ERNST CLAYTON HOLT

THE MARK OF THE KNIFE

Clayton Ernst

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE NEWCOMER

Ridgley School, with its white buildings set comfortably among the maples and the oaks that crown the flat top of the hill a mile to the west of the village of Hamilton, attracts and holds the attention of all eyes that fall upon it. Partly perhaps because the dormitories and the recreation halls fit into the landscape and do not jut boldly and crudely above the trees – as so many buildings on hilltops do – there is an air of hominess and informality about the place which new visitors generally notice and mention to Doctor Wells, its head.

But it is one thing to ride up to Ridgley School in an automobile from the Hamilton Station with half a dozen other new Ridgleyites, some of whom have already become your friends, and to get your first view of the campus while cheerful voices are sounding in your ears, and quite another thing to walk up the long winding road from the village alone and to wonder as you come nearer and nearer to those neat white buildings whether you will succeed in making any friends at all among the fellows who have come up in the automobiles. Under those conditions Ridgley School might seem cold and austere and full of unpleasant possibilities.

That in fact was the situation of the newcomer who was walking swiftly toward the white buildings one morning late in September. He was entering upon an adventure that filled him with mingled excitement and gloom – excitement because of the mystery of the new life opening before him, gloom because of the necessity of giving up so much that had made him happy in the past. He went directly to the office of the Head in the building nearest the road and announced himself to Doctor Wells:

"I am Findley Holbrook."

Doctor Wells, whose face looked young in spite of the gray hair at his temples, got up from his chair and shook hands gravely. "I'm glad to see you, Findley," he said; "I hope you're going to like the school and that the school will like you. We've assigned you to Gannett Hall; I'll have one of the masters take you over and introduce you to the boys who've already come. We don't do much to-day except get settled. Did you bring your things?"

"My father is going to bring them up this noon," Findley replied. "I thought I'd better come early to start in with the other fellows."

Doctor Wells put him in charge of Mr. Stevens, who took him over to Gannett Hall, a three-story building with its ivy-covered front to the campus and its back to the tennis courts. A dozen boys were standing on the steps; they had been talking and laughing, but as the newcomer approached them with the master, their voices died away and they paused in their conversations. A black-haired boy, tall and heavily built, immediately called out:

"Hello, Teeny-bits!"

The new boy recognized the one who had hailed him as Tracey Campbell, who had been in the class above him in the public school at Greensboro. "Teeny-bits" was the name by which Findley Holbrook had been known ever since he could remember and to hear himself thus addressed brought to him a momentarily pleasant feeling, even though Tracey Campbell had never been a special friend of his. When Findley was younger he had been so small that some one had called him "Teeny-bits" and the name had stuck. At the public school in Greensboro, in the village of Hamilton, in his home,

every one called him Teeny-bits, and though the name did not apply to him now as appropriately as it had applied when he was four or five years younger, it still fitted him so well that no one questioned it.

Mr. Stevens smiled as he heard it from Tracey Campbell's lips and glanced at his young companion. A compact, slim body somewhat under the average height for seventeen, square shoulders, a very youthful mouth, eyes that seemed older than the rest of him and light brown, almost tow-colored hair, were the characteristics of Teeny-bits Holbrook that Mr. Stevens, the English master, saw. He said to himself that Teeny-bits was an apt nickname.

There were other characteristics that Mr. Stevens did not see; one of them revealed itself half an hour after the master had introduced Teeny-bits to the members of the school who occupied the third-floor rooms in Gannett Hall. The newcomer found himself possessed of a small and plain, but comfortable room, in which a bed, a chest of drawers, a table and two chairs were the chief articles of furniture. It looked out on the tennis courts and commanded a view of Hamilton village with its twin church spires sticking up through the trees like white spar-buoys out of a green sea. It made Teeny-bits a little homesick to look down there. His thoughts were quickly turned in other directions, however. Several of the boys came into his room, led by a tall, over-grown fellow who had been standing on the steps of the hall when Teeny-bits had entered. He came in at the head of the others, grinning confidently as if he were looking forward to something that would provide amusement.

"Friends," he said in the stagey sort of voice that a person might use in talking to an audience, "meet Teeny-bits – that's his name."

The boys behind the leader smiled in a way that suggested something else about to happen.

"Let me introduce myself," said the tall boy. "I'm Bassett, the Western Whirlwind, manager of Terrible Turner, the fighting bear-cat."

All of the boys laughed or snickered, and Teeny-bits smiled expectantly.

"Here is Terrible Turner himself," said Bassett, laying his hand on the shoulder of a pug-nosed lad whose freckled face wore a queer look of combined insolence and friendliness. "For the honor of the school he will wrestle you to test your mettle – he's a wrestler from way-back. Do you accept the challenge?"

Teeny-bits looked at Terrible Turner and then at Bassett, the Whirlwind.

"No," he said, "I don't want to wrestle in these clothes."

"Take off your coat, then; we consider it an insult to the whole school if you don't accept the challenge. Are you afraid of Terrible Turner? He's no bigger than you are."

Teeny-bits saw that the freckle-faced boy was in fact no larger than he, but he did not seem any the more inclined to accept the call to combat.

After waiting a moment, Bassett said in a taunting voice: "Friends, let me introduce you to Teeny-bits, the quitter."

The words had an effect that the Western Whirlwind scarcely expected. Teeny-bits solemnly pulled off his coat, laid it on the bed, and replied to the challenge.

"I won't wrestle with Turner," he said. "He's younger than I am. I'll wrestle with you."

