you object I thought of dropping in at the post-office on the way. There's a mail in, and possibly a letter might come for me that I could get before the carrier came around."

Frank looked at him with pity in his eyes. He knew how secretly Ralph was suffering all the pangs that can come with hope long deferred; and that each day seemed like an eternity to the boy who was yearning to feel the loving arms of a mother about his neck, a mother whom he had never known.

"Certainly; that's only a step out of the way. But be careful as you go, and if you see a brindle pup in a vacant lot run for your life! They're mighty dangerous, I'm told," at which both boys laughed again, and the cloud passed from Ralph's rather pale face.

As chance would have it, as they issued from the front door a vehicle passed the house, and in it were seated Minnie Cuthbert and Lef Seller, the fellow whom she had more than once declared she never meant to speak to again. It was Lef's rig, and the object he had in view in thus deliberately passing Frank's home was obvious.

Frank, after that one start, was prepared. He immediately doffed his cap with the most excruciating politeness. Minnie turned white, then red. She hardly knew what to do under the circumstances;

but found herself nodding her head as though she could not help it, even after cutting Frank on the preceding day.

Frank saw the grin of triumph on the face of his rival, but though his blood was fairly boiling with indignation at his coming out of the way to let him see their renewal of friendship, he simply looked after the vehicle and smiled.

Ralph was chuckling as if amused.

"Sometimes girls' friendships are so quickly changed they make me think of that wonderful Finnegan and his report of the accident on his section of the railroad. You know how his boss had taken him to task because he stretched things out so. When the old train had another wreck he just wrote out his report: 'Off again, on again, gone again, Finnegan.' Yesterday it was you, to-day Lef, and tomorrow—well, tomorrow hasn't come yet, so we won't anticipate. Come along, Frank," and linking his arm in that of his chum, Ralph drew him away.

And in the lively talk that followed Frank soon forgot his bitter feeling at the strange actions of the pretty girl he had once thought so charming.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT MARSH

"Glad to see you, fellows! Say, by the way, I hear that Clifford won the great football match against Columbia!" was the way the way Bones Shaddock greeted them as they reached his door and rang the bell.

"You don't tell me," said Frank, with a smile; "when did it happen?"

"Oh! last night some time. It was a great victory. I'm told they nearly painted the town red over it," responded the other.

"Well, for my part I prefer to do the celebrating after the thing is over to shouting before hand. Perhaps they celebrated too hard, and that might account for several fool plays that were made. I had an idea that several of Clifford's best players looked rather red-eyed, as though they didn't get much sleep," remarked Frank, as they entered.

"And I shouldn't be surprised if you were right. I was told they had a dance and it was all hours of the morning when they went home," echoed Bones.

"But what did you want us over for in particular?" asked Frank.

"Something to show you and then a proposal to make. I had a birthday to-day, and my dad's been mighty good to me. What do you think of that?"

Bones whipped out a beautiful shotgun from behind a case and handed it over to the others to admire.

"Looks like a dandy, all right. And I wager she'll do some good work when you get to looking over the sights. Handles great, too. Although I think I like my own gun a little the better, still that's only a matter of prejudice. You're lucky to have such a dad, Bones," remarked Frank, as he drew an imaginary bead on some object seen out of the window.

"And now for my proposal. I'm just wild to try the new gun, and I had word from father's farmer, Benson, that the ducks were in the old swamp that adjoins our big patch of ground over Wheaten way. I can get our horse and the three of us might take a spin over to see what we can do," suggested Bones, eagerly.

"But I thought duck shooting was always done in the early morning?" ventured Ralph.

"It usually is; but in some localities there is apt to be a good evening flight. That happens to be the case over at the swamp. I've seen them come in there to spend the night by twos and dozens, until the air was thick with them. And I've had the best sport of my life in knocking them over on a runway, or rather flyway. Say you'll go, Frank?" pleaded the enthusiastic sportsman.

"Well," answered the one addressed, "it always appeals to me, and in this case I'd just as soon be away from town to-night, because the boys are going to do stunts, and they hinted that they might get hold of me to ride me around, something I object to seriously, on general principles. So far as I'm concerned I'll be delighted to go along, Bones."

"Ditto here," exclaimed Ralph; "only I shall have to go to be the pick-up, for I haven't got a gun. I used to handle an old one of Mr. West's, but, of course, didn't bring it along with me."

"Oh! that's easily fixed. If you don't mind you can use my old one. She's a steady shooter. If you cover your bird you get him every time. And I've got plenty of shells. Suppose you chase back

and get your double-barrel, Frank, while I see about the rig. Ralph will stay with me and help, I know.”

It was speedily arranged and Frank, on returning with his gun, found the others ready to make a start. Just as he had said the arrangement pleased him first-rate, for he really did want to get out of town until a late hour that night. It was not at all to the liking of the football captain to be carried around on show, just as if he were a hero on exhibition; especially when he avowed that he deserved not one whit more honor for the victory than each other member of the team.

”I hope they get Lanky, and trot him around some to see how he likes it. He was scolding me for not behaving right to the boys to-day, when they grabbed me on the field after the game. I’d give something to see him wallowing around on a platform and made to bow to the right and to the left, over and over again.”

All of them laughed heartily at the picture Frank conjured up. Then they clambered into the vehicle and the start was made.

They had been wise enough to hide the guns, so that while some of the boys who were on the streets saw them ride off, they had no suspicion that the one bright particular star of the intended celebration intended to be far away at the time.

It was a ride of more than ten miles. The horse, while not a fast animal, could keep up a steady pace, and in good time they arrived at the farm which Doctor Shadduck owned.

As the afternoon was passing, and night comes early after the middle of November, the three young sportsmen hastened to head for the swamp where they anticipated having an hour or so of pleasure before dark actually shut in.

Bones had often come up here on a similar errand, though this was his first visit this year. Still, he kept things in such shape that there was little time wasted making the necessary arrangements.

He had a few painted decoys that had seen much service and these they carried along with them from the house.

Seeing Frank curiously examining one of the stools he carried, Bones broke out into a hearty laugh.

”Wondering what peppered that wooden decoy so, eh, Frank? I’ll tell you, though you’ll never enjoy the story as much as I did the actual thing. I had a cousin up here last winter. He was from New York City, and had never shot at real game, though he was a deadly marksman when it came to the trap, and could break bats and clay

pigeons right along.”

”I’ve seen the breed,” commented Frank, with a grin.

”Well, when we came crawling out here I forgot that I had asked Benson to put my little flock of decoys out for me. The first thing I knew I heard a bang close to my ear, and then a second shot, after which Cousin Hal jumped up shouting that he had knocked over the entire bunch. He had, but you ought to have seen his look when I sent him wading out to retrieve the game. Still, he laughed himself at the joke, and begged me not to tell it till after he left.”

”I guess they’ll float about as well as ever, even if weighted down with shot. Have you got a boat up here, Bones?” asked Ralph.

”Sure I have, and a dandy one to shoot out of, being flat-bottomed and steady as a church floor. But I only use it to retrieve the game generally; because you see, we can shoot from the land as the ducks fly over to enter the swamp.”

Frank had often heard of this style of shooting, and wanted to try it; so that he was very glad he had come. After the tremendous strain of the morning some relaxation of this kind would be a good thing too, for all of them.

”I told my people not to expect me home to supper; and also that they might be having game tomorrow for dinner, if we were lucky,” remarked Frank.

”And nobody will bother whether I show up or not,” observed Ralph, with a nervous little laugh.

”Never mind, old chap, I calculate that there’s going to come a decided change in your condition before a great while. You’re showing true grit in bearing up as well as you do. Any day you may get the letter that tells you the ones you look for are on the way here. Then your troubles will be all in the past. Hello! how’s this Bones? Have we arrived?” and Frank looked around curiously when the guide came to a sudden halt.

”Here we are, fellows. You see that abrupt break in the heavy line of trees. It seems to form a sort of avenue, and the ducks in flying toward the swamp just naturally drive into it, following after each other as though it were really a road. In fact, few of them ever enter the swamp by any other way than this.”

”If we’re going to shoot over a place like this, as the ducks come in, why the decoys?” asked Ralph.

Bones laughed as he replied:

"I generally keep them out here during the season, in a little shelter I have. Nothing like making fellows useful, you know; and while we were coming I thought three could carry them better than one! Sort of making you work your passage, see?"

Knowing the ground, and the habits of the waterfowl, Bones quickly placed his two friends. Then they anxiously awaited the coming of the first game.

A sort of routine had been arranged. This was to prevent any waste of ammunition, through two of them shooting at the same quarry.

"Frank, you try the first chap, Ralph the second, and I'll experiment with my new gun when the next pilgrim spins along. Don't forget that they are swift customers right here, and the chances are you'll shoot back of them," said Bones, as they stood at their posts.

"There, Frank!" exclaimed Ralph, as a couple of dark objects suddenly burst into view, and sped past them.

But Frank was not taken unawares. He had shot ducks more than once before, and knew how to properly gauge their flight. Beginning a little behind the pair he swept his gun forward so as to pass them; and at just the instant it covered the game in its swinging movement he pressed the trigger.

One of the ducks fell, stone dead, and the other went on with diminished speed as though crippled. Almost instantly the second barrel spoke, and this time down came the second bird.

"Fine!" exclaimed Bones, who had never seen Frank shoot before; "why, really, I'm ashamed to show my clumsiness before such a crack shot."

"None of that, now. And don't believe I can do that sort of work right along. Next time it may be a clean double miss. Ducks are unreliable things. I've known the best of shots to miss, time and again. Ralph, step up and toe the mark. You're next on the docket," laughed Frank, as he hastily replaced the discharged shells with fresh ones.

"Better retrieve your game while the balance of us keep a lookout. Otherwise we'll get things mixed, and perhaps lose some of it. Did you mark the places?" said the host of the little hunt.

"Oh! yes, I always do that. It gets to be a habit with any fellow who hunts much. I think they fell dead, so I oughtn't to have much

trouble,” replied Frank.

”Beware the oozy spots along the border of the marsh. I’ve had no end of trouble getting stuck instead of duck,” called out Bones, as the other moved away, carrying his gun along with him as a wise hunter always does.

Just as he retrieved the second victim to his accuracy he heard a single shot, and a heavy body fell not ten feet away. Ralph had dropped his first duck also.

”There you are,” remarked Frank, throwing the three birds down, as he returned to the rendezvous; ”and they do certainly look fine and plump. Reckon you have quite a few muskrats in this old marsh of yours, Bones. I saw a lot of houses in the water, made of sticks and trash?”

”I was told there were. Of course I’ve seen the little varmints at times, when I’ve been hiding in a duck-blind; but they never trouble me, and I don’t go out of my way to interfere with them. Ah! there!”

He threw up his gun, and a second later two shots rang out in rapid succession. Quite a bunch of teal had swung into the avenue, heading for the marsh. They were just everlastingly hurrying, as Ralph said, and while Bones succeeded in knocking down a couple, one only wounded, which he never did find, he declared he ought to be ashamed for not doing better.

”Still, I like the feel of the gun all right. I’ll do something worth while when I get used to the hang of it,” he remarked, as he went off to look for his game.

Then Frank had another chance. Sometimes the ducks were higher up; then again they came at such speed that it was next to impossible to make a hit.

So the fun went on for three-quarters of an hour. It was actually getting dusk, and the flight seemed about over. Ralph had dropped a single duck, and gone off to try and find it, though Bones said he doubted whether he would succeed, because of the gathering gloom.

About five minutes afterwards, as he and Frank were sitting there on the log, exchanging stories of former hunts, they heard Ralph calling.

”Hello! what’s the matter?” exclaimed Frank, starting up.

”I don’t know, but I can give a pretty good guess,” remarked

Bones; and then elevating his voice, he shouted:

"What d'ye want, Ralph?"

"Better drop over here, please!" came the reply.

"He's in some sort of trouble," suggested Frank, judging from the half apologetic tone of his chum.

"Yes, and I expect stuck in the ooze of the marsh, worse luck!" grunted Bones.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DANGERS OF THE MUCK HOLE

"Where are you?" called Bones, as he and Frank pushed forward in the gathering dusk.

"Here! Be mighty careful, fellows, or you'll get in too!" came the answer, not far away.

"Told you so," remarked the doctor's son, with a little laugh; "poor Ralph; I pity him, because I've been there myself. When I come alone out here I always carry a short rope along. If I get stuck it helps me out."

"A rope? How under the sun can that help?" demanded a voice close by; showing that they were very near the boy who was stuck in the ooze, and also that he was alive to the inconvenience of his position.

