

RALPH BARBOUR

CENTER RUSH
ROWLAND

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Ralph Henry Barbour

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CHAPTER I

ROWLAND ARRIVES

“Say, where’s this school located?”

The speaker removed a straw hat, rather the worse for wear, and mopped a damp forehead, while a youngster with a freckled face, who was engaged in lowering an awning in front of a grocery store, paused and viewed the inquirer with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. Eventually he jerked a thumb northward. “Two blocks straight ahead,” he answered.

“All right. Thanks.” The other settled his hat on his head again and went on. He was a big, deep-chested, broad-shouldered youth, rugged-looking, bronzed of face and hands. He carried himself a trifle awkwardly, as though conscious of being a bit too large for his seventeen years. Under the straw hat the hair was warmly brown and a pair of calm dark-grey eyes looked out with level gaze. He was good-looking without being handsome, for, while his nose was exceptionally straight and well made, the mouth, turned up at the corners in a quiet smile, was too wide for beauty, just as the chin was too square.

The street hereabouts mingled houses and shops, but beyond the next intersecting thoroughfare, which a sign declared to be Main Street, the shops ceased. On the boy’s left was an elm-shaded cemetery filled with slate headstones, mossy and ancient, and beyond it was a wooden church with a square, stunted steeple. Burying ground and churchyard continued for the next block, while across the tree-lined street, pretentious dwellings peered over white picket fences or rather straggly lilac hedges with an air of strict New England propriety.

The boy in the straw hat walked slowly, partly because the day was excessively warm for the last of September, and partly because he was curious to see this place that was to be his home for the next nine months. So far it was attractive enough and not greatly different from Cheney Falls, which was the little Maine town from which he had departed yesterday evening. Of course, one should scarcely expect to find much difference between towns barely four hundred miles apart, but he had never been so far away from home before and had looked on Massachusetts as a place quite foreign. He was, perhaps, a trifle disappointed to discover that Warne was only, after all, a bigger and more ancient appearing Cheney Falls.

At the next crossing he stopped in the shade of a maple tree and viewed with interest the scene before him. Across the street – the corner post declared it to be Washington Avenue – lay the school grounds. The campus, a level expanse of smooth turf intersected by neat gravel walks between rows of linden trees, stretched at his left for a distance of two blocks. Beyond the campus the school buildings were lined up as though on parade, with, to aid the simile, a building at either end set in advance of the line – like officers. There were five buildings in the row – no, six, for there was a smaller one peering around a corner like a “rookie” slightly out of position – and all were of red brick with grey slate roofs save the big and more pretentious one in the centre. This was, as the boy knew from familiarity with the school catalogue, the Recitation Building, Parkinson Hall. It was built of light-hued sandstone, in shape a rotunda flanked by wings. It was two stories in height, with an imposing dome in the centre. Two curving steps led to the big doors and the entrance was guarded by copper columns holding big ground-glass globes. There were, the observer decided, more windows than he had ever seen in one building. On the whole, Parkinson Hall was really beautiful, and one didn’t have to be a student of architecture to realise it. The boy on the corner felt a thrill of pride as he looked,

for this was to be his school after today. He guessed, too, as he fanned his flushed face with his hat, that he was going to like it. It was a heap more attractive than the pictures in the catalogue had shown it. But of course, he reflected, the pictures had just been black and white, while now the scene was full of colour: the blue of the sky above, the warm red of the bricks, the cooler cream-white of the sandstone, the many greens of grass and trees and shrubbery and ivy, the hot, golden-yellow splotches of sunlight and the purplish shadows.

Facing the campus, on the south side of Washington Street, were perhaps a dozen residences, beginning beyond the church property, each surrounded by lawns and beds of flowers and shaded by big elms or maples. Nearby a locust shrilled loudly, making the heat even more appreciable, and beyond the churchyard a gate opened and closed with a click and a man passed through and approached the corner. He was a tall, spare gentleman and wore, in spite of the weather, a long, black frock coat and a broad-brimmed, black felt hat. As he drew near the boy observed a lean, clean-shaven face, kindly, nearsighted eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses and a rather thin mouth set in a friendly smile. The gentleman appeared to be quite sixty years of age, but held himself very erect and walked with a firm energy that was a defiance to the heat. He bowed and smiled and would have passed around the corner had not the boy spoken.

"Excuse me, sir, but will you tell me where I should go to register?"

"Very gladly indeed," was the reply in a thin but pleasant voice. "The small building in the corner of the campus is your destination, young sir." The gentleman laid a friendly hand on the boy's arm and with gentle pressure turned him about. "That is the Administration Building and you will see the office of the secretary on your right as you enter. I am not certain, however, that you will find him in just now." The speaker drew a very large gold watch from his pocket and snapped open the case. "Hah! You will just get him, I think. It is not as late as I presumed it to be."

"Thank you, sir."

"You are entirely welcome. I should be very glad to accompany you and present you to Mr. Hoyt if it were not that I have an engagement in another part of the town. May I inquire your name?"

"Ira Rowland, sir."

"Rowland? A fine old English name. I am Professor Addicks, of the Greek and Latin Department. We shall doubtless meet again, and, I trust, to our mutual advantage."

"To mine, I'm sure, sir," replied the boy, with a smile, "but where your advantage will come in I'm afraid I don't see!"

"Why, as to that," responded the Professor, his grey eyes twinkling behind his glasses, "I shall have the pleasure of your society for several hours each week, and, from what I see of you, I judge that an advantage. Good morning, Mr. Rowland."

The old gentleman smiled sunnily, bowed again and went on along Maple Street, and as he proceeded his smile continued and seemed to hold a trace of not unkindly amusement.

Ira Rowland once more donned his hat and made his way toward the small, three-story brick building set close to the street. Over the door was a small sign which bore the words, "Parkinson School – Administration Building." Two worn granite steps led to the entrance and as Ira mounted them the screen door was thrust open and a rather smartly dressed youth collided with him.

"I beg your –"

"All right," said Ira, drawing aside to let the other boy pass on down the steps. But the other seemed to have got over his hurry and was observing Ira with an interest that held both surprise and amusement. However, he spoke before the silence became embarrassing.

"Are you – are you Parkinson?" he asked.

"No." Ira shook his head. "My name's Rowland."

"Oh, I see. But I meant were you a student here."

"Going to be. I'm looking for the place to register."

“First door to your right.” The other stepped aside and held the door open. “You’ve got a good day for it,” he added pleasantly.

Ira nodded once more, not thinking of any suitable rejoinder to this somewhat puzzling remark, and went on. The boy at the door looked after him until he had passed into the secretary’s office, still holding the screen open. Then he let it shut, whistled softly and expressively and hurried off, a broad smile wreathing his good-looking face.

The office of the secretary was a square, well-lighted and business-like apartment holding, beside the necessary desks, chairs and filing cabinets, only one settee. A railing divided the room approximately in half, and the secretary’s desk was set close to it. Two boys finished their business as Ira entered and turned to go out. But at the doorway they turned with one accord and looked back at the newcomer, and as they disappeared their mouths began to curve upwards at the corners.

Mr. Hoyt, the secretary, was a small, light-complexioned man with a near-sighted scowl and a nervous manner. But experience had taught him expedition, and before the second hand on the face of the big clock between the windows had moved sixty times Ira had answered all questions and was moving away in possession of a copy of the school catalogue and a slip of paper on which was printed a list of private houses, approved by the school, offering accommodations.

Parkinson School had a roster of four hundred and eighty-odd that year and the four dormitories housed but three hundred and ninety. Since Ira had applied for admittance as late as the preceding June he had not drawn a room on the campus, and now, leaving the little brick building, he drew the list from between the pages of the catalogue and consulted it. More than two dozen addresses were given, each followed by the mystifying letters “R” or “R & B.” Fortunately the catalogue contained a map of the town in the vicinity of the school, and by referring to that he found that most if not all of the addresses were within a few blocks of the campus. Instead of returning by Maple Street, he entered a gate and went along the gravel walk leading in front of the row of school buildings. Being very intent on the matter of locating the first entry on the list: “J. D. Anstruther, 29 Linden Street, R & B,” he failed to notice that the steps of the Gymnasium Building toward which he was proceeding held a half-dozen youths who were watching his approach with poorly concealed amusement. In fact, he would have turned off on the path leading across the campus to the middle gate on Washington Avenue had not one of the group hailed him.

“Good morning, stranger! Are you looking for something?”

Ira stopped and removed his puzzled gaze from the map. After a moment of hesitation he crossed the few yards to the gymnasium steps. “Yes,” he replied, addressing the group in general, “I’m looking for a room. Where’s Linden Street, please?”

“Linden Street? Straight ahead. Follow this path until you come to a gate. Open the gate – it isn’t necessary to climb over it – and there you are.”

“Thanks.” Ira viewed the speaker a trifle doubtfully, however. In spite of the serious countenance, the reference to the gate had sounded suspicious. “And will you tell me what ‘R’ means here; and ‘R & B’?”

“‘R’? Oh, that means – er – ”

“‘R,’” interrupted a tall, dark-haired chap, stepping forward and taking the list from Ira’s hands, “means ‘Rats,’ and ‘R & B’ means ‘Rats and Bugs.’ You see, the faculty is very careful about our comfort. Some fellows object to rats and some object to bugs. So they state here what you’re to expect.”