The action that took place during the next few minutes was not quickly forgotten by the members of Ridgley School who were fortunate enough to witness it. In their eyes, for the time being at least, it surpassed the battle of the Marne.

Bassett made a scornful reply to Teeny-bits' challenge and let escape the remark that he wasn't a "baby-killer" and wouldn't wrestle any "bantams."

The words were still in his mouth when Teeny-bits launched himself upon him. There was a brief collision and with a mighty thump Bassett, the Whirlwind, hit the floor flat on his back.

A mighty howl went up from the onlookers; it carried to the farthest corners of Gannett Hall, – and there was such a note of pure enjoyment and hilarious surprise in it that every son of Ridgley upon whose ears it fell wasted no time in abandoning whatever was at hand and dashing madly to the scene of combat. As Bassett struggled to his feet all the roomers in Gannett Hall began to converge on

Teeny-bits' room, and by the time the Western Whirlwind had thrown off his coat and laid hold on his opponent again, they were crowding in at the door and craning their necks to get a view of the fracas.

Bassett's face was the color of a ripe tomato; he considered that he had been caught off his guard, and the hilarious shout of his erstwhile admiring audience caused chagrin, disgust and rage to sweep over him in swift succession. He was mad clear through, and he meant to teach this impudent young Teeny-bits a lesson. He was twenty-five pounds heavier and half a head taller than the newcomer, and he had no other thought in his mind than that he could quickly regain his prestige and wipe out his disgrace, – and he meant to do it in no gentle manner. Teeny-bits should hit the floor and hit it hard, and if the fall should shake the whole building he would not care.

With a bull-like rush Bassett made for Teeny-bits, seized him with rough hands and gave a heave that was intended to finish the bout in one brilliant coup. But in some clever way his small opponent with quick work of his hands secured the under holds and though Bassett lifted him off the floor he clung on like a leech, found his feet after a second and saved himself from going down. The Western Whirlwind wrenched and twisted and heaved; he tugged with both hands, striving mightily to "break the back" of his opponent, he grunted as he worked and left no doubt in the minds of the howling audience that he meant to put an effective finish on the combat. The wonder of the crowd was that Teeny-bits did not immediately fall an easy victim. They gave him the ready sympathy that is generally accorded to the under dog.

"Hold him off, Teeny-bits!"

"Don't let him get you!"

"That's the way!"

"Look out!"

"Trip him up!"

Those were the shouts that filled the room with pandemonium. One moment the struggling pair were over against the wall, the next they bumped the bed or knocked over a chair. Surprise showed on the face of Bassett; he could not understand how this little chap was able to keep his feet. He grunted more fiercely and tried to get a new grip, but Teeny-bits squirmed and shifted and somehow saved himself. The Western Whirlwind began to puff and wheeze; sweat came out on his forehead and his face became redder than ever. Then for an instant he let up in his heaves as if to take breath for a new and more furious attack.

It was a fatal pause. Until that moment Teeny-bits had been content to cling on and make a defensive fight of it. Now suddenly he changed his tactics to the offensive. By clever leg-work he got Bassett lurching backward. He pressed home his advantage and while a shout of amazement and delight rang in his ears, brought his big antagonist down to the floor with a jar that made the windows rattle.

Bassett, the Whirlwind, lay on his back, half dazed with amazement and feeling too weak to rise because most of the wind seemed to have been knocked out of him. Once more, as of old, David had slain Goliath, and the victor was receiving congratulations.

At that moment a boy larger than any who had been in the room pushed his way through the crowd. "No fighting in the dormitory!" he cried. "What's all this about?" And then he saw Bassett just rising weakly to a sitting posture and observed the other boys slapping Teeny-bits on the back. He gazed in doubt from one to the other and then said to the diminutive conqueror: "Did you put this big lummux down?"

"You bet he did!" cried a dozen voices.

"Well, you did a mighty good job," he declared. "You're new here, but a lot of these other fellows are not, and they know as well as I do that we're not supposed to fight or have wrestling matches in the dormitories. Get on your feet there, Bassett, and mind your own business hereafter. I know well enough that you started this. You got just what you deserved, didn't you!"

In an authoritative way that was confident without being "bossy" he ordered the boys out of the room, and when the last of them had gone and the sound of their joking remarks to the crestfallen Bassett was receding, he said to Teeny-bits:

"You must be a whale of a scrapper for your size – and I'm mighty glad you gave that fresh-mouthed Bassett a good lesson. But don't get into any more trouble with him. You know we have a sort of self-government here, and we can't be smashing up things in the dormitory. I room downstairs in Number 26. Come in sometime soon."

Later in the day Teeny-bits learned that his visitor was Neil Durant, pitcher on the baseball team, and captain of the football eleven. He was dormitory leader, which meant that he represented Gannett Hall on the self-government committee of the school. Turner, who gave Teeny-bits the information, was only one of many boys who dropped in that day to see the conqueror of Bassett, the Whirlwind. Turner – the same Terrible Turner who had been willing enough for combat earlier in the morning – confessed with a grin that he was pretty glad Teeny-bits hadn't wrestled with him! "If I'd hit the floor as hard as Bassett did, I'd bet my backbone would have been broken into forty pieces," he said. "Oh, what a pippin of a thump!"

Teeny-bits liked Turner's frank, outspoken way. He made up his mind that he liked him still better when Turner said:

"None of the fellows call me Terrible Turner, you know – that was just some bunk that Bassett invented. They all call me Snubby – on account of my nose, I guess."