"Why, you see, in most cases there's a limb of a tree hanging over, and it's dead easy to throw the rope across it. After that, one can pull out, unless he's allowed himself to sink too deep. Got a match with you, Frank?" asked Bones.

"Lots. I've found them handy on too many occasions lately to go without. Here you are, Bones. Going to make a fire, are you?" and Frank, bending down, commenced to assist in gathering some dead leaves together.

"Well," replied the other, "we ought to have some light to see how to work him free. It would be a tough joke if the whole bunch of us got stuck. I don't hanker after such an experience. Things are pretty dry up here, so we must be careful not to let the blaze

spread any.”

The fire was quickly a positive fact, and being fed with some small branches it leaped up grandly. In this fashion the entire neighborhood was illuminated.

Frank looked around. The sight was peculiar, and as the marsh ran into an actual swamp, he thought he had seldom seen a more weird effect. Still, what interested him most of all was the picture of Ralph, up to his knees in the soft slime that lay concealed under the dead leaves and green scum.

”I’ve tried all I could to get out, fellows, but the worst of it is, when I lift one foot the other only goes that much deeper down. If a fellow could only get hold of enough stuff to make a sort of mattress he might roll over on it and do the trick that way. I’d be trying that if I had daylight, and was alone here,” remarked the imprisoned boy, calmly.

”Say, I never thought of that. It’s a clever idea, all right. Next time I get stuck I’m going to see how it works,” remarked Bones.

”Why not now, since you haven’t your rope along. Here’s just the ticket—some old fence rails lying in a heap. Cheer up, comrade, we’ll have you out of that in a jiffy now,” sang out Frank, seizing one of the long, cast-off rails, and dropping it on the surface of the muck.

Bones fell to along side, and between them they speedily formed a regular corduroy road out to where Ralph stood, watching the building with interest.

One of them got on either side. Then, with the aid of other rails they pried Ralph loose, so that he could crawl over to the ”mattress,” and get secure footing. After that nothing was needed but to walk ashore.

”I’m a fine sight, mud up to my knees, my hands full, and I tell you, it isn’t just as sweet as it might be,” lamented Ralph, as he started to scrape himself off with a splinter.

”Hold on, we’ll play valet to you. Take that leg, while I manage this one, Frank,” observed Bones, who was really enjoying seeing some other fellow in the same mussed condition that had been his lot more than once.

They scraped so well that presently Ralph declared he felt quite presentable once more.

”But I’ll make sure to let nobody see me in this condition,” he

added; "and this pair of trousers will have to go to the cleaner's Monday morning, you bet."

"Well, are we off now?" asked Frank, as he started to make sure that the fire was extinguished to the last spark.

"That's the ticket, Frank," observed Bones, approvingly, "I like a fire all right, but hate to see it burning up a marsh or a woods. Had one little experience that I aint going to forget in a hurry. I guess she'll do now. Let's shoulder our game and make tracks for the farmhouse. Supper will be ready, I suppose."

"Supper?" echoed Ralph.

"Why, sure. You didn't suppose I meant that we'd go hungry when I invited you to come up here for a little relaxation, after our big strain this morning? Benson promised to have something for us. They're only plain country folks, you know, so don't expect much style, fellows."

"Style!" exclaimed Ralph, with a snort, "do I look like I could put on a heap, with these mussed-up trousers? All I ask is a chance to wash my hands and face. But it was mighty good of you thinking of the grub part, Bones."

"I don't see how. I always eat with Benson when I come up here for a shoot. It was only a case of selfishness. Say, this is something of a load-four apiece all around, and they're heavy chaps, too. This one is so fat he actually burst when he fell."

"But I have no use of any game. Perhaps you'd better give the farmer my share, for his kindness," suggested Ralph.

"That's nice of you, old fellow. And I'll take you up on it, too. Benson has no time to shoot, and I don't believe he knows how; but all the same he does like a taste of game, to sort of change the bill of fare. Follow me, now, for the house."

Bones led the way, and presently they arrived at the farmhouse, a low-roofed building, where light gleamed cheerily in the small windows. Benson had a wife and several small children. The table was set, country fashion, right at one end of the big kitchen, and the odors that greeted the hungry and cold boys as they entered certainly promised an appetizing repast.

Ralph was soon made happy with a tin basin and a bucket of water. He managed to repair damages pretty well, and was only too willing to respond to the farmer's hearty invitation to take a chair and "set-to."

Perhaps it was their sharp-set appetites that made them think the food tasted unusually fine. No matter, there was a great abundance, and by the time they got up from the table every fellow declared he could not eat another mouthful if he were paid for it.

"I'll have your rig at the door in short order," declared Benson, as he went out with a lantern.

With a ten-mile drive, and a horse far from fresh, Bones had decided that they would do well to start without any delay. He had tried out his gun, and was satisfied; while on Frank's part, he rejoiced in the fact that he would be away from town while all the glorification was going on.

"Hold on, Mr. Benson, that's enough. Eight is all we want to take back with us. Ralph here is boarding and has no use for his share. So he asks you to accept it," called out Bones, as the farmer started to toss the game in the back part of the doctor's buggy. "That's kind o' him, and I'm sure much obliged. We don't get any too much game up here, close as we are to the marsh. I'm too busy, you see, and then besides, I never was a great hand to shoot. In summer I pull in quite some fish at odd times, and that's all the sport I take."

It was about eight o'clock when they finally left the farmhouse. The good wife and the three children called out good-bye, as Bones chucked to the horse, and they were off.

"It won't be so awful dark on the road, for there's a half moon peeping out up yonder behind those clouds," said Frank.

"Glad of that," returned Bones, who was doing the driving, "because you see, the road is pretty rough till we get on the main one, and if it was pitch dark we might stand for getting tumbled into a ditch alongside. There are some nasty places I've got to look out for. I know them pretty well though; ought to, for I've been in two of 'em."

"We'll help you look out then. I wouldn't hanker after a tumble into a muddy ditch just now," laughed Frank.

"Think of me, fellows! Why, my lower extremities are still damp from one trip. That was bad enough, but think of going in head first! Ugh! excuse me, if you please!" groaned Ralph.

They made out to get along with little or no trouble. The horse kept the middle of the road as a rule, and three pair of keen eyes were quite enough to pilot the vehicle along toward the junction of the two thoroughfares.

When the firmer road was reached Bones declared he was glad.

"Now we needn't worry, boys. Get-up, Strawberry; it's home for you and another measure of oats. I had the farmer give him only a small quantity. Keep a horse a bit hungry if you want him to hustle for home," he remarked.

"Sounds reasonable at any rate, Bones. And Strawberry is doing pretty good hustling right now, considering the heavy condition of our weight, in the way of game. My folks will think I'm something on the shoot, I guess," remarked Frank, humorously.

"You really got seven—" began Ralph, when his friend interrupted.

"Never mind about that. One fellow is always lucky above the rest. Never knew it to fail. To-day it might be me, to-morrow you. So it goes. Forget it, both of you."

Ralph said nothing more. He knew the nature of his chum, and that Frank had not a selfish bone in his body. If there was any sport going around he wanted every one to have their full share of it, nor could he rest happy unless this were so.

They had passed over several miles of the main road, and all of them were somehow feeling a bit drowsy from their unusual exertions of the day, when, without warning, the horse snorted and came to a full stop.

"What's this mean?" demanded Bones, in astonishment.

"There's something on the road ahead of us," declared Ralph, bending forward in order to see the better, for the shadows fell across the tree-bordered pike.

"I'm not sure," ventured Frank, "but it seems like some sort of vehicle to me. Perhaps there's been an accident. Wait while I jump out and go to see!"

CHAPTER XV

FRANK TURNS CHAUFFEUR

"Don't you want your gun?" asked Bones, in a low voice, that showed some trace of excitement; for, truth to tell, Bones was inclined to be suspicious by nature, and there had been stories told lately throughout that section, of raids by thieving tramps.

Possibly that may have been one reason why Bones was so desirous of having company on this little excursion up to the farm to try his new gun.

"What for?" asked Frank, surprised, as he dropped out of the vehicle.

"Oh! there's no telling. This may be just a trap to stop any travelers and make them hand over. It's been done before. I'd hate to lose my double-barrel the first thing."

He was groping under the seat for the aforesaid article at that very moment, as though he would feel safer with it in his hands.

But Frank laughed scornfully.

"Don't you believe it, Bones. Ten to one this is some vehicle that has left the road and gone into the ditch. I'm only afraid I may find the driver badly hurt in being thrown out, that's all."

He left the buggy as he spoke, and walked hastily forward toward the dark object that seemed to be half on the road and partly among the trees. "Why, it looks like an automobile," said Frank to himself, as he came closer; and five seconds later he added positively, "That's just what it is. I wonder what's happened now?"

He soon knew. Upon reaching the scene he found that the car must have suddenly swerved from the road and struck a tree, head on. It could not have been going at a very rapid pace at the time, for although some damage had been done to the hood, and one of the lamps seemed to be smashed, the machine did not appear badly damaged.

Some one was grunting close by, and as Frank drew near he saw a figure crawling out from the bushes.

"What's happened here?" he asked, promptly.

The figure of a man started up, and as Frank struck a match he saw that the other seemed to be decently dressed, although his clothes were somewhat torn after his headlong flight in among the bushes.

"We had an accident," muttered the man, staring hard at him; and Frank thought with a look not unlike suspicion on his scratched face.

"I see you had," returned Frank, at the same time noting almost unconsciously from the way the machine headed they must have been

coming away from Columbia at the time; "but you speak as if there might be another party along with you. Did he get tossed out too when you hit the tree?"

"I don't know. I wasn't seeing anything just then but a million stars. He don't seem to be in the car, does he?" ventured the other, who was rubbing himself all over as if trying to ascertain whether any ribs, or other bones, had been broken in his rough experience.

"Then he must be in the bushes, the same as you, though it's a miracle how he went out, being behind the steering wheel; and also how he missed hitting this tree. Fortunately it happens to be a small one. Let's look and see."

As he spoke Frank lit another match and started to examine the bushes alongside the stranded car and beyond. By the time he had used three matches success rewarded his efforts, for they found the man.

"He's dead!" exclaimed the stranger, in horrified tones.

"Oh! perhaps not. He may only have fainted from the shock," and lying down, the boy put his head down close to the chest of the motionless man.

"His heart is beating and that proves he is alive. Take hold here and we'll carry him to the car. Perhaps he'll come to his senses when I dash a little water in his face. Lift his heels and I'll look after his head," and Frank took hold of the broad shoulders as he spoke.

In this fashion they managed to move the unconscious man to the road. He was laid down alongside the car. Meanwhile, the other two boys had come up, Bones urging the frightened horse along with the whip.

"What is it, Frank?" asked Ralph, jumping out.

"Been an accident; a car rammed a tree. Both passengers thrown out, and one of them is injured; Anyhow he seems to have been knocked senseless. I'm going to get a little water in my cap and try to bring him to," with which Frank darted to the other side of the road, where his quick ear caught the trickling sound of a small stream gurgling among mossy stones.

He was back in less than a minute, and immediately started splashing some of the water in the face of the unconscious man.

"He's coming around," said the other man, watching these

operations with eager eyes; and who several times looked at the three boys as though wondering what they could be doing there on that lonely road at such a late hour, for it was now past nine o'clock.

Frank turned aside to see whether he could not light the remaining lamp of the car, which did not appear to have been broken, and had possibly only gone out through the sudden concussion, as acetyline burners often will.

He found that it was readily made to shed light again, and once his work here had been done it was only natural for the boy who delighted in machinery of all kinds to take a hasty look at the car.

"I think it might run still. Nothing vital seems to be broken, anyhow," he said aloud, as he came back to the little group.

The second man was recovering, but groaning more or less.

"He ought to be taken to your house, Bones, to let your father examine him. I'm afraid he may be badly hurt," said Frank; "if you can help him into the tonneau of the machine I'll try and see if it will work."

"Say, can you run it?" asked the second man, eagerly.

"I know something about cars; enough to drive this one, if it isn't damaged in its working parts. I couldn't guarantee to patch it up, though. Wait and let me see."

He bent over the car, and presently gave the crank a couple of whirrs to turn over the engine. Sure enough, there was an immediate response, and the whirring that followed announced that, strange to say, the machine had not been vitally injured in the smashup, though badly damaged with regard to looks.

Frank backed out, and with a few deft manipulations that proved the truth of his assertion that he could run a car, managed to head the machine once more toward Columbia. Neither of the men seemed to notice just what he was doing. The one who had appeared to Frank first was bending down over his friend, and they were holding a whispered conversation.

"Put him in; now Ralph," said the new chauffeur, quietly, "you and Bones come along after, and leave my gun and the ducks at my house. I'll be home long before you get there, I reckon, unless this old machine takes a notion to be tricky again and dump us."