“Rats and bugs!” exclaimed Ira. “You’re fooling, aren’t you?”

“Certainly not,” replied the other almost indignantly. “Do you mind rats? Or bugs?”

“Why – ” Ira’s gaze swept over the group in puzzlement – “I’m not particularly stuck on either of ’em. Aren’t there any places where they don’t have ’em?”

“No, not in Warne. Warne is noted for its rats. Bugs are scarcer, though. You’ll notice that only about half the houses offer bugs with their rats.”

“Offer’em,” muttered Ira dazedly. Surely these fellows were poking fun at him. And yet they all looked so serious, so kind and eager to help him. He shook his head as he reached for his list. “Do you know anything about that first place, J. D. Anstruther’s?”

“Not bad,” was the answer, “but I’ve never lived there myself. I’ve heard, though, that the rats at Baker’s are bigger. Billy, you roomed at Anstruther’s, didn’t you? How about it?”

“Good rooms, but rats very inferior,” answered a chunky, broad-shouldered boy in tennis flannels. “And scarcely any bugs at all.”

“There it is, you see,” said the dark-haired youth sadly. “Now if you want some corking big rats you’d better try Baker’s. That’s on Apple Street. Or, if you prefer bugs, too, you might go to Smith’s. I’ve heard Smith’s spoken of very highly.”

Ira received this advice in silence. He was thinking. At last: “Well, I’m much obliged to you,” he said gratefully. “But I guess I’d rather go where the rats aren’t so big. Of course you fellows are used to rats, being together so much, but I’ve never had much use for them.”

“Just a minute,” exclaimed a well-built boy of medium height who held a pair of running shoes on his knees. “I didn’t quite get that. About our being used to rats, Freckles. Come again, please.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Ira innocently.

“The gentleman wishes to know,” explained the dark-haired boy sweetly, “the meaning of your cryptic utterance. Why, Mr. Johnson, should our being together make us used to rats?”

“My name is Rowland.”

“Really? Well, then, Mr. Rowland, kindly elucidate.”

“I guess I don’t know what you want,” said Ira, viewing them blankly.

“Of course he doesn’t,” said another member of the group. “He didn’t mean anything. What class are you in, Hayseed?”

“Who, me? I’m going into the third, I guess.”

“Then you’ve got another guess,” jeered the boy with the running shoes. “How were the crops when you left home, Freckles?”

“Speaking to me? My name’s Rowland. First name’s Ira.”

“Well, don’t take on about it. You can’t help it. How’s crops?”

“It’s mostly lumbering where I come from. Cheney Falls, Maine, is my home.”

“Dew tell!” drawled the dark-haired youth. “What were you, a bump?”

“A bump?” asked Ira.

“Yes, don’t the logs up your way have bumps on them?”

“Oh, yes!” Ira smiled faintly. “The bumps grow on ’em, though. You – you don’t put ’em on.”

“Oh, you don’t? Thought you did. Well, what did you do in the lumbering line, then?”

“Well, last Winter I worked on the knots. It’s hard on your fingers, though.” He observed a hand reflectively. “I’m not going to do that again,” he added.

“Worked on the knots,” repeated the boy with the running shoes. “What do you mean by that?”

“Why, you see,” explained Ira patiently, “you take a pine or a spruce log and it’s got knots in it and it isn’t so good for sawing.”

“Well, what was your stunt?”

“Me? Oh, I untied the knots,” replied Ira gravely.

There was a moment of silence. Then most of the audience chuckled. But the boy with the running shoes flushed.

“You think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” he asked irritably. “You’re one of those ‘country wits’ we read about, eh? Dressed for the part, too! For the love of mud, where’d you get the costume?”

“Oh, cut it out, Gene,” said the dark-haired fellow. “Run along, Rowland, and find your room.”

“Better get a job as a scarecrow,” sneered the boy addressed as Gene. “Say, those clothes must have cost you as much as six dollars, eh? If you’d had another dollar you might have got them big enough.”

“They’re all right for me,” responded Ira calmly. “And the coat slips off right easy.”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Gene, jumping to his feet.

“Oh, forget it, Gene!” begged one of the fellows. “Let him alone.”

But Gene pushed his way past the boy’s detaining arm and thrust an angry countenance in front of Ira. “What do you mean, eh?” he repeated.

“What do you take it that I mean?” asked Ira, viewing the other undismayedly with half-closed grey eyes.

For answer, Gene Goodloe brought his right hand up quickly from his side. The boy with dark hair stepped forward to interfere, but he was too late. Ira sprang nimbly to the right and ducked, avoiding Gene’s blow, and at the same time shot his own right fist around. It was only a half-arm jab, but there was enough behind it when it landed on Gene’s chin to send him staggering back into the arms of one of the others and to temporarily deprive him of all desire for battle. He stared at his assailant in a dazed and almost reproachful way as they lowered him to the turf, and then he closed his eyes wearily.

“That’s a bad place to hit a fellow!” grumbled the dark-haired fellow, regarding Ira uncertainly. “You’d better get out of here before someone comes.”

“Maybe he will want to go on,” suggested Ira mildly.

“Huh! Maybe he will, but not for awhile! Billy Wells, duck inside and get some water, will you? You, Rowland, or whatever your name is, you get along. If the faculty sees this they’ll make trouble for you. I know he made the first swipe, but that wouldn’t help you much.”

“All right,” said Ira. “What’s his name?”

“Goodloe. Why?”

“I’ll let him know where he can find me. Just tell him, will you?”

CHAPTER II

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE

“Not what you’d call a very good beginning,” thought Ira, ruefully, as, followed by the somewhat puzzled looks of the group in front of the gymnasium, he made his way across the campus. “It was his fault, though. There wasn’t any call for me to stand around idle and get jabbed in the nose. Just the same, it would have been better if I’d gone on about my business instead of trying to get a rise out of them. Guess what you need to do, son, is keep your hands in your pockets and your mouth shut!”

For the following hour he was very busy. Mrs. Anstruther regretfully informed him that all her rooms were engaged, and the same announcement awaited him at Baker’s. It was at the latter house that the mysterious symbols were satisfactorily explained. “R,” he was told, meant that the house offered rooms only, while “R & B” stood for room and board. Ira mentally called himself an idiot for not having guessed as much. At a little past one he gave up the search long enough to perch himself at a counter in a lunch-room on School Street. A sign over the doorway held the inscription “The Egger,” and, judging from the fact that fully half the patrons in sight were boys of ages from fourteen to twenty, it was the favourite resort for hungry Parkinsonians. There were many small tables at the back, but all were occupied, and Ira finally found an empty stool in front of the long counter. The school colours, brown and white, were lavishly displayed, and there were many framed photographs of school teams and numerous unframed posters on the walls. These, however, interested Ira less than the neat sign which proclaimed the restaurant’s offerings, for he had eaten his breakfast on alighting from the Portland train in Boston, and that had been quite early, and he was now extremely hungry in spite of the warmth of the day.

While the electric fans overhead spun dizzily and the clatter of crockery and the babel of a hundred voices made a cheerful pandemonium, he thoughtfully contemplated the signs. One thing he knew he was going to have, and that was iced tea, but beyond that he was open-minded. Corn-beef hash sounded too warm. The same was true of roast beef and lamb stew with dumplings. Eggs didn’t sound appealing, although they were offered in more styles than he had ever heard of. He was still undecided when a voice said: “Try the cold ham and potato salad. It isn’t bad.”

Ira looked around to find the boy with whom he had collided at the door of the Administration Building sitting beside him.

“All right,” said Ira. “I guess I will. It looks good.”

“It’s too hot to eat today,” went on his neighbour, “but you sort of get the habit. This iced coffee is the best thing I’ve found. Do you like it?”

“I never tried it. I thought I’d have some iced tea.”

“No one can blame you. I saw you over at Ad, didn’t I?”

“Ad?”

“Administration. What’s your class?”

“Third.”

“Mine, too. Here’s Alphonse. Tell him what you’re risking.”

“Alphonse” proved to be a sandy-haired waiter who grinned at the speaker as he ran a towel over the counter. “Sure, take a chance,” he said cheerfully. “What’s it going to be, sir?”

“Some of the cold ham and potato salad and a glass of iced tea,” replied Ira. “Got any lemon?”

“I don’t know. I’ll see,” was the sober response. “We did have one last week.” Then, applying his mouth to a tube: “One-cold-ham-potato-salad!” he called. “Ice-tea-with-lemon!”

“Do you eat here regularly?” asked Ira of his neighbour.

“Dear, no! I eat in hall, but they don’t start until supper tonight. Lots of the fellows don’t come until afternoon, you see. Them as does has to eat where they can, and this is as good a joint as any. How do you like the place, as far as you’ve got?”

“All right. I haven’t seen much of it, though. I’ve been tramping around looking for a room most of the time.”

“Any luck?”

Ira shook his head. “There was one at – ” he refreshed his memory by glancing at the slip – “at Parent’s, but it was pretty small and awfully hot.”