That noon an incident occurred that some of the roomers in Gannett Hall noticed: just before lunch Teeny-bits' trunk came. Mr. Holbrook brought it up from the village in a buggy drawn by a sorrel horse and with Teeny-bits' help carried it to the room on the third floor. Several of the boys remembered seeing Mr. Holbrook in the Hamilton station and when Teeny-bits introduced him as his father they suddenly realized that the conqueror of Whirlwind Bassett and the bearer of the queer nickname was the son of the station agent and a native of the little hamlet that nestled at the foot of the hill.

Mr. Holbrook was white-haired and he walked with a slight limp that made him seem old. He looked at Teeny-bits' new friends with a kindly twinkle in his eyes and told them that they were all "lucky boys to go to such a fine school" and advised them to "study hard so as to be smart men." If he had not been Teeny-bits' father, they might have thought he was a queer old duffer.

When Mr. Holbrook had said good-by to Teeny-bits he went over to Doctor Wells' office and remained alone with the Head for half an hour. At the end of that time he came out and drove the old sorrel horse through the campus and down the hill toward the village. One or two of the boys who saw him wondered what he had been talking about so long with the Head.

Old Daniel Holbrook with the limp and the white hair meant every word that he had said about the boys being lucky to go to such a fine school, but he meant it particularly in the case of Teeny-bits, whose situation in life was entirely different from the situation of most of the other Ridgleyites. They came to Ridgley from half the states in the Union – from California and Ohio and the Carolinas and New York and New England – they came well-equipped and carried themselves with a manner that suggested the well-to-do homes they had left. Teeny-bits Holbrook was there because he had won the scholarship that under the terms of the endowment of the school was awarded each year to a public-school student who lived within the confines of Sherburne County. Fennimore Ridgley, whose coal mines had yielded the fortune with which he had founded the school on the hill above the village of Hamilton, had been born and bred in Sherburne County. He had long been lying in a peaceful grave with a tall granite shaft above it, but each year one of the boys of Sherburne County received a gift from him – the privilege of coming free of expense to Ridgley. For two years Teeny-bits had been going to the high school at Greensboro, covering the four miles on his bicycle morning and afternoon. Then the unbelievable had happened: he had won the Ridgley scholarship, and father

and mother Holbrook, whose hearts were centered on his future, received the news as a direct gift from Heaven. Their pride in him made up for the loneliness of the house after he had gone.

The career of Teeny-bits at Ridgley was not to be without its incidents, it seemed. He had been a roomer in Gannett Hall only ten days and the feeling of newness had not worn off when the school was treated to a sensation that caused no little talk and brought him into more prominence than had the victory in the wrestling match.

On a Wednesday morning before breakfast a sheet of paper was found tacked to the bulletin board that hung inside the door of the dormitory. The message that it bore had been typed crudely as if the person who had done it were a novice in the use of the typewriter. It consisted of two straggling lines and the words were:

"Beware of Teeny-bits! Holbrook is not his name! He's ashamed to tell the truth!"

Two dozen boys saw the paper and read the message before Snubby Turner tore it down and carried it up to Teeny-bits' room. They told other boys about it and no end of talk went round the school.

"This was on the bulletin board," said Snubby to Teeny-bits. "A lot of the fellows wonder what the dickens it means."

"You're a good friend of mine, Snubby," said Teeny-bits, "and I'll tell you what it means. I wonder if Bassett put it up – but I don't see how he knew anything about me – unless Tracey Campbell told him. Tracey lives over in Greensboro and went to public school with me."

"Bassett tags around after him like a tame sheep – I don't like either one of them," said Snubby.

The story that Teeny-bits told his friend was the same story that Mr. Holbrook had told Doctor Wells.

Teeny-bits had never known who his father and mother were – and yet his mother, or at least the woman whom he believed to be his mother, lay buried in the village cemetery. Her grave was marked with a plain slab of marble in which was cut the brief inscription:

"An unknown Mother. Died August 9th. 1903."

Teeny-bits remembered well the story of that tragic day as told him by the man whom he had always fondly known as Dad, – old Dad Holbrook with the white hair and the limp. On that long-ago day a train had crawled slowly into the station at Hamilton. There was a hot box on one of the cars, and while the train waited for the heated metal to cool, a woman with a small child – a boy of about a year and a half – stepped down to the track to find relief from the stifling air of the car. The Chicago express had come hurtling down the track at fifty miles an hour. Warning shouts had gone up, but the young woman had appeared oblivious of her danger. Those who saw the tragedy were convinced that she was deaf. At any rate every one agreed that she was unaware of the oncoming express until too late. Then, sensing the danger or hearing at last the shriek of the whistle behind her, she snatched up the child and tried to leap to safety. The realization that she was too late must have come upon her, for in the last fraction of a second she tossed the child to one side. The express, grinding all its brakes in a vain endeavor to stop, had instantly killed her. The baby escaped with a few scratches.

The matter of identifying the unfortunate mother had at first seemed not too difficult, but a search of the bag that she had left in her seat in the car revealed nothing that in any way offered a clue as to who she was or whence she had come. Daniel Holbrook had attended to the burial of the unknown mother and had taken the child home, thinking their relatives would soon appear to claim him. But no one had ever come for the boy and none of the notices that the Holbrooks had put in the newspapers had brought a claimant. After a year the Holbrooks had adopted the child and had put a stone over the unnamed grave in the cemetery.