Still groaning, the man was lifted into the tonneau.

"How do you feel, sir?" asked Frank, solicitously; although, truth to tell, he could not say that he liked the looks of either of the parties, judging from what little he had seen of them by the light of the lone lamp.

"Pretty bum, boy. The trouble is, my right arm hangs down like it might be broken; and without it I can't handle the wheel, you see. My friend here don't know nothing about a machine, the worse luck. So I don't see but what we've just got to let you do the drivin' for us. It's nice in you proposin' it, too. Ugh! that hurts some, I tell you!"

The man accompanied his words with more or less vehement expressions that did not raise him the slightest in the estimation of Frank. However, he was evidently in great bodily pain, and that might in some measure excuse his strong language.

The second traveler got in alongside his friend, as though he feared he might be needed sooner or later, if the other started to faint again.

"I'm going to get you to a doctor as soon as possible," remarked Frank, as he started off.

He heard the calls of his chums and answered back. Then the car lost the slow-moving buggy on the road. Frank did not dare drive very fast. He was not familiar with the machine; and besides, possibly it was acting freakish—at least the man declared that it had jumped aside straight at that tree without his doing anything. On his part Frank accepted this version with a grain of allowance; for he had long since scented liquor around, and could guess the real reason for the accident.

As he guided the car Frank could hear the two men talking behind him. The murmur of their voices just reached him, though he could not make out anything they said.

Once the man who had come out of the mishap in better trim than his companion seemed to be groping around under the seats as if searching for something.

"It's here, all right, Jim!" Frank heard him say, in a satisfied tone.

A minute later he was asking about the road, where it led, and what the intentions of the boy at the wheel were. Frank repeated what he had said before, to the effect that he thought the wounded man ought to see a physician with as little delay as possible, and

therefore he was heading back to Columbia so as to take him to Dr. Shaddock.

"Who?" exclaimed the wounded man, as the name was mentioned.

"Doctor Shaddock, the father of one of my chums, who was with me duck shooting," replied Frank, thinking it strange why the man while apparently suffering so much should care who attended him, just so long as he could get relief speedily.

Again the two men conferred in low tones. Frank could hear the wounded one muttering again. Perhaps his arm had commenced to hurt once more; or, it may have been something else that started him off.

And even while Frank was wondering who these parties could be anyway, with their strange actions and apparent unwillingness to return to Columbia, which place they must have recently left, a heavy hand was laid on his arm, and a voice said:

"Say, look here, we don't want to go to Columbia, and what's more, we ain't meaning to let you take us there! Just ahead is a road that runs off from this. They told us it runs over to Fayette. Perhaps you don't want to go that way, but forget all that and turn off, because you've just _got_ to take us! No words now, but shove us along lively!"

CHAPTER XVI

AN UNWILLING PILOT

Frank Allen felt a sudden thrill shoot through his entire body when the gruff command to change his course was growled into his ear.

He had not been at all inclined to look upon these two travelers in a favorable light; but this was the first intimation he received that they might be even worse than they appeared.

Of course he made no immediate reply. In fact, he was still dazed by this puzzling turn in the strange little adventure. He had believed that in helping the luckless victims of the accident he was furthering his own interests, in that he would reach home long before his chums. Now it began to look as though he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

He tried to collect his thoughts and reason out the case. Why should these men so seriously object to returning to the town of Columbia? Had they been guilty of doing something unlawful that made the place dangerous to them?

Once before Frank had become mixed up with a clique of men for whom Chief of Police Hogg had warrants. He remembered the circumstance clearly, and wondered whether history could be about to repeat itself again.

And then, why should the mention of Doctor Shadduck's name affect them both in that strange fashion? Did they know the foremost physician of Columbia, a man of considerable property interests, and said to be the wealthiest man in the county?

"The car!"

Frank came near exclaiming these words aloud, so abruptly did they form in his mind! Now he remembered why the automobile had somehow seemed familiar to him, and why Bones had shown such interest in it.

"Bones thought it was an exact duplicate of the new machine his father bought last week; but I believe it's the doctor's own car! These men have stolen it for some reason or other," Frank was thinking, even while he stared ahead at the white road over which they were moving at a fair rate of speed.

His pulses throbbed with the excitement, even more than when Clifford threatened Columbia's ten-yard line with an irresistible forward rush that morning. Hearing the men talking behind him he strained his ears to try and catch a few words, in the hope that he might discover what it all meant.

"It's all your fault, Bart," grumbled the injured fellow.

"I don't see how you make that out, Jim?" replied the other, gloomily.

"I wanted to turn and head for Fayette, but you said the other road was best," the heavier fellow went on.

"I think so yet, but who'd expect that we'd have such a wreck? I tell you, man, we're mighty lucky to come out of it as well as we did," said the other.

"That's easy for you to say, but my arm feels tough. I reckon she's broke sure enough. That means delay and trouble, just when things looked so bright. It's a shame, that's what. Sure we didn't

lose it in the accident, are you, Bart?"

The lighter man seemed to again feel down at his feet.

"I tell you it's there safe and sound. Given four hours, and we'll be where they ain't going to find us. Keep up your nerve, Jim. Luck's still with us, I know," he went on.

"Is it? Well, I'm beginning to suspect there's been a turn in the tide. When the machine took the bit in her mouth and slammed us up against that tree, it looked to me like we had run into bad weather. But we must be near that road, Bart!"

"Reckon it's just ahead now; I remember that big tree we passed comin' out," replied the uninjured one of the precious pair.

"All right. Don't let the kid get past. Seems to me he's some slippery. I seen his face somewhere before," grunted the sufferer.

"Course you did. He was the feller that captained them boys this morning in the game we watched while waitin' for our chance," said the other.

"He was, hey? Well, you want to keep your eye on that boy, then, mark me. They told me some high-colored yarns about him at the inn."

Frank was not in the least elated over hearing himself praised. In truth, just then he was wrestling with the puzzling problem presented by his strange situation.

What "chance" did the man called Bart refer to? Who were these mysterious men, and what did they have in the bottom of the tonneau that seemed so precious in the eyes of the fellow who was badly hurt? He could, for the time being, forget his severe injuries to make inquiries concerning this package, hence it must be of considerable value.

Were they thieves? If this was indeed the new machine belonging to Bones' father, it looked suspicious, to say the least.

What could he do? They wanted him to take them somewhere, and in a hurry, too; were they in full flight, desirous of getting to a certain place before the pursuit became too fierce?

If Frank shivered while considering these momentous things, it could hardly be wondered at. The situation was one to give concern to the bravest man, and, after all, he was but a boy, though possessed of more than the average courage for one of his

years.

"There's the road on the left, kid!" suddenly exclaimed Bart.

"I see it, sir," replied the young pilot of the damaged car, trying to keep his voice as steady as possible, in the hope that the two men might not suspect that he had guessed their secret.

"Be sure and turn in; and be careful not to upset us," continued the other.

"Yes," said the wounded fellow, quickly, "one accident is more'n enough for me, to-night. Hey, that's a good sweep around, youngster; I see as you know your business all right. Now, are we headin' straight for Fayette?"

"Yes, sir," replied Frank, readily.

"How far is that away from Columbia?"

"Twelve miles, about, sir, as the road goes," answered the new chauffeur.

"We strike the railroad at Fayette, don't we?" continued Bart, eagerly.

"There is one there, but not the same that comes to Columbia," and when he said that Frank was certain that one of the men chuckled; it must have been Bart, for the wounded fellow was in no mood for merriment, what with his groans and grunts that signified pain.

"That's right. And we're glad to hear it. Wouldn't give a cent for a chance to ride back to your slow old town. New York's good enough for us, hey, Jim."

"It sure is, if I ever live to get there. Wish there happened to be a doctor on this here road somewhere," said the second traveler.

"What for?" asked his comrade, quickly. "I'd get him to take a look at this arm, that's what."

"Huh! dangerous business, Jim. Don't you think of it 'less it's just positively necessary. Delays might cost us dear. There's going to be a big hello when our old friend gets out of that sleep."

Frank realized that the men were apparently getting to that point where they cared little how much he knew. They evidently meant to make such use of him as seemed necessary. Once he thought that it

might be a good thing if he pretended to lose control of the car, just as Jim had evidently done. Then he changed his mind, and for two very good reasons.

In the first place, there was always the risk of being hurt himself in the consequent collision with a tree. Frank could not forget that his duty was to keep himself in good condition, so long as his school looked to him to lead his team to victory in the triangular series of football contests. Then, again, he seemed to feel that it would be cowardly to desert the post into which a strange accident had thrust him.

Better stick it out until something cropped up whereby he could make at least a try to defeat the purposes of these two rogues. He had heard enough to want to know more. Probably they would not seek to injure him so long as he made no positive move toward interfering with their game, whatever that might be.

They were talking again. Once more he strained for hearing in the hope of picking up further clues that would enlighten him with regard to their aims.

"It's the safest way, Bart. If they can't get word to Fayette till mornin', we can give 'em the laugh. You've just _got_ to do it," said the wounded man, with a degree of force that marked him as the head of the expedition.

"All right, if you say so, Jim. I'd a done it up the other road, if you hadn't banged us into that tree. Say when," replied the other, who was moving about as though doing something.

Frank managed to take a swift look over his shoulder. It only puzzled him the more, for Jim seemed to be fastening something about the lower part of his legs. What could he want leggings for? And what could it be that Jim insisted he should do?

"I know of a doctor about two miles further on here," Frank said, thinking that it might delay matters some if they concluded to stop over; at least give him a chance to either escape, or render the machine useless for further flight.

"You do, eh? Well, tell us when we get there, and p'raps I might make up my mind to hold over a bit. Are you ready, Bart?" said the heavier man.

"Yes. As well here as anywhere," came the reply.

"Bring her to a stop, kid; here, alongside this telegraph pole. That's good. Now, Bart, do it!"

Frank felt more than curious to know what the men had in mind. As soon as the car came to a stand the lighter man, who had not been hurt in the accident, jumped rather clumsily from the tonneau. Frank noticed this with surprise, for up to now he had looked upon the other as rather agile. Could he have been injured after all, and was just beginning to feel the effect of his headlong plunge into the bushes?

Judge of his utter amazement when he saw Bart at once seize hold of the nearby telegraph pole and begin to climb up with a series of sturdy kicks that apparently glued each foot in succession to the pole. Frank no longer wondered, for he knew that the man had been strapping a pair of lineman's climbing spurs to his legs when bending down in the tonneau of the stolen car!

CHAPTER XVII

A DESPERATE REMEDY

"All right, Bart?" called out the man in the car, as the other seemed to have reached the cross-bars far up the pole, over the lower of which he threw a leg, after the confident manner of one accustomed to such antics.

"Sure. It was dead easy," came floating down from above.

"Then get to work, and make a clean job of it. Look here, boy, don't you be thinkin' of leavin' us in the lurch just now. I ain't fit to run this shebang, so we need you, and need you bad. I reckon you know what this is, don't you?" and the fellow showed something that glistened like steel in the mellow moonlight.

Frank could not help feeling a little chill; still, he, was not given to showing the white feather easily.

"Of course I do. It isn't the first time I've seen a revolver," he managed to say, with a nervous little laugh.

"All right, then; don't get gay, and make me ugly, or something might happen. Hey! Bart, why don't you get busy?" raising his voice again.

There was a sharp click, and a clear "tang," as of a strained wire snapping. Frank understood now what was doing. These men had fear of pursuit, and were cutting the telegraph wires in order to prevent direct communication between Columbia and Fayette!

A second and a third metallic "pink" announced that the man up among the cross bars was indeed using his cutters with effect. At that rate he would have the entire sheaf of wires severed in another minute or so.

The matter began to assume gigantic proportions to the boy, as he sat there in the car and listened. Certainly these men must have desperate need for delay in the pursuit, if they went to such extremes in order to accomplish it. And they seemed to have provided against such a contingency, too, which would indicate that they were now only carrying out a part of a well-laid plan.

What could he do? Half a dozen ideas thronged into his brain, but they seemed so utterly useless that he discarded them as fast as they arose. He must in some manner get away from their company before arriving in the neighborhood of Fayette; because if they were as desperate as they appeared the chances were they might see fit to tie him up, and leave him under some farmer's haystack, where he would not be found for hours.

"That light ahead is the doctor's place," he said, finally.

The man called Bart had apparently severed the last of the wires. He was even then coming down the pole hastily, as though eager to be on the move.