“Keep away from that dive,” advised the other. “You’d freeze to death in Winter there. Besides, we come to school to get away from them.”

“To get away from – ”

“Parents,” chuckled the other. “Asterisk. See footnote. Joke intended. Have you tried Maggy’s?”

“No. I don’t think it’s on my list.”

“Let’s see. Yes, here it is: ‘D. A. Magoon, 200 Main Street.’”

“Oh! I thought you said – ”

“Maggy’s? Yes, they call her that for short. She’s got some good rooms, but you have to more than half furnish them. About all Maggy gives you is a carpet and a bed. If you like I’ll go around there with you when you’re through.”

“Why, thanks, that’s very kind, but I don’t want to trouble you.”

“You don’t. I haven’t a thing to do until the boat comes in.”

“Boat?” ejaculated Ira.

“Figure of speech, meaning that the afternoon stretches before me devoid of – of – Say, what do I call you?”

“Rowland’s my name.”

“Mine’s Johnston. There’s a t in it to make it harder to say. Here’s your grub. Guess I’ll have a piece of pie, Jimmy.”

“What kind?” asked the waiter as he slid Ira’s repast before him.

“Why the airs? You know you’ve only got apple.”

Jimmy grinned. “Got you this time, Johnston! There’s cream and cocoanut, too.”

“Make it cream, Jimmy, and tell the Pie Specialist downstairs to let his hand slip a little.”

“Do they give board at this place you spoke of?” asked Ira when he had sampled his dinner.

“No, they don’t. You can eat in hall, though, or you can get your meals around. There are four or five places like this and a lot of boarding houses. The way I did my first year was live at the restaurants and quick-lunch joints for the first term and then, when I was sick to death of them, go to a regular boarding house. Smith’s is pretty fair. A lot of fellows eat there.”

“They give you pretty good meals at the school dining hall, don’t they?”

“Y-yes, but they charge for them.” Johnston shot a swift, appraising glance over Ira. “If you can stand six dollars a week, all right. Some fellows can’t.” Jimmy presented his slice of pie at that moment and Johnston observed it gloomily. “That fellow’s got perfect control, hasn’t he, Jimmy?”

“Oh, they cut the pies with a machine,” replied the waiter airily. “Want some more coffee?”

“Walk around! Think I’m a millionaire? Make it a glass of water instead.” Then, addressing Ira again: “What are you going in for?” he asked.

“Going in where?”

“My fault! I mean what are you going to do with your spare time? Football? Tennis? Golf? What’s your line?”

“Oh! I don’t know. I’ve never played anything except a little baseball. I guess I won’t try any of those things yet.”

"You look as though you'd make a football player," said Johnston. "If you don't intend to try it you'd better keep out of sight. If Driscoll sees you he will get you sure."

"Is he the captain?" asked Ira.

"Coach. Ever played it?"

"Football? No." Ira shook his head. "I never thought I'd care to. I saw a game once at Lewiston."

"Where's that?"

"Maine. I live in Cheney Falls."

"No one can blame you. How's the grub?"

"Fine, thanks. Who is Goodloe?"

"Gene Goodloe? Track Team captain. Know him?"

"Not very well. I – I sort of met him awhile back."

"You'll like him, I guess. Most of us do. He's a corking runner. Good fellow to know, Rowland. Better cultivate him. Meet all the fellows you can, old man. The more the merrier. You can't know too many at school, especially if you're a new boy. I had a perfectly miserable time of it here my first year. I was horribly shy, you see. Yes, I got over it!" He laughed as he caught Ira's quick glance of surprise. "Had to. I used to get red clear around to the back of my face if anyone spoke to me. The second year I realised that it wouldn't do and I made up my mind to get cured. How do you think I did it? I got up one morning and went out and spoke to every fellow I met, whether I'd ever seen him before or not. It nearly killed me at first and I got all sorts of snubs and funny looks, but it cured me. Now I – I'd slap Jud himself on the back if it would do me any good."

"Jud?" asked Ira.

"Otherwise Doctor Judson Lane, principal of this here school. All through? Going to have desert? No? Come along then. There's your check. Might as well pay it if you've got the money. They have a nasty way of going out on the street after you and bringing you back if you get absent-minded."

They slid off their stools and made their way to the cashier's desk, Johnston hailing many acquaintances on the way and once pausing in response to the invitation of one. Ira had an uncomfortable suspicion that he was the subject of the short, whispered dialogue that ensued. "It's probably these clothes," he thought. "They *are* different from other fellows'. I'll have to get some new ones, I guess."

Outside, Johnston chatted merrily as he conducted his companion around the corner of Main Street and finally brought up before a three-story house set close to the sidewalk. It showed evidences of past grandeur, but the buff paint was peeling away from the narrow porch and stores had been built close to it on either side. The first floor was occupied by a tailor's establishment on the right and by the agency of a spring-water company on the left. Johnston gaily pointed out the convenience of having your trousers pressed on the premises as they waited in the hallway. Presently, in response to the tinkling of a faraway bell, footsteps creaked on the stairs and a tall and angular woman came into sight.

"Good afternoon and everything," greeted Johnston. "You don't remember me, Mrs. Magoon, but we were very dear friends once. I used to come here to call on Dan Phillips a couple of years ago."

"I remember you very well," was the reply in a dry voice. "You're the young man that broke the newel post one time when you was sliding down the –"

"My fault! I see you do remember me, after all. I feared you didn't. Now –"

"It wasn't ever paid for, either, although you said time and again –"

"You're perfectly right, ma'am. It just somehow slipped my memory. I'm glad you mentioned it. Everybody ought to pay his just debts, I should think. I've brought you a lodger, Mrs. Magoon. This is Mr. Rowland, Mr. Thomas Chesterfield Rowland, of Cheerup Falls, Maine, a very personal friend of mine. He was about to take a room over on Linden Street, but I prevailed on him to come to you. I told him that you had just the room for him. You have, haven't you?" Johnston beamed ingratiatingly.

“Well, I dunno,” said Mrs. Magoon, folding her hands in a blue checked apron and looking doubtfully from one boy to the other. “Everything’s pretty well taken now. There was a young man in here not ten minutes ago to look at the only room I’ve got left. I dunno will he be back, though. He said he would, but they always say that. If you’d care to look at it, sir – ”

“He would,” declared Johnston. “He would indeed. After you, Rowland. One flight and turn to your left.”

“Two flights and turn to your right, if you please,” corrected the landlady. “All the second floor rooms are taken.” She toiled upstairs at their heels and directed the way to a large, scantily furnished room at the back of the house. “It’s a nice, cheerful room,” she said pantingly. “Two good windows and a fine view. There’s a washstand goes in here yet.”

The fine view consisted of several backyards, the roof of a shed and a high board fence in the immediate foreground, but beyond the fence lay the trim, green lawn of a residence on Washington Avenue, while, by stretching his neck a little, Ira could see a few gravestones in the cemetery around the corner of the next-door building. Just now the foliage hid the school, but Mrs. Magoon predicted that in the Winter he would have a fine view of it. There were two big windows on the back of the room, a sizable closet, a fireplace with a dingy, white-marble mantel and a rusted grate and a few oddments of furniture all much the worse for wear. Ira tested the bed and shuddered inwardly. It was like a board. There was a green plush rocking-chair, a battered walnut table with an ink-stained top, a bureau of similar material and condition, two straight-backed chairs and an ornate black walnut bookcase with one glass door missing. A faded, brown ingrain carpet covered the centre of the floor, the wide expanse of boards surrounding it having at some far distant time been painted slate-grey.

Johnston expatiated warmly, even with enthusiasm, on the room’s attractions. “How’s that for a fireplace, old man?” he asked. “It’s real, mind you. No stage fireplace, with a red lantern in it, but the genuine thing. Lots of room here, too. Must be twenty feet each way, eh? Of course, you’ll need a few more things. A window seat would help. And another easy-chair, maybe. Then, with the family portraits on the walls and a fire crackling cheerily – what ho! ‘Blow, wintry winds! What care we?’ Or words to that general effect. You say there’s a washstand, too, Mrs. Magoon? Fine! Imagine a washstand over there in the corner, Rowland. Sort of – sort of finishes it off, eh? Useful little affairs, washstands. No home should be – How about the bathroom, Mrs. Magoon? Adjacent or thereabouts, I presume?”

“One flight below, sir. It’s a very nice bathroom, with an enamelled tub, sir. If you’d care to look at it – ”

“By all means, ma’am, as we descend. You said the rent was – ”

“Four a week, sir.”

“Oh, no, indeed! For the school year, Mrs. Magoon.”

“I said four a week, sir.”

“And I said – Oh, I see! Four dollars a week! You will have your joke, eh? The lady has a sense of humour, Rowland. You can’t deny it.”

“It doesn’t seem to me that it’s worth that much,” said Ira dubiously.

“Bless us, no!” said Johnston. “That was only her joke. Now, Mrs. Magoon, seriously, what do you ask by the month for this palatial apartment?”

“It’s four dollars a week, young man, whether you pay weekly or monthly; although I have to insist on the bills not running no longer than a month.”