When Teeny-bits finished telling his story, Snubby Turner's eyes were round with wonder. Instead of detracting from the prestige of Teeny-bits, the story had the effect of enhancing it, and if the person who put the paper on the bulletin board intended it to effect an injury, his attempt defeated itself, for the true story of Teeny-bits rapidly spread by word of mouth and, instead of bringing him

into disrepute, cast about him a certain air of mystery that caused the boys in other dormitories to seek him out to make his acquaintance. Thus, through no effort of his own, Teeny-bits Holbrook found himself somewhat of a character at Ridgley School before he had been there two weeks.

CHAPTER II
A BLEMISH

In the middle of October Teeny-bits surprised every one by going out for the football team. Even his most loyal friends thought that he had lost his senses. The team was particularly heavy this year; the first-string men were big, well-formed, aggressive players of the type of Neil Durant, who weighed one hundred and sixty pounds with not an ounce of fat, and who was quite as good a half-back, it was said, as many college players. The most that Teeny-bits could hope for was a place on the scrub, but that meant drudgery of the worst sort and a daily mauling that was enough to take the courage out of larger boys than he.

"They'll make Hamburger steak out of you!" warned Snubby Turner. "You'd better not do it."

"Good night, Teeny-bits! do you want to commit suicide!" said Fred Harper. "I'll hang a wreath on your door."

But the first team did not put an end to Teeny-bits' career. They laughed when the coach gave him a chance on the scrub one afternoon and laughed harder when he at last got a chance to carry the ball and by clever dodging succeeded in making a twenty-yard gain. He slipped out of the grasp of Ned Stillson and nearly eluded big Tom Curwood, who covered Teeny-bits so completely when he finally had him down that ball and runner were almost completely out of sight.

"He's as slippery as an eel," said big Tom.

"And so small you can't see him," growled Ned Stillson.

After that the first team watched him like tomcats watching a mouse and Teeny-bits got no chance to break away.

In the locker room after practice Mr. Murray, the coach, came over and laid a friendly hand on his arm. "Keep it up," he said; "if you weighed about twenty-five pounds more, by jingo, I believe you'd make the team."

The members of the eleven also were friendly and treated him as they might have treated a mascot in whom they had great faith. In the shower-bath room Neil Durant jumped out from under the cold spray and shook the water from his lean, firmly-muscled body just as Teeny-bits came in. The big half-back looked admiringly at the new candidate for the scrub and said:

"Good work, Teeny-bits! You're the original bear-cat all right."

Teeny-bits grinned appreciatively as he stepped under the shower. Neil stood near by, drying himself with a Turkish towel. As the smaller boy turned this way and that under the spattering water the half-back looked critically at his compact body and firm muscles. To be sure, Teeny-bits was small, but he was shaped like a young god and modeled with perfect symmetry. Something else, however, attracted Neil's attention.

"That's a peculiar mark you have on the back of your shoulder," he said, as Teeny-bits turned off the water.

"It's a sort of birthmark, I guess," said Teeny-bits. "My trademark."

What Neil Durant referred to was a five inch, terra-cotta colored blemish on Teeny-bits' smooth back. The shape of the mark was what made it peculiar. It resembled strikingly a dagger-like knife with a tapering blade and a thin handle. Once seen it was not likely to be forgotten.

In the same manner that the true story of Teeny-bits had spread through the school after his unknown ill-wisher had tried to injure his name by posting the notice on the Gannett Hall bulletin board, the news spread from boy to boy that the conqueror of Bassett and the new candidate for the scrub bore on the smooth skin of his shoulder a strange and curiously formed mark, and during the days that immediately followed Teeny-bits' first appearance on the football field, more than one candidate for the team made it a point to be present in the shower-bath room in order that he might

cast seemingly casual glances at the unusual mark. Some of the Ridgleyites were more open in their curiosity and did not hesitate to question Teeny-bits, but they all received answers similar to the one that Neil Durant had received. To Teeny-bits there was nothing strange about the mark, for it had been there from the time of his earliest memory and he had thought little more about it than he had of the fact that he possessed hands and feet. Snubby Turner, whose bump of curiosity was as big as a watermelon, lingered one night in Teeny-bits' room while the new boy was undressing.

"I want to see that knife-thing on your back that I heard the fellows talking about," said Snubby frankly. "Come over under the light so I can get a good look. That *is* queer – the hilt of the knife is curved a little just the same on both sides. It looks to me as if somebody had drawn it on your back – only the color doesn't look like a tattoo."

"Just a freak of nature," said Teeny-bits with a laugh. "I guess I was born with it."

Sudden popularity has been the downfall of many a schoolboy and many a man, but it did not seem to have any adverse effect on Teeny-bits Holbrook.

"It rolls off him like water off a roof!" exclaimed Fred Harper, who was one of the newcomer's greatest admirers. And so it seemed, for Teeny-bits went about his work methodically and seemed entirely unimpressed by the attentions of his numerous followers. He made time to do his studying and did it well, but he was not what his classmates called a "shark"; he had to work and work hard for what he got.

One morning during a class in English literature, Mr. Stevens asked Bassett to tell what he knew about the writings of Walter Pater.

"Well," said Bassett, putting on a look of extreme intelligence, "he wrote quite a while ago and he didn't succeed at first very much, but toward the end he was more successful."

"Is that all you can tell me?" asked Mr. Stevens.

"Oh, no!" said Bassett with the manner of one whose knowledge has been underrated. "He was quite a figure in his time and he wrote a lot of stuff – I think it was – poetry."