"It is, eh?" remarked the other, with a plain sneer, as though he guessed the sudden hope that had leaped into being in the heart of the boy; "well, seein' as how we've been held up here so long I reckon I'll have to let that chance get by me. Seems like I can move that arm a little. P'raps she aint broke after all."

Bart jumped rather clumsily into the car.

"Hit her up now, kid. We ought to make up some for the time we put in here. Been a preachin' to him, ain't you, Jim? It's just as well that he knowed how things lie, 'cause we can't afford to have any foolin'?" he observed.

"I warned him that we wouldn't put up with any hoss play. If he tries to run us into the bushes he's goin' to get himself into a peck o' trouble. Likewise, keep a still tongue in your mouth when we go past the doctor's house; understand!"

Jim thought it good policy to accompany these last words with a vigorous prod between Frank's shoulder blades; and there could be no mistaking the nature of the hard object with which he did this punching.

To tell the truth Frank had really thought of doing some shouting just when they were in front of the little house where the country doctor lived. His plans had been in a sort of chaotic state at best, for he could not see just how anything of this sort might avail to divorce him from the unwelcome company of these two rascals.

"I'm not saying a word," he remarked, with another little nervous laugh, as the speeding machine passed the home of the medical man, perched on a little knoll.

While he bent forward and seemed to be scanning the road ahead, so as to avoid a collision in case they met another vehicle coming the other way, Frank was again doing his best to conjure up some wild plan that might promise him the desired chance to escape from the company of these two desperate men.

He now had not the least doubt but that they were thieves of some sort. What he had heard them say with reference to some person who would not be apt to wake up for several hours, made him think again of Doctor Shaddock.

The gentleman was a rich man, and accustomed to dealing in many enterprises that necessitated the employment of considerable means. Possibly these men had managed to hoodwink the capitalist in some fashion, and when their opportunity came had run away with something valuable belonging to him. They may even have used some of the good doctor's chloroform, or other drugs, to put him in a condition whereby he could not give the alarm or start a pursuit for some hours.

It was really thrilling; but Frank had no desire to see anything further of his unwelcome companions. He wished he had the nerve to turn the car from the road; but the chances of being injured himself discounted this desire.

Surely there ought to be some other way whereby he could say good-bye in a hurry. They would not search long for him if he once got away. Since Jim admitted that his arm was feeling better perhaps he would try and guide the machine into Fayette. Meanwhile Frank could be trying in some fashion to warn the authorities.

The sound of their voices just reached him as he sat there thinking. They were talking low now, as if desirous of not letting him hear, but Frank possessed keen ears, and could catch certain words, especially in Jim's heavier tones.

"It's just got to be did sooner or later. He could ruin all our game if he wanted to. I've risked too much now to take chances. Don't you go to showing any of your squeamishness, Bart; I won't

have it," he was growling.

They must be referring to the boy who sat at the wheel and guided the moving car. Bart evidently said something more, for presently the voice of Jim once more came to the listening ears of the one so deeply interested.

"He ain't goin' to be hurted, I tell you. But his mouth has got to be kept closed, unless you want the hull county on our heels. I seen that feller play, and I know what he's capable of doin'. So just shut up, Bart, and do what I says, hear?"

Evidently the other finally agreed to abide by the decision of his leader; for they both relapsed into temporary silence.

"I must find some chance to jump!" Frank said over and over to himself, after having heard what had passed between the two men back of him.

To do it then and there invited a dislocated shoulder when he struck the hard ground. And then again there was that ugly, shiny thing which Jim had taken such deliberate pains to show him; he did not fancy being used for a target.

"How far along are we now?" asked Jim, close to his ear.

"About five miles out of Fayette, I think?" replied Frank, who had frequently come over this some course on his wheel, and knew the country well.

"Huh! that's encouraging. Keep her going like she is, bub. You seem to know how to run a machine, all right. Steady! there comes something ahead. Give 'em the horn, boy, and steer to the right, d'ye hear! Not a peep as we pass, remember!"

Again came that wicked punch in the small of Frank's back.

"I'll remember," he said, hastily, as he turned as far out as the nature of the road permitted, and at the same time caused the horn to give a few croaks.

It was another auto approaching, as the several lights announced. Frank's heart seemed to be in his throat as the two machines rapidly approached each other. What would he not have given for a chance to shout out, and tell the parties who were in the other car that he was held under duress, and compelled to play the part of chauffeur to these fugitive rascals; but he dared not, with that desperate wounded man right at his back.

Judge to his astonishment when he saw that the other car held a number of Columbia people, among the rest Minnie Cuthbert and her father. He only had a quick glimpse of them as the two machines passed; but it was enough to show him a look of sheer astonishment on the face of the girl, which told that she must have recognized him.

"Hello! Frank!" came a voice booming after them, as the other car slowed down suddenly; and he believed that it must be Mr. Cuthbert who called, possibly influenced by Minnie.

"Silence! not a word, do you hear?" exclaimed Jim, emphasizing his words with a further display of significant pushes with that hard object.

"And keep her going, kid, keep her going right along," added the other man, grimly.

"Are they turning around, Bart?" demanded the stout party, savagely.

"Naw. Nothing doing this time. There they start up again, and headin' the other way. It's all right, pard, all right sure."

"Lucky for them it is," grunted Jim; though he sighed in relief because the peril had passed; "them fellers seemed to know you, son?"

"Yes, they are Columbia people," replied Frank, shortly, for he had experienced a bitter disappointment when he realized that this sudden little chance had slipped away without helping his forlorn cause a mite.

Three more miles or so had been passed over when suddenly there flashed into his mind a brilliant idea that promised results. Just ahead was a bridge over Juniper Creek, quite a good sized stream that flowed into Harrapin River above Clifford.

Passing down the incline that led to the bridge, Frank managed to make the car act wobbly, as though there might be something the matter. And as it ran on to the boards of the bridge itself, he brought it to a sudden stand.

"What's wrong here?" demanded Jim, angrily.

The engine had stopped working.

"I'll get out and see," observed Frank, suiting the action to the word, and opening up the hood of the car.

"Don't you try to run away, son, if you know what's good for you," said the man, after Frank had used a wrench on the engine. "Try cranking her again, and see if she refuses to work. There—hold on, you fool—why, he's crazy, Bart!" for Frank had suddenly whirled around, and taken a plunge over the side of the wooden bridge into the cold waters of Juniper Creek!

[Illustration: FRANK HAD SUDDENLY PLUNGED OVER THE SIDE OF THE BRIDGE.]

CHAPTER XVIII

MATCHING WITS

"After him, Bart! We mustn't let him get away!" exclaimed the stout man, as he hurriedly climbed out of the tonneau of the automobile.

"Not me! I ain't hankering after a cold bath just now," answered his companion, who had jumped out on the other side, and was running around.

"Run down to the bank and get hold of him, if you can!" continued Jim, harshly.

This seemed at least reasonable, and Bart had no objections to trying to do something along such lines.

"Don't see anything of him here!" he announced a minute later, as he appeared below, and ran along the bank of the stream.

The moon had gone behind a cloud, as though wishing to favor the escape of the unwilling chauffeur.

"Hang the luck! Well, come up here then, and we'll put off. P'raps I might manage with my other arm. We can't hang around here, with time flying. The town's close by. Hurry up, Bart!"

But when Bart reached his side, he found the other breathing out threatenings in a fashion that denoted a new difficulty.

"What's wrong now?" asked the slim man, who was panting from his exertions.

"That clever little scamp has dished us, that's what; carried away

the spark plugs of the machine with him, and without them we might as well try to move this bridge. I was a fool to trust him one second. We've just got to find him, Bart, that's all there is to it! Either that, or walk into Fayette, and perhaps lose that train. Come on back again. You take one side, and I'll look over the other. He's there, sure, unless he got drowned, and that I don't imagine is the case."

Bart was fully awake to the great necessity of finding the boy, after hearing what Frank had done as he jumped from the car. Each of them hurried around the approach of the bridge, and slipped down the bank.

"Any sign of him over there, Jim," called Bart, as he pushed his way into the bushes and reeds that bordered the creek.

"Don't see none yet, but keep on further down. Like as not as he just drifted with the current a bit, and then crawled out. Get him, if you find his tracks, I feel like I could do something to him for playin' this trick on us. Hello!"

"What's doing, boss?" called the other.

"Here's where he crawled out, all right," replied Jim, excitedly.

"How d'ye know it is?" demanded the other, across the water of the creek.

"It's all wet. I'll follow it up, and nab him in a dozen winks. He can't have got far away, I reckon."

"What d'ye want me to do, Jim?" called his companion, after a wait.

"Go back to the bridge, and cross over here."

"All right. Keep right after him. The moon's going to come out again right soon. If you see him, give him a shot to make him stop!" and shouting in this vein, Bart turned to retrace his steps back to the bridge.

He was somewhat out of wind by the time he had half mounted the abrupt bank that served as the base for one end of the bridge. All at once he heard a sound that electrified him. It was the cranking of the car!

"Hi, Jim! here he is! Come back! He's going to leave us in a hole! Head him off up the road there! Hurry, Jim, hurry!"

The climbing man could hardly finish shouting, so short was he of breath; but perhaps it may have been the absolute necessity for prompt action that forced him to continue the balance of the sheer ascent.

The answering cries of his companion welled up from somewhere down along the side of the stream, and the crash of his plunging footsteps could be heard as an evidence that he understood the danger menacing them.

As Bart pulled himself up alongside the approach to the bridge he saw a boyish figure spring into the fore part of the damaged car. Then came a series of quick pulsations that announced the fact of the machine working, as if nothing had ever been the matter.

"He's going off with it, Jim! Stop him! He's carrying our stuff with him! Head him off! Puncture a tire for him! Give him a shot, Jim!" howled to the thoroughly demoralized Bart, starting to stagger after the retreating automobile himself, with his hands extended, as though he would fain seize hold upon it.

"Good-bye, fellows; your cake is dough!" shouted the one who sprawled in the front seat of the car and guided its destinies.

Frank had purposely thrown on considerable power in making his start, for he knew what if ever there was need of haste it was right then and there. Jim was running ahead there, with the intention of cutting him off, and little though he had seen of the gentleman, he felt that he had no desire to prolong the acquaintance further.

Now the friendly moon could no longer hold back behind that floating black cloud, and with her first appearance Frank turned an anxious face toward the spot where a violent agitation in the brush announced the presence of the running Jim.

"Hold up there, boy! Put on the brake, or I'll—" but the rest was unheard, for Frank had dropped as low as he could in the front of the car, though still keeping his hands on that guiding wheel.

He heard the sharp discharge of a weapon, thrice repeated. His heart seemed to come up almost in his throat, for this thing of being under fire was a new experience for the young athlete. Perhaps the man had tried to simply puncture the tire, although this would in the end delay their departure. Frank never knew the truth in connection with the firing.

Then, in another second or two, he realized that he had passed beyond the zone of danger, with a clear road ahead of him!

"Hurrah!"

He could not help giving vent to his delight in this one shout. Just half a mile further on another road branched off from the one he was flying over. He remembered that by a circuitous way it would eventually take him to Columbia, passing through first the village of Stagers, and then a larger place known as Plattville.

His pulses were bounding with triumph as he let the car out notch by notch. Why, after all, the smash could have done no serious damage to the machine. What was fifteen miles when in such a splendid traveler as this new auto of the good doctor's?

He made the turn, and presently dashed into the first village. Here he stopped at a tavern long enough to make an examination, to ascertain whether his supply of gasoline might be sufficient to carry him home. He also wished to impress the fact of his having been there upon the hotel keeper. In case anyone tried to cast any doubts upon his story, it might be well to have evidence that he had visited Stagers that night.

And during his brief stop Frank took occasion to look at the object lying in the bottom of the tonneau, and which had seemed to be especially valuable in the eyes of the two unprincipled men.

It was a common variety of grip, made of some good leather. He did not bother opening the same, thinking that possibly Doctor Shadduck might be better qualified than himself for that task, but he placed it at his feet in front.

Once again Frank was on the move. He really hoped that nothing would interfere with his reaching Columbia safely, now that fortune had been so kind.

The road was not the best possible for a machine, and often he had to slow up rather than take unnecessary chances for an accident.

Whenever he thought of the pair of rascals left behind, he laughed. He felt that he could afford to loosen up a little after such a strenuous time. But in his wet condition he found rapid traveling rather unpleasant. True, he had borrowed a heavy coat from the hotel man, to whom he had explained the case in a few sentences; but in spite of this protection, he soon began to shiver.

This compelled him to reduce speed still more. When he reached Plattville the road would be better, and besides, he might find a chance to get a drink of warm coffee or tea, if the eating-house were open at such an hour.

Cheered by this thought, he set his teeth together, resolved to stick it out to the end. But Frank was not apt to forget that ride in a hurry.