“No one can blame you. But you’ll find my friend here very prompt, ma’am, in such matters. I have never known him to let a bill run longer than a month. You might almost call him finicky in money matters. Considering that, now, suppose we say three dollars a week, with – ” he shot a questioning glance at Ira – “two weeks paid in advance?”

“I couldn’t do it, sir,” replied the landlady firmly, arms akimbo. “Three-seventy-five is my lowest figure, and nothing you could say – ”

"I don't think I want the room, thanks," interrupted Ira. "I'd have to buy a good many things for it to make it comfortable. Much obliged, ma'am."

"Don't be hasty, old man. Think well. Rooms are scarce, as Mrs. Magoon will tell you, and at three and a half –"

"Three-seventy-five," corrected the landlady.

"You couldn't do better. I'll take you to a place where you can get anything you need for half of nothing and pay when you like. With another chair and a couch and a few pictures – why, you wouldn't know the place! He wouldn't know the place, would he, ma'am?"

"'Twould look better, no doubt. There's the washstand yet, sir, and it helps to fill up, so to speak."

"We-ell," began Ira, doubtfully.

"That's decided, then!" exclaimed Johnston gaily. "Have the room all ready in an hour, Mrs. Magoon. If you've got seven dollars where you can put your hand on it, Rowland, you might bind the bargain, eh?"

"If the lady wants to let me have it at three dollars and a half –"

"She does! Hasn't she said so? You said three and a half, didn't you, Mrs. Magoon?"

"I did not!"

"No? My fault! But you're going to, eh? Rather than lose a tenant?" Mrs. Magoon wavered. "Here it is the last day, ma'am. School begins tomorrow. I guess everyone's settled by this time. You wouldn't want the room to stay empty, now would you? Of course not! A bird in the hand, and all that, eh? Well, that's settled, what?"

Mrs. Magoon nodded without enthusiasm. "It's less than I ever took for it before," she said sadly. Then, brightening: "Maybe the young man would want his breakfasts in?" she asked hopefully. "Many of them does."

Johnston was shaking his head violently, but neither the landlady nor Ira saw it.

"Why, thanks, I – How much are breakfasts?" said Ira.

"Twenty-five cents, sir. Coffee and toast and two eggs or a bit of meat."

"Perhaps it would be more convenient than going out," mused Ira. "All right, ma'am, I'll take breakfasts."

"Fine! Come along, Rowland. Remember that Doctor Lane was very particular about having you let him know what you decided on. He will be anxious. Back in an hour, Mrs. Magoon."

"If you'd care to see the bathroom –" began Mrs. Magoon as they descended.

"Not now," said Johnston, shoving Ira along toward the next flight. "I'm sure it's absolutely perfect, ma'am." When they were once more on the street he turned sorrowfully to Ira. "You shouldn't have let yourself in for the breakfasts, old man," he said. "They're fierce. I tried to give you the sign, but you wouldn't look. Still, you can cut them out after a week or so. They all do."

"I dare say the room will look better when there's more in it," said Ira.

"Rather! You'll be crazy about it, old man."

"Or in it," said Ira drily. Johnston preferred not to notice the remark.

"And three-fifty isn't bad these days, either."

"I guess I'd rather pay her what she asked, Johnston. She says she never let it for so little, and –"

"Yes, but her memory's failing her. Johnny Grew had that room two years ago, and I happen to remember that he paid exactly three and a half for it. Besides, she'll make it up on the breakfasts. Now let's run around to Jacobs' and see what we can pick up. Better leave the buying to me, old man, for in spite of being a Maine Yankee, you're a mighty poor bargainer!"

"I'm taking up a lot of your time," Ira demurred.

"I like it. Besides, I've got nothing on until the five-twelve gets in." He was silent for a full minute, something so unusual that Ira viewed him in surprise. Then, with an odd lack of assurance, he said: "About that newel post now, Rowland. I – you see –"

“All right,” said Ira. “I understand.”

“Eh?” asked the other startledly. “Hold on, though! No, you don’t, old man.”

“All right. I don’t care, anyway.”

“But you mustn’t think I took you around there on that account. Fact is, I’d quite forgotten about it.” Johnston chuckled. “Guess if I’d remembered it I’d have stayed away. But when she sprang it on me, why – why, then I thought I might as well square myself.” He looked uncertainly at Ira. “See what I mean?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well – well – Oh, hang it, Rowland! Now, look here. You don’t need to take that room if you’d rather not. I guess I did sort of force your hand. We’ll go back now and get the money and tell her it’s off. Come on! I’d feel a lot better. Then we’ll look somewhere else. Hang it, it was only a dollar, and I’m switched if I want to look like a piker for just a little old dollar! Come on back!”

But Ira shook his head. “When you know me better, Johnston,” he said with a smile, “you’ll find that it’s awfully hard to make me do anything I don’t want to. If I hadn’t thought the room would answer I’d never have taken it, no matter what you might have said. I don’t think it’s palatial, but I do think it will do well enough, and if Mrs. Magoon lets you off about the newel post on my account I’m glad of it. I owe you that much, anyhow, for all your trouble. Just the same, I’m glad you didn’t – didn’t take me around there on purpose.”

“I didn’t, honestly, old man. I’d forgotten all about it. But you’re quite sure it’s all right, eh? Sure you really want to take the room?”

“Certain sure.”

“Well, you’re a brick. I guess I’ll drop around and pay Maggy her money, just the same. Any fellow ought to, I should think. I’ll do it this afternoon while I’ve got it. Well, that’s settled. And here’s the emporium of our friend Jacobs.

““Open the door and tinkle the bell:
You want to buy and I want to sell!””

CHAPTER III

GETTING SETTLED

Half an hour later Ira was the proud possessor – Now that’s what comes of using phrases. It’s a poor habit. As a matter of honest fact, no one could have been really proud of the articles purchased in Mr. Joseph Jacobs’ Second-hand Emporium. First, there were the remains of a window seat. Ira had viewed it distastefully until Johnston – it had developed that his first name was Martin and that he was usually called Mart – assured him that with a hammer and four nails and a bit o’ luck he could fix it as good as new. Then came a leather couch. The frame, springs and hair were quite serviceable, but the leather – well, Mart said it was a “crime,” and we’ll let it go at that. “But,” he pointed out, “all you’ve got to do is throw something over it, old man, and no one will know. Haven’t you some trifle like a Paisley shawl or a Persian rug about your person? Never mind, we’ll find something. And five dollars is dirt cheap for it. Why, it’s worth that much for fuel, and you want to remember that you’ve got a perfectly good grate to feed when Winter comes. We’ll take it, Jacobs.”

The easy-chair was not as easy as it looked. About the only thing easy, except its appearance, was the price. It was one of those brown-oak contraptions with a back that let down to form various angles with the seat. Unfortunately each succeeding angle was more uncomfortable than the last. “Old Man Mission,” observed Mart, “may have been a dandy carpenter, but he was a mighty poor comforter!” They picked up some hanging book shelves for sixty cents and two rugs only half worn out for a dollar apiece and, finally, an oak table-desk with a column of drawers at one side, one of which would open without the use of a jimmy. Leaving instructions to have the furniture delivered not later than five o’clock, they returned to “Maggy’s.”

Mart heroically paid Mrs. Magoon a dollar, much to that lady’s bewilderment, and then they went up to the room. A decrepit walnut washstand was already in place, but Ira couldn’t see that its presence added much to the apartment. They tried it in three places and at last returned it to its original position, restoring the casters which it had sprinkled around the room in its travels. Then Mart threw himself into the plush chair and stretched his legs out and viewed the room thoughtfully.

“Better make a list of things to buy, old man,” he advised. “All ready? Paper of tacks and a hammer – better get a real hammer and not one of those playthings; a hammer’s always useful – , two brass curtain rods – By Crickey, we forgot curtains! Never mind, though, we’ll get those at Alston’s. We can get the rods there, too. And you’d ought to have a cloth for that table. Every fellow ought to have a cloth on his table, I should think. And – let’s see – ” He looked around the room inquiringly.

“I guess that’s enough for today,” said Ira. “The next thing is to get my trunk over from the station. I suppose there’s an expressman around somewhere.”

“Come on down with me at five and give your check to Harris. He does most of the school work and won’t mind lugging it up two flights. Some of them expect ten cents more for that. Let’s get cooled off a bit and then buy the curtains, eh? Curtains will make a lot of difference, I tell you! I’ll borrow a yard-stick or something from Maggy and measure the windows.”

When that had been done they sailed forth again. There was one excellent feature about Ira’s abode, and that was its convenience to the shops. Alston’s dry goods store was only a half block away, across School Street, and soon they were viewing muslin and scrim curtains which an obliging saleslady hung over big brass rods. Mart found that he might as well have spared himself the trouble of taking measurements, for the curtains were all the same length. They finally selected two pairs of what the young lady called “cross-barred muslin” and purchased rods and fixtures. Subsequently they visited a hardware store and bought the hammer and the paper of tacks and a small quantity of nails. When they got back to Number 200 Main Street they found an expressman struggling upstairs

with the leather couch, followed grimly by the landlady who exhorted him at every step to “mind the plaster now!”