"That's enough, Bassett," said Mr. Stevens. "Holbrook, can you tell me anything about Walter Pater?"

"No, sir, I can't," said Teeny-bits.

"Thank you," said Mr. Stevens. "I'd rather have an honest answer than an attempt to bluff!"

Every one in the room looked at Bassett, who scowled back at the smiles of his classmates. "I didn't try to bluff, sir," he said to Mr. Stevens, but the English master paid no attention to the denial and every one knew that the self-styled "Whirlwind" had been guilty of treating the truth as if it had been a rubber band.

The incident was small, but it increased the enmity that Bassett had for Teeny-bits and added another score to those scores that he intended some day to wipe out.

There were others in Ridgley School who bore Teeny-bits no affection – one of them was Tracey Campbell, who had been the first to hail the newcomer by his nickname. Tracey Campbell was a candidate for the football team playing on the scrub; Coach Murray, it was said, looked with favor upon him and was about to promote him to the first eleven. But of late Mr. Murray had not paid so much attention to Campbell; his interest, as far as the scrub was concerned, seemed to be veering in another direction.

It may have been that Tracey Campbell had something in mind more than merely playing a prank when he took it upon himself on a Wednesday night to amuse some of the fellows who were lounging about the steps of the dormitories.

Old Daniel Holbrook had driven up from the station, sitting erect in the buggy behind Jed, the sorrel horse. His errand, as he had explained to Ma Holbrook, was to see how Teeny-bits was "getting along." He arrived at dusk and, after hitching the sorrel to a post outside Gannett Hall, mounted the two flights of steps to Number 34. He found Teeny-bits just beginning to study.

"Well, now, it does seem nice to see you," he said. "Your Ma and I've been kind o' lonesome, and she allowed as how I ought to pay you a mite of a call. I said as how she ought to come too, but I couldn't budge her. She said wimmen folks weren't wanted around boardin' schools."

"It's great to see you," said Teeny-bits. "The fellows here have been wonderful, but of course it isn't home, you know, and I've missed you folks a lot. I wish Ma *had* come; you tell her not to be so bashful next time."

Old Daniel Holbrook smiled benignly. It pleased him to have Teeny-bits so obviously glad to see him and so sincerely speaking of Ma and his wish to see her.

"I suppose wimmin folks *are* a trifle more timid than men folks about putting themselves forred," he remarked, "but when it comes to thoughtfulness you can't get 'em beat. Now take this box that she put into my hands – I don't know but what I'm entering into a conspiracy to break some of the rules of this school, but Ma just plain insisted that I bring it along and I have a *faint* suspicion that it contains somethin' to eat. I seen her fussin' round the kitchen with choc'late frosted cake and some other contraptions, and from the size of the package I'd say she'd put most of 'em in. The question is: am I breakin' any regalations if I leave it? Just say the word, and I'll take it back home."

"Not on your life!" said Teeny-bits fervently. "You're not breaking any rules, and believe me, whatever it is, it won't last very long. I've some friends around here who would climb right through the transom if they knew that there was anything like that in this room."

"That being the case," said the station master, "here she remains. I'll put it on the table. Now tell me, how's things going?"

"It's so much better than I thought it would be," said Teeny-bits, "that it hardly seems real. I want to tell you that there are some of the finest fellows in the world in this dormitory, and the whole school is just O. K."

While Daniel Holbrook, sitting back comfortably in Teeny-bits' spare chair, listened to the newcomer's impressions of Ridgley School, a bit of action was beginning to develop outside on the campus. Tracey Campbell, strolling across to Gannett Hall with Bassett and three or four other members of the school, who for one reason or another seemed to find pleasure in the company of the two, came in sight of the sorrel horse. There was no question that the station master's steed was ungainly and that harnessed to the old-fashioned buggy he presented to persons who were straining their eyes for the ludicrous a more or less amusing spectacle. The evening was warm and Tracey Campbell had pulled off his sweater. As he went by the sorrel horse he gave the garment a snap which sent one of the sleeves flying against the animal's neck. With a snort of surprise the horse lifted his head and danced backward a step or two in a manner that called forth laughter from the group of Ridgleyites.

"Whoa, Ebeneezer!" said Campbell. "Calm yourself," And then an idea came to his mind. "Here's a chance for a little moonlight ride," he said. "Who'll come along? We'll borrow this old nag for a few minutes and tour the campus."

Bassett, who was ready for any excitement that offered itself, climbed into the buggy after Campbell, while one of the other fellows untied the hitch-rope.

"All right, we're off," said Tracey, lifting the whip from the socket and snapping it vigorously.

Old Jed apparently wasn't accustomed to the sound or the feel of the whip, for when Campbell touched his flank smartly he plunged forward and began to trot around the driveway that circled the campus.

"Some racer!" said Bassett. "Can't you get any more speed out of him than that? I'll show you how to drive him."

"No, you won't," said Campbell. "I can get as much speed out of him as anybody can. I'll bet you that if you'll get out and run, I can beat you round the campus."

"How much'll you bet?" asked Bassett.

"Oh, I'll bet you a good dinner," said Tracey.

"All right," said Bassett, and jumped over the side of the buggy.

By this time several members of the school who were passing through the campus had paused and were watching the performance. Some one called out: "Ready, get set, go!" and Bassett, who had never been much of a runner, started out at a lumbering pace around the drive. Campbell immediately brought the whip down heavily upon the sorrel's back, which so surprised the horse that instead of dashing forward in pursuit of Bassett, he did what he had never been known to do before, – put his head down and made his heels rattle a vigorous protest against the whiffletree and dashboard. Shouts of laughter rose louder and louder over the campus, and dormitory windows were thrown up here and there while the occupants of the rooms thrust out their heads to get a view of what was going on.