It was now a quarter to ten. He found this out by striking a match and looking at his watch, the moon having retired once more behind the clouds. But Frank was under the impression that he must be close to the town now.

"I believe I remember that windmill on the left, and the big water tank on the hill. Yes, Plattville must lie down there in the valley. Now to slip along the down grade. Just seven miles from home; but I wish I was there now," he was saying, as he passed over the crest of the elevation.

Yes, there were many lights in sight, and how they cheered him, after his lonely ride along the wretched road from Stagers. He felt like shouting again, so buoyant had his feelings become. What would Bones say when he learned the truth; and doubtless Doctor Shaddock would be pleased at getting his new car back, damaged as it was.

So Frank, running downhill, crossed a bridge, and came into the town of Plattville. On ordinary nights, doubtless, the place would be quiet enough at this hour; but Saturday was different. Quite a number of persons were on the main street, and cast curious glances at the lone traveler who had entered the town.

Straight to the leading hotel Frank went. He had been here before, and even taken a dinner once upon a time, when his club came over to play the Plattville boys.

A small-sized crowd stood around the door of the bar room. Frank could see that there seemed to be some signs of excitement, though he did not suspect that it could have anything to do with him.

Hardly had he brought the car to a stop when some of the men crowded around, and one of them shouted out:

"Hi! sheriff, here's the identical car you was readin' to us about in that ere dispatch from Columbia. And here's one of the thieves come right in to give hisself up! Surround the machine, boys; don't let the feller escape; and look out, for they do say he's a desprit case! come out here, Sheriff Tucker!"

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE END OF THE CIRCUIT

A tall man came running out of the hotel.

"What's that you say, boys?" he was demanding, as he advanced eagerly.

"Here's luck for you—the very car you said was stolen over in Columbia! See if it ain't, sheriff!" cried the fellow who had done all the shouting.

"It's the same make car, as sure as you live. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be Doc. Shaddock's new one," observed the official, glancing at a yellow paper he gripped in his hand, and which, as he held it close to the one burning headlight of the car, proved to be a telegraph dispatch.

"That's right, sheriff; it is Doctor Shaddock's car," said Frank cheerfully, as he proceeded to alight.

"Hey! he's goin' to try and run for it, sheriff; nab him!" exclaimed the voice.

"You admit that this is the car stolen from Columbia this very night do you?" demanded the stern-faced man laying a hand on Frank's shoulder.

"Of course I do, sheriff; but I'm shivering all over. I've been in Jumper Creek not long ago. Come in with me while I get a cup of hot coffee, and I'll tell you the story. You ought to know me, sheriff; I'm Frank Allen. I've seen you in my father's store more than once."

"What's that. Well, I declare now if it ain't so! This is getting mighty interestin', sure. Here, Dobbs, you watch this car until I come out. Now, my boy, come along with me," said the sheriff.

"All right, sir; just wait a couple of seconds. There's something here in the car that Jim and Bart seemed to think a heap of, and so I wouldn't like to lose sight of it just now."

Saying which Frank bent down and took hold of the little leather bag. He had been surprised before to find it quite heavy, a fact that had convinced him it must hold something which had been stolen from the doctor over in Columbia.

Fortunately there was hot coffee to be obtained. While it was coming Frank entertained the kindly sheriff with a rapid account of what had happened, commencing with the duck hunt, and the finding of the stranded car on the road home.

"Well, I never!" the other kept saying, as he sat there with his eyes glued on the face of the young speaker, and drinking in his words.

When Frank told of how he jumped over the railing of the bridge that spanned Juniper Creek, the sheriff brought his hand down upon his knee with a resounding slap.

"Beats anything I ever heard, I swan if it don't! And they tell me that you captained them boys as played the Clifford football team to a stand this mornin'. I don't wonder at it; they ain't much as could stand up before such pluck! And so you went souse into the creek? Ugh! it must a been a cold bath, Frank. Go on," he exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"Oh! that's about all. I crawled out below, and when they came down to hunt for me, because I'd fixed it so the machine couldn't be run, I just crawled up the bank, jumped aboard, and was off. Jim banged away after me a few times, but he was hurt so he had to use his left hand, and I knew he couldn't hit a barn. That's all. Here comes my coffee; I only hope I don't take cold."

The elated sheriff watched the youth gulp down the hot drink, admiration in his eyes.

"I'll see to it that you have a big fur coat the rest of the way. And I'm goin' along with you, boy, to be in at the finish. This is too good to lose. Ain't had so much excitement in six months. Jim and Bart is loose on the community. I'll just have word sent around so they kin be pulled in if they try to get aboard any train."

Ten minutes later and Frank again jumped into the captured car. He was now warmly clad in a heavy automobile coat that would defy the bracing air as they headed for Columbia, just seven miles distant.

"We'll make it in a quarter of an hour, easy," he remarked, as the sheriff took a seat beside him.

"I reckon we oughter, Frank. I'd sure like to be in your shoes for this. They'll think more of you in Columbia than ever, I reckon," remarked the officer, as they made a flying start, amid a few cheers from the gathered crowd.

"Did you telegraph along the line about those men?" asked Frank,

desirous of seeing justice meted out to Jim and his companion.

"I did, and told the operator at Fayette to pass the good word along everywhere. There's some reward out for the apprehension of them fellows, and its enough to make every chief of police keep busy in hopes of corralin' the same. Now tell me what them men looked like. That job of cuttin' the wires was a cute one. I reckon that Bart he's been servin' his time as a telegraph wireman, and knows all the dodges."

Frank could not decline, although he would have much preferred keeping silent as he drove the big car onward. The sheriff had been so kind to him that he felt as though he could not refuse to aid him in any way possible. So he described both men as nearly as he could, considering what few glimpses he had had of their faces.

The seven miles proved a short ride. Having more confidence in the machine now that the road was fine, and that hard object no longer prodded him in the back, Frank let out quite some speed in places.

"I wonder if Bones and Ralph have gotten home yet?" he was thinking, as the outskirts of Columbia came in sight.

Turning several corners, he arrived in front of Doctor Shadduck's place. The house he saw was all lighted up. And standing in front was the vehicle he and his two chums had used in their little expedition after the ducks of the marsh.

"That tells the story. Bones has arrived ahead of me, after all. Wonder if its struck him that he saw his father's new car, and me in it driving those two precious rascals off so cheerfully?"

Frank chuckled at the thought. Just then there came a big shout, as a figure rushed down the steps of the house.

"Here's the car, dad! And Sheriff Tucker's got one of the thieves in custody, too! He's carrying your bag. Hey, Ralph, come out and see the fun!"

Of course it was Bones, and since Frank was bundled up in that great wolfskin automobile coat, with a hat pulled down over his eyes in place of the cap he had lost in Juniper Creek, it was not strange that the other failed to recognize his comrade.

"Halt! hands up, Bones!" cried Frank, throwing the little leather bag forward menacingly.

"What! great smoke! if it ain't Frank—and he's brought the car and the bag back home! Ralph said he would, just as soon as he heard about it; but I was a doubter. I thought they'd just eat you

alive, Frank, old boy. Where'd you get the coat, and how'd the sheriff happen on you? Did he do the rescue act?" demanded Bones, throwing his arms around the other, enthusiastically.

"Did he? Not if he knew it, young man," replied the officer himself, with a shake of the head; "but let's get inside, and the whole story can be told while Frank warms up again. Your dad must see to it that the boy don't take cold, for he's been in Juniper Creek to-night!"

"Wow! now you have excited my curiosity some, Mr. Sheriff. Hurry in, Frank, and let's hear what happened after you left us. We just got home five minutes ago, and found the whole place upset. Those slick scoundrels worked a confidence game on my governor—left him in a stupor in his private office, after supper, with the door locked, and skipped out with his new car and some valuables, including negotiable stocks worth a good many thousands, and all his expensive new surgical tools that he kept in that glass case, you remember, in his consulting room." And Bones rattled this off at a tremendous rate.

"Oh! I see," exclaimed the sheriff just then; "so that's who Jim and Bart are. A couple of smart ones have been going around visiting doctors upstate this two months past, and stealing their instruments, to sell again in New York. I reckon we'll try to make this their last job, all right."

"But your father—surely he couldn't have been lying there all this time?" observed Frank, wondering how the news could have been wired or phoned over to Plattville if this were so.

"Oh! no; Mr. Willoughby happened to drop over to ask dad something, and when they couldn't get any answer, he broke in the door of father's den. They found him just beginning to come out of his sleep, for, what do you think, those rascals had chloroformed him, as sure as you live," replied Bones.

"I understand now. Of course a general alarm was sent out for the thieves. But they couldn't have reached Fayette if they tried," laughed Frank.

"And why not?" asked Bones, quickly.

"Wires down. Bart, the fellow who wasn't hurt, shinned up a pole, by the aid of a pair of lineman's spurs he carried with him, and cut every blessed wire soon after they made me turn into that road leading to Fayette," replied Frank.

Doctor Shadduck they found pretty much himself. He greeted Frank warmly, as did also Coach Willoughby.

"He's all wet, dad; he's been in Juniper Creek, the sheriff says. There's a story back of it, and I'm just dying to hear it," cried Bones, shoving the other forward.

"First of all, please see if everything is safe here," said Frank, as he thrust the bag into the hands of the doctor.

"Everything they got, so far as I can see, is here. It's wonderful how you happened to get hold of them, and the car too," said the doctor, shaking the boy's hand again warmly.

"There's where you're mistaken, dad; it didn't happen at all, and I'd wager on it that Frank played a right hot game with those two rascals, and beat them out in a square deal," declared Bones, sturdily.

"Bully for you, Bones," remarked the sheriff; "you just bet he did. Wait till you hear the whole story. It's the greatest ever."

Of course Frank related all that had happened to him; but first of all the wise physician insisted upon giving him something that would prevent any ill effects following his cold plunge and subsequent wild ride.

Meanwhile Frank's father and mother were called over, and the story had to be told again for their benefit; though Frank tried to beg off, and declared that after all it had been just good luck that carried him through.

CHAPTER XX

FRANK'S LUCK

Perhaps it was just as well that a day of rest followed that strenuous Saturday.

Frank found himself somewhat stiff and sore when he awoke, and acting under the advice of his father he remained in seclusion the better part of the day. But the story had gone around, and the doorbell of the Allen home was kept busy throughout the whole afternoon.

Half a dozen of Frank's most intimate chums dropped in to hear the story, and Frank finally declared he would have to get it set up in type and copies struck off if the demand kept on.

There were grown people who came also. Among others was Mr. Cuthbert. Frank found his hand trembling a little nervously when he saw him, thinking that possibly Minnie had sent a message; but it seemed that if he had come over at her earnest solicitation the gentleman had been instructed not to mention that fact.

"We believed it was Frank in that car," he said, as he shook hands warmly with the boy; "and I even called out, for some of us thought he looked toward us rather appealingly; but as no answer came we concluded it must have been a mistake. To think we were so close to those wretches, and didn't suspect anything wrong. Have you heard the latest, Mr. Allen, and you Frank?"

"Are they caught?" asked Frank, instantly, jumping at the truth from the expression he saw on the gentleman's face. "So it is said; and I was told that Sheriff Tucker was the one who cornered the pair of rogues after all," replied Mr. Cuthbert.

"Hurrah!" cried Ralph and Paul and the others in a chorus.

"Well, I'm glad that it fell to my friend, the sheriff of the next county. He was mighty good to me and deserves all the reward there is coming," was the remark of the one who was supposed to be the most interested.

He was secretly bitterly disappointed because Minnie had not come over, or asked her father to carry a message. Evidently, whatever it may have been that had come between Minnie and her former friends, the Allens, it was proving an insurmountable barrier.

And on Monday when Frank went to school, as usual, he had to submit to being asked a thousand questions. Often he utterly refused to answer anything further, he became so weary of hearing about the matter.

Minnie appeared as distant as ever. But one thing Frank happened to see that gave him more or less satisfaction; and this was the utter humiliation of Lef Seller.

Lef had been standing around, listening to what was being said; and the air of utter unbelief upon his sneering face told that had he dared he would only too gladly have called the whole story a freak of the imagination; and that in reality the credit belonged to Sheriff Tucker, who had only allowed Frank to assume the laurels because he wanted to get credit at the Allen department store, where he was known to trade.

Just then Minnie happened to pass in company with her new chum, Dottie Warren; and thinking to add a drop of bitterness to Frank's

cup of joy, Lef immediately posted after the two.

There were some words between them, during which it seemed as though Minnie might be accusing Lef of saying something to which she seriously objected. At any rate she walked on with her head held high in the air, while Lef shrugged his shoulders, and not daring to look toward the grinning group of boys, sauntered off.