When the new purchases were in place the room did look a lot better, and when Mart had, after much difficulty, put up the rods and pinned the curtains over them the two boys viewed the result with deep satisfaction. “It’s the little touches that do it,” proclaimed Mart. “Now when we get a cloth – ”

But they had forgotten the cloth for the table, as well as the “drape” for the couch, and had also neglected to provide anything in the way of a cushion for the window seat. “But Rome was not built in a day,” said Mart cheerfully. “I forget how long it took, but it was more likely a week. Now, in a week you won’t know this place, Rowland. Got any pictures to hang on this lovely yaller paper?”

“No, but I can get some,” answered Ira, regarding the paper distastefully. “Wish I could get enough to hide the walls entirely!”

“Put up half a dozen and hang a pennant over the door and stick a few posters around and you won’t notice the walls at all. And if I were you I’d buy a can of brown paint and go over this border again. That colour on there now makes me sort of faint. What time might it be?”

“Twenty to five.”

“Geewhillikins! Where’s the afternoon got to? Here, I’ll knock this window seat together and then beat it. Where’s that hammer? Don’t tell me – Oh, all right! Toss it over. Nails? Thank you, sir. Now then, you rickety, tumble-down, lob-sided bunch of boards, how do you go, anyhow? I say, Rowland, there’s a leg missing! I didn’t notice that, did you? Never mind. It won’t matter if you don’t sit on that corner, and some time you can nail a piece of board on there. Say, this thing is a regular Chinese puzzle! Know what I think? Well, I think he’s gone and sold us parts of two different seats!”

But he wronged Mr. Jacobs, for ultimately the sections fitted together, and when they did the two boys looked at the result in silence and then burst into howls of laughter. The window seat had been built for a corner! No matter how they struggled with it it remained L-shaped! If half of it ran across a window the other half stuck out into the room at right angles like a sore thumb! Ira subsided on the bed and Mart sprawled himself on the floor and they laughed until they were weak.

“Well,” said Mart finally, “either you’ve got to change your room or this seat, and I guess the seat’s the easier. Now look here. If we turn this end around, so, and tack a couple of short boards on here – ”

“Oh, don’t!” begged Ira. “Don’t spoil it! It – it’s beautiful!”

“Oh, well, if you won’t be serious,” laughed Mart, dropping his hammer. “Let’s leave it until tomorrow. I’ve got to meet Brad at five-twelve. Put your hat on and come along. Bring your trunk check, by the way. Hang it, quit laughing! Get a move on, you – you idjit!”

“Y-yes, but – but look at it, Johnston!” gasped Ira. “Isn’t it —*funny*?”

“It’s killing,” agreed the other, grinning. “I say, why not leave it that way just for a joke?”

“I – I’m going to! I – I-like it!”

“Well, don’t cry, old man! Pull yourself together! Here’s your hat. Now come on. We’ve only got eight minutes.”

The railway station was four blocks south and by the time Ira had arranged for the delivery of his trunk and rescued his suitcase from the parcel room those eight minutes were gone and the express was rumbling in. Mart left Ira at the waiting-room door, with instructions not to move until he returned, and was presently pushing his way through the throng of arriving students in search of his roommate. Ira, however, concluded that he would only be in the way. The chums would of course have lots to say to each other and he didn’t believe that either of them would really be any happier for his presence. So, before the new arrivals had more than overflowed the platform, he was on his way uptown again, the heavy suitcase, into which at the last moment he had forced a lot of things that had been intended for the trunk, tugging at his arm. Station carriages, filled to capacity with merry youths, began to pass him before he reached Main Street and turned toward his lodgings, but he saw nothing of Mart.

He had a bath in the wonderful enamelled tub on the floor below and felt cooler and generally better for it. After he had returned to his room and made himself as comfortable on the bed as the hard, lumpy mattress would allow he heard the sound of arrivals. Voices and footsteps and the banging of doors came to him. Downstairs a spirited battle began for the possession of the bathroom. Across the hall from his closed door a youth with a strident voice sang loudly and opened and shut drawers most ungently. In spite of the noise, Ira, who had slept but poorly on the train the night before, drowsed off presently and knew no more until there came a banging at his portal. Half awake, he admitted the expressman with his trunk, paid for it in a stupor and then subsided on it to gather his faculties. His blinking gaze rested on the window seat and he began to chuckle at the perfectly idiotic way in which it thrust one decrepit end into the room. By that time he was sufficiently awake to find his key and open the trunk, after which he donned fresh underwear and his second-best suit of blue serge, spruced himself up and thought of supper. However, there was no great hurry about that, he concluded. Since he had decided to get his meals at the restaurants for awhile he was not required to observe regular hours. It was only a little past six, and there was his trunk to unpack and his things to find places for.

The closet, although short on hooks, was roomy. He made a mental memoranda to buy some hooks tomorrow and in the meanwhile “doubled up” with what there were. The bureau drawers stuck abominably, but he at last conquered them and arranged his possessions within. Books, of which he had brought a good many, were equally divided between bookcase and shelves. (He wondered why he had bought the shelves until he remembered that he hadn’t; that Mart Johnston had bought them!) By half-past six the nearly empty trunk was pushed out of sight in the closet, his few toilet things decorated the marble top of the bureau, sponge and toothbrush reposed on the washstand and, in short, he was settled.

The room really began to look a bit homelike, he concluded, viewing it critically from what would have been the hearth-rug had he possessed such a thing. He would have to get something to hide the tattered and torn leather on the couch, and a cloth for the hideous walnut table; and, of course, there was that ridiculous window seat! He had to smile every time his eyes fell on it, but for some reason it seemed quite the most companionable article of furniture in sight. He decided that he would find an upholsterer and have a good cushion made for it, and then he would buy some pillows. Probably, he reflected, he would fall over the protruding end of the crazy thing a dozen times in the next week. If only —

And right there a brilliant idea struck him! “Why, of course!” he exclaimed. He tugged and pushed the oak desk alongside the end of the seat that ran out from the wall, restored the walnut table to its erstwhile position in the middle of the rug, placed the plush easy-chair beside it and there you were! That put his desk between the windows, with the light coming over his left shoulder very nicely, and made a back for the homeless end of the window seat. And it looked great! He was quite proud of that arrangement and went out in search of supper very cheerfully.

He found a lunch room around the corner on Linden Street and, probably more because he was really hungry than because the food was especially good, made an excellent repast, with an evening paper propped up against the vinegar cruet. It was nearly eight when he wandered back to his lodging through the warm, quiet evening. Most of the stores on Main Street were closed, but a few windows still threw floods of yellow radiance across the brick sidewalks. Doorsteps held family groups, quite as if Summer had not gone, and children played along the pavement. An old-fashioned lantern with a gas jet sizzling inside it hung above the door of Number 200 and threw a wavering, uncertain light on the four creaking steps. As Ira passed into the hall the door of the tailor’s shop was open and he saw a little hunchbacked man of uncertain age and nationality working steadily and swiftly over a pressing board. On each floor a dim gaslight flickered, but for most of the distance each flight was in darkness and he made his way upwards warily, a guiding hand on the banister rail.

Halfway up the second flight he heard Mrs. Magoon's voice. It sounded querulous, even a trifle resentful. The next moment another voice broke in angrily, and Ira reached the third floor and viewed an astounding scene. In the doorway of his room, seated determinedly on a small trunk, with a bag on his knees, was a boy of perhaps sixteen. In front of him stood Mrs. Magoon, her hands wrapped in her apron. At the sound of his footsteps both actors in the little drama staged on his doorsill turned their heads and regarded him, the boy with an expression of dogged defiance and Mrs. Magoon with very evident relief.

CHAPTER IV

FOUND – A ROOMMATE

“Now I guess you’ll behave yourself,” exclaimed the landlady triumphantly. “Here’s the young man that’s taken the room.”

“He hasn’t any right to it,” declared the boy on the trunk, gripping the bag on his knees more firmly. “You gave me the refusal of it! I told you I’d be back! It’s my room, and I mean to keep it!”

Ira looked inquiringly at Mrs. Magoon, but she silently referred him to the claimant in the doorway.

“What’s wrong?” Ira asked of the latter.

“Why, I came here this afternoon and looked at this room and I asked this – this lady if she’d give me the refusal of it until evening and she said she would. I agreed to come back in any case and say whether I’d take it or not. And now, when I send my trunk here, she tells me she’s rented it to you!”

“I gave him no refusal,” exclaimed Mrs. Magoon irately. “He said he’d be back, yes, but he didn’t know whether he wanted it or didn’t want it. And I can’t be losing the chance to rent my rooms while he’s making up his mind.”

“Well, if you didn’t have a refusal,” said Ira mildly, “I don’t see what claim you have. I found the room for rent and took it this afternoon, and paid two weeks in advance. I’m sorry, but I guess you’ll have to look somewhere else.”

“I have looked!” cried the other. “There aren’t any rooms left. This is all there is. I’ve been all over the crazy place.”

“Oh, I guess you can find one tomorrow,” said Ira soothingly. “Why don’t you get a lodging for tonight somewhere and then start fresh in the morning? I’ve got a list of houses here – ”

“I’ve been all through the list. Everyone’s full up. Anyway, this is my room, and I mean to have it. She *did* give me the refusal of it, and she knows plaguey well she did!”