"Get up, you bucking bronco!" yelled Campbell, and once more brought the whip down on the sorrel. By this time, consternation and terror had taken possession of old Jed; he suddenly abandoned his kicking and set out at a gallop around the driveway. Campbell stood up like a Roman charioteer and urged his steed on, but the lumbering Bassett had gained too much of a start, and although the finish was close, the so-called Whirlwind passed the steps of Gannett Hall while the sorrel was still a length or two behind. Tracey Campbell braced himself firmly and jerked back on the reins so roughly that the horse was brought to a sliding stop.

"You win," he yelled to Bassett. "I'll buy the dinner."

Attracted by the commotion, Teeny-bits had thrust up the window of his room, and old Daniel Holbrook had joined him in looking down upon the scene. At first the station master had laughed a little and said:

"Some of your friends seem to be playing a few pranks on me."

But when he heard the noise of the whip and saw the horse jump with fright and pain, his expression had changed and he had started down to the campus. Teeny-bits followed close behind him; they had reached the steps of Gannett Hall when the spectacular finish of the race occurred. Tracey Campbell, seeing the owner of the horse, leaped out of the buggy and said facetiously:

"I just borrowed this animule of yours for a minute. He's some *racer*, I'll say."

"I'll say to you, young man," said Daniel Holbrook, "that that isn't any way to treat a horse. I don't mind a mite having you borrow my rig, but I *do* mind having you abuse a dumb animal that hasn't any way to come back at you."

Two or three of the boys in the crowd tittered, but most of them were silent. They knew that the station master was right, and they were ashamed that they had joined in the laughter. But Tracey Campbell still seemed to take it as a joke; he looked at the station master with a grin and said in a tone which suggested that he was imitating:

"He's blowin' and puffin' *a mite*, but I guess he ain't injured none, and I reckon as how he'll pull through the crisis and amble you home if you drive real calm."

Campbell's attitude and manner of speaking carried an open insult; it stirred up in Teeny-bits a feeling of intense rage. A great desire came over him to walk up to his rival for the football team and punch him in the head. He started forward and said in a voice which trembled a little in spite of him:

"When you speak to my father I want you" —

Teeny-bits did not finish what he had intended to say, for at that moment Mr. Stevens came briskly up to the group and in no uncertain tones demanded to know what was going on. Some one started to explain, but only a few words had been said before the English master instinctively, as it were, grasped the import of what had been happening.

"Campbell," he said, "get up to your room and be quick about it! We've had enough from you for to-night. And Mr. Holbrook, I'm sorry that there has been any trouble. I hope it was merely thoughtlessness."

"No damage done, I guess," said the station master. "I don't like to see young fellows misusing animals, but I suppose it was just a bit of high jinks, so we'll forget all about it."

The old man's sportsmanship and generosity in this last remark won for him the respect of the Ridgleyites who had remained on the scene, and the result of the incident was to make them feel that Campbell had acted with little or no decency.

Teeny-bits' first appearance on the football field and his rather spectacular work had not been a mere "flash in the pan." He had gone out every afternoon with the scrub, and the members of the first team had learned that it was just as well to keep their eyes wide open and their heads up when there was any likelihood that Teeny-bits would run with the ball. In spite of their vigilance he succeeded nearly every afternoon in making a gain that called attention to his ability to squirm through a broken field.

He did not approach the skill of some of the first team members, particularly Neil Durant, the captain, who regularly romped through the scrub as if they were wooden Indians, but he did seem to have a natural ability to dodge and to worm his way through opposing tacklers.

An incident occurred on the last Wednesday of October that had a distinct influence on Teeny-bits' career. That day before practice Coach Murray talked to the scrub in no mollycoddle terms.

"The first team isn't getting enough competition," he declared. "You fellows on the scrub go to sleep and take a nap every afternoon; you don't play the game with any heart; every time you see one of the first-string backs charging through your line, you act as if you thought you were a party of snails on a railroad track trying to tackle an express train. There's nothing to be afraid of; if any of you expect to be advanced to the first squad you'd better begin to acquire a little ambition. We have a hard game Saturday with Wilton; I want to see you chaps come back to life to-day and show me whether you are candidates for a team or for a grave-yard."

The scrub tried hard; they charged low and fast and for ten minutes prevented the first team from scoring; they even recovered the ball on a fumble and in six rushes, in which Tracey Campbell figured largely, carried the ball forward twenty yards to the middle of the field. Fred Harper, the scrub quarter-back, then snapped the ball to Teeny-bits, who eluded the opposing end, slipped out of the clutches of the left half-back and was finally downed by Neil Durant ten yards from the first team's goal line.

The scrub was within striking distance and Harper gave his signals with nervous eagerness; he felt as if his life depended on seeing the ball placed behind that goal line ten short yards away. But the first team held solidly and then on the third try Tracey Campbell fumbled the ball. Neil Durant picked it up and tucking it under his arm was off like a grey-hound. Two of the scrub tackled him, but he shook them off and ran on with every chance apparently of covering the length of the field for a touchdown. Coming from the right was Teeny-bits, but at first no one gave the new member of the scrub a thought, for Durant was a sprinter and he was going down field at his best pace. To every one's surprise, however, Teeny-bits held his position and gradually began to force Durant nearer the side line. No one else was in the race. The captain glanced sideways and saw who his pursuer was; he veered further toward the left and concentrated on speed; still Teeny-bits held his own. Then suddenly Durant, seeing that the side-line was dangerously close, shifted direction and tried to pass his pursuer. But Teeny-bits was not to be evaded; he gathered himself and plunged, and next moment the captain of the big "team" was down at the fifteen-yard line with his smaller opponent gripping him tightly around the shins. For the second time Neil Durant had a word of approval for the younger boy.