Still, that new quarrel between the others did not heal the breach that separated old friends. Frank tried to forget, and laughed as merrily as though there was not a cloud on the horizon.

Professor Parke even called Frank into his study and requested him to relate the strange thing that had happened. The head of Columbia High School had a very tender spot in his heart for Frank Allen, not alone because he was a bright pupil, but on account of the clean character he bore among his fellows.

Coach Willoughby was staying over to see the last game of the season. He declared that while he was losing money every day he remained away from his law business, he could not find it in his heart to desert the boys until they had safely landed that beautiful silver cup in a deciding victory over Bellport.

Truth to tell, the old Princeton graduate was a thorough sport, and once he had yielded to the call of the game he could not break away.

"Don't you come out to practice for several days, Frank," he advised, "on Wednesday perhaps, when we start to go over the entire thing again and try new signals, it will be time. There are a few weak spots in the team that need help, and I'm going to devote two afternoons to them exclusively. Wander around, and limber up with walks or a bicycle ride. But please don't employ your spare time rounding up any more rascals, will you?"

"I'll try not to," laughed Frank; "but what's a fellow to do if they will persist in throwing themselves at your head?"

"That's a fact, they did kidnap you, to be sure. Well, next time try and see to it that the other fellow goes into Juniper Brook and not you. That's a dangerous trick at this cold season of the year; and especially taking a long ride afterward in an open car. I wonder you didn't come down with pneumonia, Frank," said the coach, as he threw one arm affectionately across the other's shoulders.

"Oh! everybody was so kind. I had the loan of a coat first, and an old hat; then Sheriff Tucker got me a big shaggy automobile fur coat, which with the hot coffee helped ward off a cold. Finally

Doctor Shaddock dosed me good and hard. Nothing doing in that line for me this time," laughed the boy.

It was on Tuesday afternoon that the time began to drag most heavily on his hands. Paul and Ralph, together with Bones, had gone to the recreation grounds to talk over matters with the coach, and try out some new plays. Frank really knew of no one whom he cared to look up just then.

A reaction seemed to have set in after his recent excitement, and things were most woefully dull. The weather still held dry and fair to a degree that was considered extraordinary for November, usually so dismal with the approach of winter.

"I wonder if it wouldn't be worth while to take a spin on the wheel," he mused as he considered the matter; "the chances are the weather will change any day now, and then good-bye to wheeling for the season. Besides, I really believe I'd like to turn down that road to Fayette, and take another look at that old bridge. There are a few things I don't quite understand about that affair."

The thought aroused him. Again he felt the blood circulating through his veins with the old-time vigor; the stagnation had departed, and it was with considerable elation that he hurried to get his bicycle.

The fact that the bridge was a matter of ten miles or more away did not give him cause for worry. He could easily make it in an hour or less, and be back long before suppertime.

As he passed the school building he waved his hand to old Soggy, the janitor and custodian, who was busily engaged with his daily duties.

"Off after another lot, are ye?" laughed the good-natured old fellow; "well, this time bring 'em in yourself, and don't be botherin' no poor sheriff to help out. You ought to be ashamed, my boy!"

Frank knew that old Soggy would have his joke, and he only laughed in response. That was the one thing objectionable in doing anything out of the ordinary run; every person thought they had a right, either to make a hero out of him, or else sneer at the story as something like the accepted fish yarn.

His wheel was in good shape, as always; the road seemed much better for a bicycle than it had been for a car, and with the bracing atmosphere made a combination difficult to surpass. Before the hour was up he had dropped off at the bridge, and stood there leaning on the rail looking down.

"H'm! after all, it was a good thing I knew so much about this same place. If I'd jumped ten feet further along I'd have come slap down on that ugly looking bunch of rocks that stick their noses up above the water. Juniper is low, like all the other streams around here, after this dry fall. But I knew there was a deep pool right under and below the bridge."

So he mused as in imagination his eye followed his course after reaching the water. He could see just where he had crawled out, as Jim discovered later, when the fugitive was already half-way back to the road again.

"He had to run uphill, and that's one reason why he couldn't head me off, as Bart wanted him to do. Then that lame arm prevented him from shooting decently. On the whole, I guess I was mighty lucky," he concluded.

After lingering around for a short time he once more mounted his wheel and headed back toward Columbia. There were short-cuts that he knew from former usage, by means of which several miles might be saved. Something seemed to beckon him along this course, though he hardly understood why he should want to shorten his run when he was out for the exercise and air.

It was while he was traversing a farmer's lane that would bring him out on the other road, and save two miles around, that Frank for the first time noticed some one moving across a field, and heading almost directly toward him. He noted the fact with some surprise, because he happened to know that the farmer was the possessor of a very vicious bull, which he often allowed the freedom of that very pasture, in the summer and fall, for exercise, so that the boys of Columbia always went around when making for the old "swimming hole."

He had noticed the animal only a couple of minutes before, trotting around back of the haystacks that ran along one end of the field. If he ever caught sight of that feminine figure crossing his preserves there would surely something be bound to happen.

Frank, impelled by some sense of coming trouble, came to a stop and caught hold of the high rail fence to hold himself on his wheel while he looked. Somehow there seemed something wonderfully familiar about the figure of the tripping maid; and his heart seemed to almost stand still as she raised her head to look around, and he discovered that it was Minnie Cuthbert, evidently on the way to visit an uncle, who lived a short distance beyond Farmer Blodgett.

Just as he made this interesting discovery he heard a dull roar that struck a note of dismay at the door of his heart. The savage bull, whom every one feared, had discovered the fair trespasser on his preserves, and was coming on the run!

CHAPTER XXI

THE LIFTING OF THE CLOUD

"This way, Minnie! Run as fast as you can!"

The girl had looked back and discovered the advancing bull, which sight caused her to shriek and became panic-stricken. Fortunately the animal pursued peculiar tactics while bearing down upon his expected victim. Running forward for a short distance, he would stop to bellow furiously and toss up the turf with his short horns, upon which gilt balls had been fastened by the farmer owner.

Frank had jumped the fence like a flash, and was already rushing toward Minnie. She caught sight of him, and naturally changed her course so as to head in his direction. Perhaps just then she hardly knew who it was coming to her assistance; but turned to any port in a storm.

When they met it was at a distance of possibly thirty yards from the fence. Frank immediately clutched her arm and began to hurry her toward the haven of safety as rapidly as he could.

"Oh! Frank, he is coming faster!" gasped the girl, who had been constrained to look back over her shoulder toward the threatening danger.

"Never mind! Run! run" cried Frank, trying to instill new courage in her heart.

At the same time he knew full well that they would never be able to reach the fence and climb over before the enraged animal came up. Something else must be done. How could he attract the attention of the bull to himself while Minnie clambered over?

The question was not difficult to solve. She was, by the strangest accident in the world, wearing a red sweater that buttoned down the front. In other days they were known as Cardigan jackets, and Frank could easily remember how charming Minnie had looked many a time the previous winter in this same garment.

It was this that was adding fuel to the rage of the angry bull, always attracted by a flaming color. Frank without regard to the feelings of the astonished girl caught hold of this outer apparel, and with one effort ripped the buttons loose. It was no time for courtesy, nor could he waste a precious second in explaining just why he did this strange thing.

Another effort and the sweater was in his hands. Minnie seemed to realize by now what he had in his mind, for a weak little smile appeared on her white face as she looked up at him.

"Run straight to the fence and climb over! I'll follow you, but never mind me! Quick, Minnie, do as I say!" he exclaimed.

There was unconscious authority in his voice, just as when he called to his players on the diamond or on the gridiron. Minnie ran on, obeying his instructions thus far. She undoubtedly expected that Frank meant to cast the offensive red sweater on the ground, so as to attract the attention of the beast for a dozen seconds, time enough to allow of his finding safety beyond the barrier.

As she neared the high rail fence she turned her head again to look. To her horror she saw Frank standing there, waving the scarlet jacket wildly to and fro. He was challenging the oncoming bull to make a run at him, actually endeavoring to attract the animal's attention, so as to give Minnie ample time to escape.

Even as she stood there with quaking knees, staring, she saw Frank suddenly and nimbly jump aside, and avoid the first mad rush of the bull.

"Oh! Frank; run! run! He will kill you!" she shrieked, wringing her hands hysterically; all the past forgotten in that one minute of terror.

"Get over the fence! Get over the fence! The longer you delay the worse for me! Climb over, Minnie!" came back the answering shout, as Frank poised himself to repeat his former tactics.

Crying, she obeyed, though it seemed as though her half-blinded eyes could hardly show her how to catch hold of the various bars; but presently she had succeeded in gaining the outside of the enclosure, and through the spaces between the rails she looked again, her heart almost standing still with dread.

Frank was still on his feet, though he had been put to his best efforts in order to escape those threatening horns.

"Now run, Frank! I'm over the fence!" she cried at the top of her voice.

"All right! I'm coming!" he replied, as best he could, for his antagonist just then made another vicious lunge, and it was only by a shave that the athletic boy managed to escape those golden balls that surmounted his massive head.

Now that he had accomplished the main object of his labor Frank could devote his energies toward his own escape. When the bull passed him he turned and bolted in the direction of the friendly fence. The distance was too great to think of making it in one run. As he flew along he expected to hear the pounding of the bull's hoofs on the hard turf behind him, nor was he mistaken.

"He's coming, Frank! Oh! be careful!"

Minnie was calling this in trembling tones, and yet Frank paid little or no attention to her warning, for he had to depend upon his own instincts just then. At the proper instant he whirled around. Already he had stamped the situation in his mind, and knew to a fraction just how far away the fence lay.

Again he managed to escape the rush of the beast. Had he been an experienced Spanish bull-fighter he could hardly have done better. And again he changed his position. All he wanted was one more chance, and he knew he could win out. This time the animal, growing more and more enraged, came within a foot of striking the boy, who was beginning to get winded with his efforts.

"Now!" cried Minnie, who seemed to recognize the opening when it appeared.

Already was Frank in full motion, sprinting for the near-by fence with all his might and main. He reached it even as the bull was bearing down after him. One tremendous effort and he had mounted the rails to fall in a heap on the other side—safe! The bull came to a sudden halt within the enclosure, and vented his fury in more bellowing and tearing up of the turf.

Minnie was at the side of her champion in a moment.

"Oh! Frank, are you hurt?" she exclaimed, as she caught hold of him in her anxiety; and almost breathless as he was, the boy could not help feeling a thrill of satisfaction at the prospect of the breach between them being healed in this wonderful manner.

"Not a bit, Minnie, only short of breath. Here's your sweater, safe and sound. Excuse me for taking it in that rude way, but you see there wasn't much time for explanations," he managed to say,

as he started to put it on her again, an operation to which she submitted with pleasure.

"And now," said Frank, as arm in arm they started to walk away from the scene of the adventure, he rolling his wheel as he went, "what was all this trouble about, Minnie? What terrible thing have I done to make you treat both Helen and myself so? Neither of us have the least idea, and she's very unhappy over it. Please let me know."

Minnie looked troubled, and yet a gleam of hope began to appear in her gray eyes.

"Oh! if you only could explain it away, I'd be so glad, Frank; so glad," she said.

"Is it anything that Lef Seller has been saying about me?" he asked, shortly.

"No, no. This is a matter that concerns only you and I. It was about a letter you wrote, a note rather, that was intended for Helen, and which—Oh! I don't know what to make of it, I've tried so hard not to believe you meant it; but every time I look at that note it stands out so plain, and gives me a shock."

She clung to his arm, and let her head sink as she spoke. Frank knew that she was crying softly, too, and he was the most mystified boy that could be found.

"A note that I wrote to Helen, and about you! Why, Minnie, surely you must be mistaken. I don't ever remember doing anything of the kind!" he declared.

"But I've got it still, Frank, right here in my little bag. Ten times I tried to destroy it, and just couldn't," she exclaimed, looking up at him.

"Let me see it, please," he said, his eyes filled with wonder. With trembling hands she opened the little bag, to which she had unconsciously clung through all her recent peril. From this she took a folded piece of paper, that had apparently been frequently handled, to judge from the creases.

When Frank examined what was written upon it his face first took on a look of astonishment, and then amusement.

"I see," he said, slowly, "this is evidently about half of a page, and torn in a diagonal way. Notice Minnie that it is only a portion of a note. There is another half, which will give it an entirely different version! I admit that I wrote this note

to Helen in school one day. Then I changed my mind, and tore it in half, intending to destroy it. Where did you happen to find this piece, Minnie?"