“The idea!” exclaimed Mrs. Magoon in shrill tones. “Calling me a liar to my face, are you? If you don’t get right out of here this very minute I’ll call a policeman, I will so!”

“Wait a minute,” counselled Ira. “He didn’t mean it that way. Now I tell you what we’ll do.” He glanced across the corridor to where a door had just opened to emit a large youth who was now regarding them with his hands in his pockets and a broad smile on his face. “You let this chap and me talk it over quietly, Mrs. Magoon. We’ll settle it between us. There’s no reason to get excited about it, is there? Just you go on down, ma’am, and it’ll be all right.”

“There’s only one way it can be settled,” replied the landlady irately, “and that’s for him to take himself and his trunk out of my house!”

“But there’s no hurry, Mrs. Magoon. Besides, we’re disturbing the others with all this racket. Shove that trunk inside, please, and we’ll close the door first of all.”

Mrs. Magoon grunted, hesitated and finally went grumbling off down the stairs, and Ira, taking affairs into his own hands, pushed the small trunk out of the way of the door, its owner grudgingly vacating his strategic position atop, and closed the portal, to the disappointment of the neighbour across the way.

“Now,” said Ira pleasantly, “sit down and be comfortable. Try the armchair. What’s your name? Mine’s Rowland.”

“Mine’s Nead,” replied the other, not very amiably. “Names haven’t anything to do with it, though.”

“Just wanted to know what to call you. Now, honest-to-goodness, Nead, did Mrs. Magoon say she’d hold this room until you had decided?”

“She did! If it’s the last word I ever utter – ”

“All right! And, if you don’t mind telling me, how much were you to pay for it?”

“Thirteen dollars and a half a month.”

Ira did some mental calculating and smiled. “That’s about three dollars a week, isn’t it?” he asked. “You’re certain that was the price?”

“Of course I’m certain. Three dollars was all I wanted to pay, and I told her so. She wanted four at first. Four dollars for this – this old poverty-stricken attic!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be hard on it,” said Ira pleasantly. “I like it pretty well.”

“But it isn’t yours! Now you look here, Boland – ”

“Rowland. And don’t let’s have any melodrama, please. We can come to a settlement if we don’t shout, I guess. What you agreed to and what Mrs. Magoon agreed to is no business of mine. That’s between you two. She says the room is mine. You say it’s yours. I’ve got it!”

“You haven’t any right – ”

“Well, there’s the right of possession,” chuckled Ira. “Mind you, I’m inclined to believe your account of what took place, because – well, I’m beginning to doubt Mrs. Thingamabob’s – er – memory. But I think you left it pretty late to decide, Nead. If I’d been Mrs. Magoon I’d have considered myself released from that refusal by six o’clock; by seven, anyway. You couldn’t have got here until half-past, I guess.”

“I had to get something to eat and then find a man to fetch my trunk – ”

“Yes, but you could have dropped around before and told her you’d take it. You see, Nead, if you hadn’t wanted it, and she had stood by her bargain until nearly eight, she might not have rented it at all. There’s that to consider.”

“Oh, you make me tired! You talk like a – like a lawyer! She said I could have the room and I’ve come for it and that’s all there is to it!”

“Well, what about me?” inquired Ira mildly.

“You can find another one. You can do what you told me to do. If you think it’s so easy, just take a try at it!”

“If I thought you really had a right to this room I’d do it,” answered Ira, “but I don’t. At least, not a convincing one. Tell you, though, what I will do, Nead. I’ll get Mrs. Magoon to fix up some sort of a cot or something and you can stay here until tomorrow. It’s pretty late to go room hunting now and that’s a fact. Or maybe she has another room that she will let you have overnight. We’ll go down and ask her.”

“But I tell you it’s my room, Boland! I don’t care whether you think I have any right to it or not. I know that I have. I know that I was given a refusal of it until evening – ”

“What do you call evening?” interrupted Ira.

“Oh, if you’re going to split hairs – ”

“I’m not, but if I said evening I’d have some time like sunset in mind. The fact is, Nead, you didn’t make sure that there was nothing better until just before you came around here. And if you had found anything better you would never have shown up here again. And you know that’s so, too. I’m perfectly willing to share the room with you tonight, but I’m not going to get out of it. I’m sorry the misunderstanding happened, but it isn’t any fault of mine. Now, what do you say to making the best of things and bunking out here until morning?”

Nead observed Ira gloweringly, and for a long moment made no answer, and in that moment Ira had a good look at him. He was at least a full year younger than Ira, a thin, rather peevish looking youth with a poor complexion. His features were not bad, and he had rather nice eyes, but there was something unpleasant about his expression. He wore good clothes, but wore them carelessly, and Ira noted that his tan shoes looked as if they had not seen polish for many days. On the whole, Ira felt no enthusiasm about having Nead for a roommate even overnight.

“Well, I’ll stay here, I suppose,” said Nead ungraciously. “But I’m not giving up my claim on the room. Tomorrow I mean to go to the Principal and tell him about it. I guess he will see that I get what belongs to me.”

“All right! That’s settled for the present, anyway. Now I’ll go down and interview Mrs. Magoon. If she hasn’t an empty room she can probably find us a cot or a mattress. You can come along if you like,” he ended questioningly.

But Nead shook his head. “She will only get mad again if I go,” he said. “Besides,” he added, tossing his hat to the table and stretching himself more comfortably in the plush chair, “it’s not up to me. I’m at home already.”

“Glad you feel that way,” replied Ira gravely. “I’ll be back in a shake.”

He found Mrs. Magoon more complaisant than he had expected. There was, she recalled, a cot in the attic, but he would have to bring it down himself. And having an extra person in the room would be fifty cents a day. Ira, however, gently but firmly negated that, pointing out that she had got herself into the fix and that it was nothing to do with him, and finally the landlady agreed to waive remuneration. Ten minutes later, not very enthusiastically aided by Nead, he had the cot set up. There was a rather sketchy mattress on it and Mrs. Magoon grudgingly furnished two sheets and a blanket. By that time Nead had got over his grouch to some extent and was displaying a few human qualities.

“I thought I was going to have a room in one of the dormitories,” he explained, divesting himself of his outer clothing and depositing it helter-skelter around the room. “I wouldn’t have come if I’d known I had to room off the campus. Why, you can get a fine study in Leonard Hall for a hundred and twenty-five for the year, and that’s only about three dollars a week. They ought to have enough dormitories here and not make fellows live around in dives like this. Gee, some of the prices they talked today would make your hair stand up! One place I went to asked six dollars for a room not half the size of this. It was furnished, though, which you can’t say of this place. She’s put some more things in here since I saw it, though.”

“Bought ’em myself,” said Ira.

“Bought them! But they look second-hand!”

“N-no, I don’t guess so. Third-hand, maybe, or fourth, but hardly second, Nead. Still, they’re all right, aren’t they? How do you like the window seat?”

“Window seat? Is that what you call it?” Nead laughed. “Say, what’s the matter with it? Why does it shoot out like that?”

“It used to be straight,” answered Ira soberly, “but it’s rather old and has rheumatism. That explains the crook in it.”

“Huh! It looks mighty silly. If you expect me to buy this trash off you you’ve got another guess coming.”

“I don’t, thanks. It’s not for sale. Especially the window seat. I’m sort of fond of that.” He chuckled. “It’s so – so foolish looking!”

Nead viewed him in puzzlement. “Well, if you like foolish things, all right,” he said finally, dipping into his bag for his pyjamas. “I don’t, though. Say, where do you come from?”

“Maine. How about you?”

“Buffalo.”

“Dakota?” inquired Ira blandly.

“Dakota! Of course not, you idiot! There isn’t any Buffalo in Dakota. New York, of course.”

“There used to be. Maybe they’re all killed now, though. Buffalo’s quite a big place, I suppose.”

“It’s big enough, anyway. And it’s the best city in the country.”

“Sort of like this place, then, I guess.”

“*What!*”

“Well, you said it was a city in the country, didn’t you?” asked the other innocently. “And that’s what this is. I’d call it that, at least.”

“You go and see Buffalo some time,” advised Nead disgustedly. “I guess you live in the country, all right.” He grinned at the nightgown that Ira was getting into. “Don’t they have pyjamas up in Maine?”

“Not many. There’s a few raccoons left, though.”

“Oh, gee, you’re a smart guy, aren’t you? Well, I’m going to turn in. Hope you’ll find that cot comfortable, but it doesn’t look it!”

“Oh, you’re taking the bed, are you?”

“Sure,” chuckled Nead. “It’s mine, isn’t it?”

“It’s yours for tonight,” was the answer. “If I have the nightmare, just yell. I usually wake up. Good night.”

Ira slept soundly in spite of the discomforts of that wobbly, creaking cot, and when he awoke the early sunlight was slanting in at the windows behind the new curtains. Across the room Nead was still asleep. Reference to his watch showed the time to be but a few minutes past six. Ira turned over stiffly and tried to slumber again, but after ten minutes of unsuccessful effort he gave it up, rolled over on his back, put his arms over his head, fixed his gaze on an interesting crack that travelled from one side of the ceiling to the other with as many ramifications as a trunk-line railway and faced the problem presented by the unconscious form on the bed.