"Good work!" he said. "You got me clean."

The scrub endeavored to live up to the pace that Teeny-bits had set, but they had shot their bolt and the first team pushed the ball over in three tries and scored two more touchdowns in the course of the next fifteen minutes.

One result of the day's play was that the scrub received some well-deserved praise; another was that Coach Murray called Teeny-bits aside and said some words that sank in deeply and that seemed to the newcomer at Ridgley to carry an import that presaged the realization of one of his fondest hopes.

"Teeny-bits," said the coach. "I'm going to pull you up to the first squad; you may not get a chance to play in many of the games, but I think I can use you as a substitute back. That was a good tackle you made and a good run, but you have a lot to learn yet. One thing is change of pace when you carry the ball. If you sprint the way you do in a track dash, the men against you have a good target for a swift tackle, but if you keep something in reserve and turn it on just as you're about to be tackled, you'll do better. Watch Durant; you can learn a lot from him."

Teeny-bits walked on air on the way back to his room, but no one knew it, for it was his way not to show elation in things that concerned himself, and he told no one of his promotion, for he preferred to let the news get abroad by other means. Neil Durant overtook him before he reached the campus and walked with him to Gannett Hall. "You're always springing surprises, aren't you, Teeny-bits?" said the big half-back with a smile. "I didn't think you had so much speed."

"I don't believe I could do it again," said Teeny-bits deprecatingly.

"Of course you could," declared the captain. "Coach just told me you're to join our squad. I'm glad; I'm counting on you to do big things."

Teeny-bits looked up at his companion and said to himself that one of the biggest reasons why he wanted to do big things was to win the close friendship of this hard-fighting, clean-playing "regular" at his side. Aloud he said: "I'm going to try like thunder!"

When Coach Murray at the beginning of practice next day announced that Holbrook was to leave the scrub and join the first squad there were murmurs of approval that were joined in by nearly every one. The exception was Tracey Campbell, who considered that Teeny-bits had been unjustly promoted over his head. He determined to show up the newcomer if the opportunity came, and it was noticeable in the practice that afternoon, when Teeny-bits got a chance to play with the first team for a few minutes, that Campbell made a tremendous effort to down the new member of the squad with a crash.

Bassett was watching on the side lines and that evening he came round to Campbell's room with a proposition.

CHAPTER III
A PLAN AND A GAME

Campbell and the Western Whirlwind had certain qualities in common; both had ambitions to be "sporty." They shared an inclination for lurid neckties, fancy socks and striped silk shirts; they believed themselves wise as to the ways of the world, and each had been heard to express the opinion that Ridgley School was a "slow old dump." Campbell was the leader of the two – he dominated Bassett as a political boss dominates his hench-men. One reason was that Bassett foresaw favors to be had at the hands of Tracey Campbell.

Tracey's home was only eight miles away – just on the other side of Greensboro – and within recent years his life had been greatly changed through the fortunes of war. To many homes in the busy town of Greensboro the struggle in Europe had brought privation and to some it had brought tragedy, but to the Campbells it had brought prosperity. Campbell, Senior, was a wholesale dealer in leather; he had caught the market just right and, in the expressive words of his neighbors, had made "a mountain of money." He had moved from his modest home in the town and had built a pretentious house on a hillock two miles to the west. Those of the townspeople who had been inside "the mansion" declared that every chair and every picture on the wall was screaming aloud, "He got rich quick! He got rich quick!"

Campbell, Senior, did not believe that the son of a man who had made a million should remain in the public school, and so he had arranged to have Tracey go to Ridgley. The younger Campbell had come to the school on the hill with a certain feeling of superiority that was in no small measure owing to his belief that his father was richer than the father of any other fellow in sight.

Bassett had been brought up in a somewhat similar home; his father was a promoter of mines and oil wells and had come naturally by a bombastic manner which he had in turn passed on to his only son. The elder Bassett was known behind his back as Blow-Hard Bassett, and it was said of him that he owned more diamond stick-pins than any other man alive.

On the night after Teeny-bits had practiced for the first time with the "big team", Bassett knocked on Campbell's locked door.

"Who is it?" demanded Campbell, and slipped the catch when he heard Bassett's voice. As soon as the "Whirlwind" had stepped inside, Campbell went over to the window and resumed the occupation in which he had been engaged when Bassett had interrupted him. From the window sill he took a smoldering cigarette and, holding it in his cupped hand so that the glow could not be seen from outside, sucked in, and after a moment cautiously blew the smoke out into the night air. Bassett watched him in silence for a moment and then he said:

"They slipped something over on you, didn't they?"

"What can you expect?" was Campbell's reply. "But I can tell you this – if I don't get a fair show pretty quick, I'm going to quit – and I'll not only quit playing football, but I'll say good-by for a lifetime to Ridgley School. I'm not going to be the goat much longer – you can bet your gold pieces on that."

"You'd have been on the first team already if it hadn't been for Teeny-bits," said Bassett.

"Some day I'm going to show that fellow up," said Campbell. "It makes me sick the way the whole crowd falls for him."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well you watch and see!"