"On the floor in the hall. Soggy was sweeping out when I went back for something I had forgotten. Just by accident I saw your writing, and unconsciously stooped to pick it up. Oh! Frank, what a cruel shock it gave me," she said.

"Well, as near as I can remember, I tried to thrust both pieces into my desk. This one must have fallen to the floor either then or later, and was swept out. Perhaps the other half may still be there, Minnie! Will you go with me around to the school now? The sooner this strange thing is cleared up the better."

"If you say so, I'll be glad to go, Frank. But it's enough for me to hear you say that it was not intended to warn Helen against me," she replied, smiling up through her tears.

"Wait and see the proof first," laughed Frank.

They reached the high school building in due time. Soggy, the janitor, was just about locking up, and upon hearing their request readily allowed them to enter. Going straight to his desk, Frank fumbled around inside eagerly, and then with an exclamation of triumph drew out something.

"There, look!" he exclaimed, as he fitted the ragged edges of the two pieces of paper together on the top of the desk. "You see they match perfectly. Now read out loud what I was writing to my sister that day, and changed my mind, intending to talk with her when we got home."

And Minnie read this:

HELEN

Don't believe all you hear. In the first place it's nonsense to think that you could expect the truth from one so shallow as Minerva Stone. I never liked her. She may seem all right as a friend, but I'd advise you to have little to do with her. She says one thing to your face and another to your back. I'm afraid she's deceptive, and that's about the meanest trait any girl can have. Better let your new friendship gradually cool, and drop her altogether. Honestly, to tell the truth, I think Minnie Cuthbert ought to be enough chum for you.

FRANK.

When she finished this she looked up at him with tear-steeped eyes.

"We're friends again once more, Minnie, are we not." he asked, smiling.

"Yes, good friends; true friends, I hope Frank!" she replied as they clasped hands, and a pair of happy gray eyes looked up shyly into the darker orbs of the boy.

CHAPTER XXII

HOW BELLPORT BUCKED THE LINE

As so frequently happens, Thanksgiving Day was overcast and cold, the air having a tang as of threatening snow.

"Bully football weather!" shouted the fans, as they crowded into the great park-like field at Columbia; the toss of a coin during the week having given Frank's team the privilege of playing on their home grounds.

There was even a greater crowd present than on the occasion of the game with Clifford. This struggle was to effectually decide the ownership of that coveted silver cup, and the championship of the tri-school league for the season.

Everybody who could possibly get there was present. The grandstand seemed to be a waving mass of color with the various little flags, and the gay wraps of the school girls, intensely interested in this battle of brawn and skill between their brothers.

Naturally those from Clifford gathered together for the most part; and Bellport had sent an enormous delegation to whoop things up for her sturdy team.

Indeed, those Bellport players did look like a serious proposition as they scampered back and forth across the field before the time for play had arrived. Many a timid heart among Columbia's friends felt as though the chances were very much against such a victory as had been won over Clifford.

Such enthusiasm as abounded! Cheers arose everywhere. Bands of students went about, headed by some valiant cheer captain, and made all other sounds insignificant beside their clamor, as they chanted their school yell in common, or sang the favorite songs of their classes.

"We're going to see a hot old game, anyhow!" cried Buster Billings, as he sat on the bench in the grandstand, being reckoned of little account as a football player, however much he might shine in baseball.

"What's Bellport's line-up? Seems to me nearly every face here is familiar; and I reckon their entire baseball squad has qualified for the gridiron," remarked another observer.

"Just as you say, there's not a fellow missing," sighed Buster; "but then, none of them happens to be gifted with the left that fastened its fatal clutches on me at an early age. I'd give the world to play football, but though they've tried me several times, it's always back to the scrap heap for poor Buster boy."

"Well, they left me out this time, too; my first half in the game with Clifford wasn't a howling success. But at any rate I'm a sub, and if a few of the boys get carried off the field they may call on me," and Jack Eastwick patted his chest in anticipation of the slaughter to come.

For the concluding tussle of the High School League the contending teams presented this line-up:

COLUMBIA.

Comfort
F.B.

Allen, Captain. West.
R.H.B. L.H.B.

Wallace.
Q.B.

Shadduck. Oakes. Harper. Bird. Daly. Shay. Morris.
R.E. R.T. R.G. Center. L.G. L.T. L.E.

BELLPORT.

Clay. Coddling. Smith, Jr. Lacy. Alpers. Macy. Smith, Sr.
L.E. L.T. L.G. Center. R.G. R.T. R.E.

Snodgrass.
Q.B.

Banghardt. Bardwell.
L.H.B. R.H.B.

Lee, Captain.
F.B.

The same referee officiated who had managed the game with Clifford so well. And the coach of each team was busily engaged giving the last instructions, since the time specified for the opening kick-off was very near.

Columbia was not boisterous, but there was a look of grim determination visible on the faces of Frank Allen and his fellows that counted for much.

"It's better to shout after you're out of the woods, fellows," said the captain, as he drew his squad around him for a last word ere going upon the field.

This time Frank was lucky, and won the toss. He immediately selected the goal from which the cold November wind blew, as that gave Columbia considerable advantage to start with, though it would be evened up later when the second half brought about a change in base. Still, by then the wind might have died out, and the advantage lost.

Lee opened matters with a beautiful kick, but the oval was captured, and it came Columbia's turn.

Comfort smashed out a fine one, sending the oval far down the enemy's territory. And so fast did the other Columbia fellows chase after it, that when Bellport secured the ball through a clever catch, they found no chance to do anything more than return the kick.

After that the fight was on. Columbia sent the ball back into the territory of the enemy, and at such a bewildering angle, thanks to the wonderful spiral kick of Jack Comfort, that the player who attempted to clasp it in his arms allowed it to get away.

"Go it, you tigers!" shrieked many in the crowd, as they saw several Columbia men making furious efforts to reach the rolling oval before any of the enemy could throw themselves upon it.

But Coddling was there in time to drop on the ball, though hardly had he done so than Shadduck landed on his back, together with various others belonging to both teams.

Now Bellport had the ball, and there was great curiosity to know what success they would have in bucking the Columbia line. Report had it that never had Bellport been so strong in her line of attack; and Clifford enthusiasts had warned their neighbors of what was in store for them this day.

Bellport rushed into the fray. The artful Lacy, he who had played such a clever game as shortstop in the baseball tournament the preceding season, snapped the ball to Snodgrass, who plunged straight for the middle of the Columbia line backed up by a solid wedge that seemed capable of carrying the heavy quarter-back through.

There was a confused mass of struggling players, and a great cloud of dust, in which figures were to be seen pushing this way and that.

[Illustration: THERE WAS A CONFUSED MASS OF STRUGGLING PLAYERS.]

"He's down!" shouted hundreds as the dust passed off with the wind, and they could see the situation again.

"But he took several yards with him, and Bellport has the ball. What d'ye think of that sledgehammer way of carrying things, eh? Wait till Snodgrass and Banghardt and Bardwell get working together, and you'll see the Columbia defense crumple up like dead leaves in a fire!"

Of course it was a Bellport admirer who said this; but those who heard only laughed and waved their Columbia flags the more fiercely. They had full confidence in their boys, and knew what Frank could get out of them in an emergency.

Once more the teams were lined up, watching each other like so many wild animals, hungry and eager. Lee shouted out some signals in his sonorous voice. It sounded very like the previous set, but only those in the secret could know whether the slight difference meant a new change of action or not.

Then the ball was put in play. Like lightning it passed from Lacy's hands. Snodgrass made out to receive it, and once more plunged for the center, as if intending to break through, with several of his fellows backing him up. The deception was so complete that the vast majority of the audience really believed he carried the ball with him.

So a great whoop went up when he was dragged down by one of the Columbia tacklers.

"But look at Smith, Sr., running! He's got the ball, fellows! He's after a touchdown, and he won't be happy till he gets it! Wow! that's going some!"

"He'll never make it! There's West in the way, and Allen bearing down on him like a pirate ship under full sail! What did I tell

you? That Ralph West is the best tackier in the county! They made no mistake when they booted Tony Gilpin out and made room for West. Where is the ball now, fellows?"

"Under Smith, Sr., and on Columbia's twenty-five yard line!" admitted Buster Billings, unwillingly.

"And Bellport has still another chance to carry it over! If the wind was favorable Lee could boot the pigskin across your goal, and not half try. But I guess they'd rather depend on breaking through, or getting around the ends. Keep your eyes on those boys, for they're as full of schemes as an egg is of meat."

"That sounds encouraging. I was afraid our fellows might have too easy a snap, and disappoint their friends by not half trying. Just wait yourself, Bellport. It was the same thing in baseball last summer; and yet Columbia flies the banner, all right. You may be treated to some surprises yourself, old chap," remarked Buster, condescendingly.

Again the scrimmage was on. The Columbia tigers were so fast on their feet that Clay, who got the ball this time, was unable to accomplish much before they pounced upon him and bore him heavily to the ground.

"How's that?" shouted Buster, "our fellows just eat up such easy plays. Bring out some of your fancy stunts, and do something, can't you?"

Three minutes later and the ball came to Columbia. It was time, for Bellport had, by a series of bull-like rushes, carried it over the twenty-yard line.

"Now to get back some of that lost ground. There they go! See Shaddock run, will you? He's Mercury, with wings on his feet! Look at him dodge that left guard! Say, he's going to make it yet, as sure as you live he is! Bully boy, Bones! Go it! Go it, you darling! Oh! what a heart-ache I've got! He's over the line, boys; over the line! A touchdown for us to start things!" and Buster danced in his excitement, like a rubber ball.

"No he ain't," snarled a Bellport backer, "they downed him before he got there! Notice that just three of our fellows are settin' on his back. He tried mighty hard, but they nailed him a little too soon!"

"You're mistaken. He held the ball over the line, and it counts for Columbia, as you can see if you look again," remarked Mr. Allen, who was sitting near.

"That's so," grumbled the discomfited Bellport man, "and with that wind it's goin' to be as easy as pie to boot the ball over for a goal. Shucks! what ails our fellows to-day? They never did sloppy work like that with Clifford."

"There was a reason, they say. Clifford claims that her signals were sold to Bellport. Anyhow, there's going to be nothing of that kind to-day, but clean fighting. There goes Frank to kick goal, and he'll do it, too," answered Buster.

The goal was made easily, thanks to the favoring wind. Then again the ball was put into play, and fierce ran the rivalry. Sometimes the fighting was on Columbia territory, and then again the tide of battle shifted until it was Bellport's line that was threatened.

Now and then the cheers of the enthusiasts arose and swelled over that fiercely-contested field like thunder. Back and forth they swung, both now doggedly determined. A score of plays were made that brought out cheers from the spectators, regardless of school affiliations; for they liked clean football, and could applaud clever work, even on the other side.

When the heart-rending agony was finally relieved by the referee's whistle announcing the end of the first half, that score of six by Columbia was the entire counting!

CHAPTER XXIII

WON BY FOUR INCHES

"See 'em getting Hail Columbia from their coach because they made that fool play! Next time it'll be different," growled the unhappy Bellport backer.

"I hope so," replied the cheerful and optimistic Buster, composedly.

Frank, as he came in from the field, dusty and disheveled, looked eagerly at a certain part of the grandstand where Helen sat alongside her chum Minnie. Immediately both girls waved their flags at him, and called out something, which, of course, was utterly drowned in the furious shouting that arose.

But Frank would ten times rather have heard what they said than to listen to the cheers of the multitude; for he knew that love and friendship endure, while the admiration of the crowd is as fickle

as the weather, praising one day and on the next condemning.

Both teams held earnest consultations during the interval between the halves of the game. New plays were planned whereby advantage might be taken of some supposed weak spot in the line of the enemy's defense. And singular to say, not a single change had as yet been made in the line-up, something remarkable indeed, when in other days half a dozen casualties must have resulted from those furious clashes. Doubtless there were those who suffered in silence, fearing lest they be taken out, if their real condition were made known; and every man was wild to finish in what promised to be the most exciting football game that had ever happened in the tri-school league.

"There they go to take position. Now for another heart-breaking period of suspense. But they've got the advantage. It's an up-hill fight for Bellport; six to nothing, and half the time gone. If they can only keep the others from scoring it isn't necessary to make any more," said Buster to Jack Eastwick.

"No chance for me to get into this game. That Shay is a sticker. But I candidly admit he's something of an improvement on myself, and I hope he holds out. But mark me, Buster, there's going to be some changes before the game ends," remarked the other, confidentially.

"What makes you say that, Jack?" asked his friend, curiously.

"Because those Bellport bulldogs have got blood in their eyes now. The coach has been combing them down, and they're just bound to carry things before them, or die trying. It's going to be hotter than ever, Buster."