There was a freshness and coolness in the morning air that made for well-being, and Ira felt extremely kindly toward the world, even including Nead and the pugnacious Gene Goodloe. He wondered whether the latter would see fit to follow up the little affair of yesterday, and remembered that he hadn’t sent him word of his whereabouts. He would write Goodloe a note as soon as he got dressed. As far as he was personally concerned, he was ready to call quits. It was much too wonderful a day for fighting! Then he speculated about Mart Johnston and wondered whether Mart would look him up. He didn’t care a whole lot. Mart was a cheerful sort of idiot, but he wasn’t exactly restful! And Mart had so many friends, besides that chap “Brad,” that it wasn’t likely he would recall the existence of the boy who was thinking of him except, perhaps, to laugh at him. And, finally, there was Nead.

Nead was a problem, and Ira scowled at the crack in the ceiling and tried to solve it. Perhaps, after all, Nead did have a good claim on that room. Ira tried to see the affair from Nead’s point of view. It was rather puzzling. He didn’t quite know what he ought to do. Of course, he might follow Nead’s idea and leave the decision to the faculty, but it seemed a trivial affair to bring to its attention. Or he might —

He brought his gaze suddenly from the ceiling and stared blankly at the window for a moment. Then he turned and regarded the sleeping countenance of the boy across the room. In slumber Nead didn’t look so unpleasant, he thought. And living alone would be, perhaps, rather lonesome. Certainly, could he have his choice of roommates the choice wouldn’t fall of Nead, but he couldn’t. And maybe Nead would improve on acquaintance. Ira had already discovered that first impressions are frequently erroneous. There was, too, the advantage of having someone share the expense, although Ira wasn’t greatly concerned about that. He weighed the question for some time, lying in bed there, and finally made up his mind. He would make the proposition to Nead. If Nead wasn’t agreeable, why, Nead could find another room. Ira considered that he would then have done all that was required of him. He plunged out of bed and, gathering up towel and sponge and soap, made his descent on the bathroom.

CHAPTER V

SCHOOL BEGINS

It was all settled by the time they had finished breakfast. Perhaps the cheerfulness of the morning, or it may have been Mrs. Magoon's coffee, worked its effect on Nead, for that youth was far more amiable, and, while he did hesitate and seem a bit dubious for a moment, he ended by accepting the proposition. Ira found himself hoping that he wouldn't and took the other's hesitation as a good augury, but put aside all regrets the moment Nead made his decision.

"That's all right, then," he declared. "Now we'll have to make a dicker with Mrs. Magoon, I guess, for she'll want more for the room if there's two in it."

"I don't see why," objected Nead. "Anyway, we oughtn't to pay more than four a week."

"I think four would be enough," Ira agreed. "And what about breakfasts? She charges a quarter apiece, you know."

"And they're pretty punk, if this is a sample," said Nead. "The coffee's all right, but my chop had seen better days. Still, it's easier than hunting a restaurant. I thought maybe I'd eat in school. They say you get mighty good feed at Alumni Hall."

"Well, we'll tell her we'll take two breakfasts for awhile. That will cheer her up, maybe. Shall I make the dicker?"

"Yes, she doesn't like me. And I don't like her. So that's even. What class are you going into, Rowland?"

"Third, unless I trip up. What's yours?"

"Second. Wish we were in the same. It makes it easier if you're with a fellow who's taking the same stuff. There's another thing, too; that bed's fierce. See if she hasn't got a better mattress."

"I was going to buy one," said Ira. "I guess hers are all about the same, don't you?"

"Well, make a stab," said Nead. "She may have one that hasn't been slept on twenty years. What are the other fellows here like?"

"Don't know. I've seen only one, the fat fellow across the hall. There must be quite a lot of them, because she says she has all the rooms rented, and there are four rooms on each floor."

"Nine rooms altogether," Nead corrected. "There's one on the ground floor at the back that she rents. It's behind the spring-water place. I suppose there are two in some rooms. Must be twelve or fourteen fellows in this dive, eh?"

"Maybe," agreed Ira, pushing away from the walnut table on which the breakfast tray had been placed. "Do you know any fellows in school?"

"No, do you?"

"Only one, a fellow named Johnston. I ran across him yesterday and he told me about this place. They call it 'Maggy's.' I'd been to about six before that and couldn't find anything I liked. Well, I'll go down and – Hold on, though! I must write a note first."

He got a tablet and pulled a chair to the desk, and after wrinkling his forehead a moment, wrote: "Mr. Eugene Goodloe, Parkinson School, Warne, Mass. Dear Sir: I have a room at Mrs. Magoon's, 200 Main Street, third floor back on the left. A note addressed to me here will find me and I shall be glad to meet any appointment you care to make. Respectfully, Ira Rowland." Then he enclosed it, stamped the envelope and dropped it in his pocket.

"That's what I must do, I suppose," remarked Nead. "I told my folks I'd write last night, but I forgot it. Guess I'll scribble a note while you're talking to the old girl downstairs. Let me use your pen, will you? Mine's in the trunk."

"Sorry, Nead," replied Ira, "but that's something I won't do. I'll lend you about anything but my fountain pen."

“Oh, all right,” said the other haughtily. “I’ve got a better one of my own. Just didn’t want to look for it.”

The interview with Mrs. Magoon was a long-drawn-out ceremony. In the first place, she was not eager to have Nead as a tenant. When she had finally agreed to it, she held out for four dollars and a half a week until Ira informed her that they would each want breakfasts. Four dollars a week was at last agreed on. In the matter of mattresses, however, she was adamant. More, she was even insulted. “That mattress has been on that bed for six years,” she said indignantly, “and nobody’s ever said anything against it before. Anyhow, I ain’t got any better one.”

“All right, ma’am. And how about another bed in there?”

“You can keep that cot, I guess. I ain’t got another bed.”

“But the cot’s as hard as a board!” exclaimed Ira. “It hasn’t any mattress; just a – a sort of pad!”

“Well, I don’t know what I can do,” replied the lady. “I can’t afford to go and buy a lot of new things. It’s all I can do to get along as it is, with rents as low as they are. That room ought to fetch me six dollars a week, it should so. And I’m only getting four for it. And the price of everything a body has to buy is going up all the time. I don’t know what we’re coming to!”

“Suppose I buy a cheap single bed and mattress,” suggested Ira. “Will you take it off my hands when I move out?”

“I might. It wouldn’t be worth full price, though, young man, after being used a year or more.”

“No, that’s so. Suppose you pay me half what it costs me? Would that do?”

“Why, yes, I guess ’twould. But don’t go and buy an expensive one. I wouldn’t want to put much money into it.”

“Well, I dare say I can get a bed for six dollars and a mattress for ten, can’t I?”

“Land sakes! I should hope you could! You can get an iron bed for four dollars and a half that’s plenty good enough and a mattress for six. You go to Levinstein’s on Adams Street. That’s the cheapest place. Ask for Mr. Levinstein and tell him I sent you. I buy a lot from him. Leastways, I used to. I ain’t bought much lately, what with times so hard and rents what they are and everything a body has to have getting to cost more every day. I mind the time when – ”

But Ira had flown, and Mrs. Magoon’s reminiscences were muttered to herself as she made her way down to the mysterious realms of the basement.

Nead flatly refused to spend any money for bed or mattress, but agreed to go halves on the furniture that Ira had already purchased and on anything it might be necessary to buy later. “You see,” he explained, “it will be your bed, and I won’t get anything out of it. Maybe I might swap mattresses with you if I like yours better, though,” he concluded with a laugh.

“You just try it!” said Ira grimly.

He purchased the bed and mattress before first recitation hour, paying, however, more than Mrs. Magoon had advised. After testing the six-dollar mattresses Ira concluded that there was such a thing as mistaken economy! After leaving Levinstein’s he remembered the letter in his pocket and dropped it into a pillar box and then hustled for school.

He was somewhat awed by the magnificence of Parkinson Hall as he made his way up the steps and entered the rotunda. It still lacked ten minutes of first hour, which was nine o’clock, and the entrance and the big, glass-domed hall were filled with groups of waiting fellows. He found a place out of the way and looked about him interestedly. The rotunda was a chamber of spaciousness and soft, white light. The stone walls held, here and there, Latin inscriptions – Ira tried his hand at one of them and floundered ingloriously – and there were several statues placed at intervals. A wide doorway admitted at each side to the wings, and into one of the corridors he presently ventured. There were three doors to his right and as many to his left, each opened and showing a cheerfully bright and totally empty classroom, and at the end of the corridor was a stairway leading to the floor above. About that time a gong clanged and, with a hurried and surreptitious glance at the schedule card in his pocket, Ira began a search for Room L. A small youth in short trousers came to his assistance and he found it at

the end of the opposite wing. He had rather hoped to run across Mart Johnston, but it was not until he had taken a seat in the recitation room that he saw that youth several rows nearer the front. Mart didn't see him, however, for he was busily engaged in whispering to a good-looking, dark-complexioned fellow beside him whom Ira surmised to be "Brad." The whispering, which was general, suddenly died away and the occupants of the seats, fully a half-hundred in number, Ira judged, arose to their feet and began to clap loudly. Ira followed suit without knowing the reason for the demonstration until he caught sight of a tall, thin figure in black making its way up the side aisle toward the platform. Then he clapped louder, for the figure was that of Professor Addicks, and Ira already had a soft spot in his heart for the pleasant-voiced man who had spoken so kindly to him the day before.