"But Frank has been saying things, too. And our boys have the benefit of the experience of one who was a terror on the lines of Princeton, my especial friend, Coach Willoughby," remarked Buster, proudly. "He's set 'em up a few capers that are going to surprise our good Bellport friends. I'm game to stack up on Columbia. I only hope some of those Bellport players like Bardwell and Banghardt don't try foul tactics on us, like they did in baseball, that's all."

"The referee has his eye on 'em. He has been warned, and let them try it at their peril. If those two dangerous half-backs are put off the team it'll go to pieces in a hurry, mark my words. That's what I'm expecting it to end in."

But Jack was mistaken. Bellport knew the folly of attempting anything that had a suspicious look. Brawn and strategy and agility must carry the day, no matter which side won.

Shrilly blew the whistle, and once more the ball, yellow no longer, for it had been ground into the dirt, sailed through the air. There was an exchange of punts that ended when Bellport held the pigskin on her forty-yard line and the signal came for a play around Columbia's left end.

"Watch out now, fellows!" warned Frank Allen. "Don't let 'em get through, or past you."

"Eighteen-twenty-seven-sixty-all together-fourteen!" chanted Snodgrass, and back the ball was snapped to him. In a flash he passed it to Bardwell, who started as though to circle Shaddock at right end. And then that trick, so often worked, so effective when it comes out right, and so futile when it does not, was tried. Bardwell passed the ball to Banghardt on the run, and the left-half started for the end where Morris was.

How it happened none of the Columbia players, not even Morris himself, could tell, but he was drawn in by the double pass and his end was free to be circled by Banghardt. Even the Columbia two half-backs were fooled, and no excuse for it, either, as they admitted afterward, for they had often worked the play themselves. Be that as it may, Banghardt was past, and with no one between him and the goal line but Comfort.

But the full-back was a tower of strength, and with eagerly outstretched hands he waited the oncoming of the left half.

"Get him, Comfort! Get him!" pleaded the crowd.

Straight at the full-back came Banghardt, and then, with a sudden shifting, he turned aside, and Comfort grasped only the empty air, while the man with the ball, amid the wild, excited cries of the adherents of his school, while the grandstands fairly rocked under the impact of thousands of stamping feet, touched down the pigskin.

"Touchdown! Touchdown for Bellport!" howled the enthusiasts, while the dazed Columbia team crawled out of the scrimmage and wondered how it had happened. So, too, did some of the Bellport players themselves wonder, for the play had come like a flash from a clear sky.

The goal was easily kicked, tying the score, and then the big crowd sat up and wondered what would come next.

"It's going to be a hot game all right!" was the general verdict.

"Here's where we beat you, Columbia!" called a Bellport supporter, as he turned to Buster with a grin on his face. "Oh we've got you

in a hole dead sure. We've got your number."

"Oh, have you!" retorted Buster. "Wait. Don't count your chickens until they're out of the woods."

After the kick-off there followed some line smashing tactics on both sides. Once Bellport was penalized for off-side play, and once Columbia lost the ball for holding in the line. Bellport was later penalized ten yards for a second offense in off-side work, and then the players seemed to realize the importance of being careful, and they got down to business.

How they ever stood the smashing, banging tactics, the fierce tackling, the eager runs, the line bucking, the giving and taking, only one who has played football, and who knows the fierce joy of the game, can understand. Nervous women cried out in alarm as they saw the struggling mass and heap of boyish humanity. There were several times when the play had to be stopped to allow the dashing of cold water over some unlucky chap, to bring him out of a half faint, and the number of lads who lost their wind, and had to have it pumped into them by artificial respiration was many.

But no one was seriously hurt, though Coddling had to leave the field because of a broken finger and Harper was replaced at the Columbia right guard because he was so disabled from a fierce piling-on of players that he was useless in the line.

Ten minutes more to play, and the score tied! Back and forth the players had surged, up and down the field, now kicking, now plunging into each other's line, now circling the ends. It was the most fiercely contested game that had ever been played in the league. The Columbia-Clifford contest was as nothing to it.

"Hold 'em, Tigers! Don't let 'em score again! Rip out another touchdown! Go at 'em!"

How the cohorts of Columbia begged and pleaded! No less did the friends of Bellport.

A touchdown, a field goal, or a safety for either side now would win the game and the championship. Which would it be? To which side would it go. A thousand admirers of either team asked those questions.

Bellport had the ball, and had, by a smashing rush, carried it three yards through Columbia's line. It was on the latter's forty-yard line now, but it had been there before, and had not advanced much farther. That last attack, though, had had power behind it.

"Look out!" warned Frank. "They may do us!"

The play looked to be another rush on the part of Bellport, and with fierce and eager eyes her opponents watched for the slightest advantage. Bardwell came on with the ball like a stone from a catapult. He hit the line between Shay and Daly, but he did not go through. With desperate energy, borne of despair, the guard and tackle held.

And then, wonder of wonders, probably because he was dazed by the impact with which he hit the line, Bardwell dropped the ball. Like a flash Daly had fallen on it.

"Our ball!" he fairly howled, and when the crowd knew that they went wild—that is, the Columbia contingent.

But the time had slipped by. There were but three minutes more of play.

"Quick now, fellows. Line up! Get a touchdown!" begged Frank. "Break the tie!"

Into the play plunged the doughty captain himself for a ten-yard gain, for the shock of surprise at their misfortune still held the Bellport players spellbound.

"Another like that!" cried the throng.

A fake kick netted eight yards additional, and then followed more line bucking.

"A goal from the field," suggested Wallace, when time was taken out to allow Alpers to get back his end.

"No, straight up the field—rush it!" ordered Allen.

Once more he made a slight gain.

"One minute more!" warned the time-keeper.

"Oh, can we do it!" panted Wallace.

He called on Ralph West for a straight plunge between guard and tackle. The plucky left-half drew a long breath, and gathered himself for the tremendous energy he knew would be needed. They were but four feet from the goal line. The ball must be shoved over if human lungs and muscles could stand the terrific strain a moment longer.

Amid a solemn silence came the signal. Like a shot West plunged forward, with the ball tightly tucked under his arm.

Into the line he went, smash bang! Oh, what a great hole there was torn for him by the strenuous Shay and Daly! Through it West went, and in vain did Lee and Bardwell try to stop him. As well try to stop a rushing torrent as the Columbia players now. They were going to have that touchdown or tear up the goal posts.

With the quickness that argued how well he knew the need of haste, West placed the ball down beyond and over his head after he had fallen in a fierce tackle. Over the line—over—ah, was it over? The chalk-mark was obliterated at this point. Was it over?

"Touchdown!" howled the Columbia players madly.

"Never. It's not over!" retorted Bellport's men fiercely.

There was a wild dispute, and in the midst of it the whistle blew, ending the game.

Who had won? It would take a measurement to decide. The linesmen came hurrying up, while the crowd chaffed at the delay and did not know who to cheer.

Anxiously the measure was taken, and while hearts wildly beat the announcement was made.

"The ball is over by four inches. Columbia wins the touchdown!"

"Oh, wow!"

"Hurrah!"

"We win!"

"Eleven to six!"

"The silver cup is ours!"

And then such a riot of wild cries, such stamping of feet, such waving of banners and streamers of ribbon! The great championship game was won by Columbia! Columbia!

"Columbia! Columbia the Gem of the Gridiron!" came the eager shouts. And the players filed off the field.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MESSAGE FROM TOKIO.—CONCLUSION

That Thanksgiving night Columbia went wild.

True, the first snow of the year began sifting down, and the ground was covered with a white mantle; but such a little thing as that could not quench the ardor of those happy fellows. And so for hours the town resounded with cheers and songs, while in several places great bonfires along the banks of the Harrapin told of the general rejoicing.

How could they help it when Columbia High had completed the greatest year in all her history—first there was the winning of the baseball championship; then came the hotly contested inter-school rowing races, in which she won new laurels with her young athletes; and last but not least, both Clifford and Bellport had gone down to bitter defeat before her gridiron warriors!

Frank would have begged off, but even the girls insisted that it would be a shame to spoil the fun. So he had to join in the festivities, and shout with the rest of Columbia's brave sons and fair daughters, as the gigantic procession wound in and out through all the town, greeted by answering cheers from the equally enthusiastic fathers and mothers from the windows.

"There's only one more thing we ought to scoop in this year," said Paul Bird, as he and Frank stood with the girls and watched the antics of Herman Hooker and his band of comical players, wherein the most astonishing stunts were indulged in with amazing instruments manufactured for the occasion.

"You mean the hockey championship, I suppose?" returned Frank, smiling.

"Yes, and from the expression on your face, old fellow, I'm of the opinion right now that you mean to have a look-in on that later on when the river is frozen again."

Frank laughed and nodded.

"Some of us have been talking it over. You know Clifford has been unbeaten in that line for years. They have the best skaters up there in the State, they claim. If we think to accept their standing challenge this year it's up to us to put a better team on the ice than last season," he remarked.

"Well, they did snow you under, for a fact. But experience showed that there were two fellows on your team who ought never to have been there. They lost the match through their clumsiness. Isn't that so, girls?" demanded Paul.

"Everybody said so," declared Helen; and Minnie nodded her head to indicate that she was of the same opinion.

"Then it must be so," laughed Frank. "But those fellows are not on the team this year. We've been keeping quiet about who is going to play. The committee have selected a certain number of players, and the best will be chosen in time. Mark my words, Paul, we mean to try and give Clifford the biggest kind of a fight this winter. Whether we can win or not depends on many things. Time will tell."

And time did tell, for what manner of hockey was played that winter on the ice-clad surface of the neighboring Harrapin can be found recorded in the next volume of this series of High School sports, entitled: "The Boys of Columbia High on the Ice; or, Out for the Hockey Championship."

When the first of December came around shortly after that great Thanksgiving Day game, Ralph West sought out Frank once more. His face told of excitement, and Frank was consequently ready to expect some important news.

"Did you get your usual monthly allowance from Uncle Jim's office?" he asked.

"Yes, yesterday. I suppose he left word before he went that it should be sent while he was away. But I've heard from him direct," replied Ralph, his face glowing with the eager light of anticipated happiness.

"You have? A letter from China or Russia or Siberia, which?"

"You're away off, Frank. This was a cablegram. I just got it at the office, for I have wandered in there often in hopes of such a thing, and know the operator. It was from Tokio, and I suppose your Uncle Jim must have followed Mrs. Langworthy and her brother Arnold Musgrove there. Perhaps they gave up all hope of getting to Russia through China. I don't know how that is, but here's what it says," and he handed a message to Frank, who glanced down at these words:

"Leave here next steamer for States. Mrs. Langworthy accompanies me. Keep up a good heart, for there is much joy in store for you.
JAMES DECATUR ALLEN."

"Hurrah! that's glorious news, old fellow! From my heart I

congratulate you! Now, I know Uncle Jim well enough to feel sure that he'd never cable like that unless he was absolutely positive of his ground. Like as not, that monster of an Arnold—why wasn't his name Benedict like the Revolutionary traitor, has confessed; for you don't notice his name among the expected travelers."

"Well, I don't know how I'll ever be able to stand the weeks that must pass before they get here in Columbia. You must help me, Frank, you and Helen," declared Ralph, gripping the hand of his chum almost savagely.

"We will, all right. The time will fly, because you're anticipating happy news. Just think of the extravagance of Uncle Jim, sending nearly thirty words in a cablegram. It costs twenty-five cents a word to London, and goodness knows how many times that from Tokio here. He knows what he's doing though, and I warrant you it's the lady's money that pays for that cablegram," whereupon Ralph impulsively raised the paper to his lips and kissed it, then blushed like a girl.

With such good and true friends around him, it may be sure that Ralph was not going to be left alone much of the time. They made him join in all their sports, and with the coming of winter a dozen new things presented themselves to the boys and girls of old Columbia High.

Minnie was happier than ever, since that little shadow was removed, and her former warm, friendly intercourse with Frank and Helen renewed. Many times she thought of how valiantly Frank had stood there, holding the attention of that terrible bull, so as to allow her time to clamber out of harm's way; and never without a shudder, as she contemplated what a terrible thing might have happened had the boy slipped when avoiding those rushes of the enraged animal.

Never would she allow that old red sweater to leave her possession. The very sight of it always made her sigh with satisfaction. It had undoubtedly had much to do with the savage attack of that animal, whose pasture she so unwittingly invaded; but had that event not happened, perhaps the mystery of that torn paper would never have been explained.

Nothing could again cause her to ever doubt the fidelity of Frank Allen; and to the end of the chapter they must always be, as she had said that day, "good friends, true friends!"

THE END.