Professor Addicks bowed and smiled, standing very straight on the platform with one gnarled hand on the top of the desk. "It gives me much pleasure to see you young gentlemen all back here again and all looking so well," said he. "I trust you have spent a pleasant Summer and that you have returned eager for work – and play. Someone – was it not our own Mark Twain? – said that play is what we like to do, work what we have to do. But he didn't say that we can't make play of our work, young gentlemen. I can think of nothing that would please me more than to overhear you say a few years from now: 'I had a good time at Parkinson. There was football, you know, and baseball and tennis; and then there was Old Addicks' Greek Class!'"

A roar of laughter greeted that, laughter in which the Professor joined gently.

"Oh, I know what you call me," he went on smilingly. "But I like to think that the term 'Old' is applied with some degree of – may I say affection?"

Clapping then, and cries of "Yes, sir!"

"Age, young gentlemen, has its advantages as well as its disadvantages, and amongst them is the accumulation of experiences, which are things from which we gain knowledge. I am old enough to have had many experiences, and I trust that I have gained some slight degree of knowledge. I make no boast as to that, however. In fact, I find that I am considerably less certain of my wisdom now than I was when I was many years younger. Looking back, I see that the zenith of my erudition was reached shortly after I had attained the age of the oldest of you, that is, at about the age of twenty-one years. Today I am far more humble as to my attainments. But, young gentlemen, there is one thing that I have learned and learned well, and that is this: each of us can make his work what he pleases, a task or a pleasure. Some of you won't believe that now, but you'll all learn eventually that it is so. And if you make your work a task you are putting difficulties in your own way, whereas if you make it a pleasure you are automatically increasing your power for work. If it is a pleasure you want to do it, and what we want to do we do with a will. Therefore, young gentlemen, bring sufficient of the element of play to your studies to make them agreeable. You go through hard and difficult exertions for the exercise of your bodies and call it fun. Why, then, pull a long face when you approach the matter of exercising your minds? If one is play, why not the other? A word to the wise is sufficient. I have given you many words. Let us consider the pleasures before us."

There was no class work that day, and after they had had the morrow's lessons indicated and had listed the books required for the courses in Greek and Latin the fellows departed to gather again in another room before another instructor. By noon Ira had faced all his instructors, his head was swimming with a mass of information as to hours, courses of reading and so on, and he had made quite a formidable list of books and stationery to be purchased. He returned to Mrs. Magoon's and spent a half-hour filling in a schedule card, and then, as Nead hadn't returned, set off by himself to The Eggery for dinner. Now that the big school dining room was open in Alumni Hall, The Eggery was rather deserted as to students. The bulk of the patrons today were clerks and shopkeepers.

After dinner he made various purchases of scratch-pads, blue-books, pencils and similar articles, bought several books at a second-hand store and paid a visit to the First National Bank of Warne. There he made a deposit of all the money he had with him save enough change to meet immediate demands, signed his name where the teller pointed and emerged the proud possessor of

his first check book. By that time it was nearly three, and, having nothing especial to interest him, he crossed the campus, made his way around Parkinson Hall and past the little laboratory building and found himself facing the broad expanse of level and still verdant turf known as the Playfield.

There was some twelve acres here, in shape a rectangle, with one corner cut off by Apple Street, which began at the end of Linden Street and proceeded at a tangent to the Cumner Road, the latter forming the northern boundary of the field. Directly in front of Ira were the tennis courts, a dozen in all, of which half were clay and half turf. To the right of the courts was a quarter-mile running track enclosing the gridiron and beyond that were the baseball diamonds, three in number. A sizeable grandstand flanked the gridiron and a smaller one stood behind the home-plate of the 'varsity diamond. Already the playfield was well sprinkled with fellows. Several white-clad youths were practising flights over the high-hurdles, another was jogging around the farther turn of the track, the tennis courts were fairly well occupied and the football candidates were beginning to emerge from the nearby gymnasium and gather in front of the stand.

Ira stopped and watched the tennis for awhile and then gave his attention to the hurdlers. He had never seen hurdlers in action before and he looked on with interest while one after another went springing by with long strides and queer steps; stride, stride, stride, step and over; stride, stride, stride, step and over! Ira wondered what would happen if he ran up to one of those barriers and tried to stick one leg across and double the other one behind him. He chuckled at the mental picture he got! One of the hurdlers interested him particularly. He was a much shorter and chunkier lad than the others; in age probably seventeen. There was no useless flesh on him, but he was very solidly built and had more weight than the usual boy of his age. As a hurdler he was persevering rather than brilliant. He struck four hurdles out of the ten invariably, each time throwing himself out of his stride and just saving himself from a fall, but he finished through with a fine, dogged patience, rested and went at it again.

"If," thought Ira, "I was selecting a fellow to win one of these hurdle races I wouldn't pick him, but if I was choosing a chap to – to hunt for the South Pole or take on a hard job and finish it I guess he'd be the one!"

When the hurdlers had picked up their sweaters and gone panting back to the gymnasium Ira turned toward the grandstand. By this time a half-hundred boys in football togs were assembled on the field, while twice that number were seated in the stand to watch the first practice of the year. Ira found a seat a little removed from the throng and viewed the gathering. Even as he turned his eyes toward the candidates their number was increased by the arrival of some eighteen or twenty others accompanied by a man of perhaps thirty years whose air of authority plainly stamped him as the coach. By his side was a strapping youth with broad shoulders, a slim waist and sturdy legs who was quite as plainly the captain. He had tawny hair, light eyes and a lean, sun-browned face that, without being handsome, was striking. He looked, Ira decided, like a born leader. And those shoulders and that deep chest and the powerful legs under the brown-and-white ringed stockings suggested that he was as capable physically as any other way. A rotund man in brown denim overalls pushed a wheelbarrow around the corner of the stand and from it unloaded a surprising amount of paraphernalia; a canvas bag containing a half-dozen scuffed footballs, many grey blankets, a water bucket and several shining new tin dippers, head-guards, several pairs of shoes, a bunch of leather laces, a nickel-plated horn with a rubber bulb attached and a leather case whose contents were not divulged that afternoon but which Ira later discovered to hold adhesive tape, bandages, phials and similar first-aid requisites.

A tall, immaculate youth in street attire joined coach and captain. He carried a square of light board to which were held by a clamp a number of sheets of paper. Ira surmised correctly that he was the team manager. A short conference ensued between the trio and then things awoke to action.

"First squad down the field," called the coach. "New candidates this way, please!"

The knot of players who had accompanied him on the field went off with a couple of the worn footballs, while the balance of the fellows gathered around. They represented all ages from fifteen to twenty, although there were but two or three who looked more than eighteen; and were of

assorted sizes and of various builds. There were slim boys there and dumpy boys; undersized boys and overgrown boys; fat boys and lean boys; and boys who weren't anything in particular. All wore football togs of some description, many new, more old. Here and there Ira caught sight of a brown sweater with the white P followed by the insignia "2nd," and here and there a white sweater bearing the letters "P.B.B.C." in brown. But for the most part the candidates, perhaps sixty-odd in number, appeared to be tyros. What the coach said to them Ira was too far distant to hear, but he spoke for several minutes amidst respectful silence. Then the group broke up and a minute later the candidates had formed three groups at different parts of the field and were passing balls to each other.

It wasn't an exciting sight, and after a half-hour Ira pulled himself from his sun-smitten plank and made his way homeward across the campus, loitering a little in the grateful shade of the buildings. He passed three or four groups of fellows studying, or at least making a pretence of studying, under the lindens, and always he was followed by curious and faintly amused looks. He didn't know it, however, and wouldn't have been troubled if he had known it. It certainly didn't occur to him that anyone could find anything unusual in his appearance now that he was wearing his blue serge. He had bought that suit in Bangor and he had the salesman's word for it that it was absolutely the last cry in fashionable attire and that it fitted him perfectly. Perhaps, however, the salesman had been nearsighted. Let us be charitable and think so; for the fact is that that blue serge suit was too short as to trousers, leaving a painful lapse between the edge of each cuff and Ira's low shoes – a lapse rather startlingly occupied by faded brown socks – and the coat was ungracefully long and fell away at the back of his neck. Possibly the waistcoat fitted as well as the salesman had asserted, but Ira wasn't wearing the waistcoat today. There is no gainsaying that, judged by the standard of the flannel-garbed youths under the trees, Ira's appearance was somewhat unusual at Parkinson.

As he crossed Washington Avenue from the centre gate and entered School Street he found himself hoping a trifle wistfully that he would find Nead in the room, for he was beginning to feel a bit lonesome and out of it. But he was destined to disappointment, for when he opened the door the room was quite empty. There were, however, evidences of recent occupation, evidences both olfactive and optical. First, there was a distinct odour of cigarette smoke, and, second, there was a note propped up against the lamp on the desk.

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