"Got any plan?"

"Not yet."

"I have – one that will work this time." Bassett looked at his friend keenly and seeing that Campbell's face betrayed skepticism he prepared himself mentally to exercise the same talents that had made his father, Blow-Hard Bassett, a successful seller of mining stock.

The game with Wilton, on the last Saturday in October, was the first hard test of the season. The outcome of the struggle with Wilton had always been taken at Ridgley as an indication of the probable result of the game with Jefferson, – the final athletic event of the year and the crisis of the football season. If Ridgley pushed back the sturdy Wilton team and snatched victory from the wearers of the purple, then there were reasonable grounds for hoping that three weeks later there would be a bonfire on the campus and a midnight parade to celebrate a victory over Jefferson, the ancient and honored foe of Ridgley. If, on the other hand, Wilton showed an impertinent disregard for the best line that Ridgley could assemble and carried their impertinence to such an extreme as to romp home with the victory, the situation looked black as ink, and the tense atmosphere that accompanies forlorn hopes took possession of Ridgley School and penetrated not merely to the recitation halls, but even, it was said, to the office of Doctor Wells, the head. In such times there were mighty efforts to bolster up the spirit of the team, to feed it concentrated football knowledge and to ward off by Herculean effort the black shadow of defeat that raised its ugly head like a thunder cloud pushing itself higher and higher over the white buildings on the hill.

Before the Wilton game Coach Murray had a few words to say to the team that made every member tingle with a desire to show what he could do. When the whistle blew and the game began, Teeny-bits was sitting on the side lines with the other substitutes.

Ridgley kicked off to Wilton, and immediately received a terrific surprise. The pigskin went sailing through the air impelled by the heavy boot of big Tom Curwood; it fell into the purple-covered arms of a rangy Wilton half-back who, instead of running with the ball, immediately sent away a long spiral punt that flew over the heads of the charging Ridgley players. Neil Durant yelled out a quick warning and turned with his team-mates.

Ned Stillson was nearest the ball when it struck the ground; he intended to gather it up as it bounced, and then he meant to carry it far back toward the Wilton goal, but his calculations went wrong. His outstretched fingers touched the ball and almost grasped it, but the pigskin oval slipped from him and next instant – to the horror of the Ridgley watchers – was seized by a swift-footed son of Wilton who had come tearing downfield as if some weird instinct had informed him that Ned was to make the fatal error. Before any Ridgley player could overtake him he was lying between the goal posts with a satisfied grin on his features. The game was scarcely thirty seconds old and the score was 6-0 in favor of the invaders! A moment later the Wilton captain kicked an easy goal and the tally was seven.

Nor was that all of the misery in store for Ridgley; before the timekeeper had signaled the end of the first quarter, another disaster had occurred; and this time the element of luck, which might have been said to enter somewhat at least into the scoring of the first touchdown, played favorites no more with Wilton than with Ridgley. The home team was outgeneraled. By a series of strong rushes the visitors carried the ball sixty-five yards for a well-earned touchdown. The baffling thing about their play was a sudden shift; the quarter-back began to shout his numbers, then he yelled "Shift" and with a quick jump several members of the Wilton team took new positions; almost instantly the pigskin was snapped and before the Ridgley players had the Wilton runner down, the ball was five or ten yards nearer their goal line. That had happened again and again during Wilton's successful march to Ridgley's goal line. Wilton scored near the corner of the field and failed to kick the goal. The tally was 13-0.

The brief rest between the first and the second quarters was put to good use by Neil Durant; he got his players together and so rallied their spirits that in the second quarter they not only held their own, but gradually pushed their opponents back and back until they were threatening the line. But they did not quite succeed in scoring; with thirty seconds more to play, Ridgley had the ball on

Wilton's five-yard line. It was first down. A rush through tackle failed and while the Ridgley team was lining up for another try, the timekeeper's whistle blew. The chance had been lost.

The third quarter started more auspiciously; two forward passes netted Ridgley forty yards of gain. The ball was far within the enemy territory again, but Wilton held, and on the fourth down Ned Stillson fell back and made a successful drop kick.

During the rest of this quarter there was a good deal of seesawing back and forth and neither side seemed to have the advantage, until Tom Curwood recovered a fumble on the visitors' twenty-five-yard line. Again the Wilton line held and again the Ridgley team scored by a drop kick. This time it was Neil Durant's toe that sent the oval between the uprights and over the cross-bar. The third quarter ended with the score 13-6, and Wilton's cheering section indulged in vociferous expressions of glee.

At the beginning of the final quarter Coach Murray sent in Teeny-bits to take the place of White, the left half-back, who was limping. The Wilton players glanced at the substitute and exchanged looks of satisfaction; the newcomer seemed too small to be dangerous. It was the first big game that Teeny-bits had ever been in; he was quivering with eagerness to run with the ball. But the opportunity did not seem to come; most of the time Ridgley was on the defensive, fighting desperately to hold back the Wilton plungers.

When Ridgley finally did get its chance the time was slipping swiftly away, and hope was glimmering but faintly in the home stands. There was to be one more sensation, however. The ball was Ridgley's on its own twenty-five-yard line. Durant carried it forward ten yards, then Tom Curwood plunged through for five more. Then Dean called on Teeny-bits.

"Twenty-seven, sixteen, eleven," he called out, and the ball came back swiftly into his hands. Teeny-bits took it from Dean on the run and began to circle the right end of the line; a gap opened for an instant; he was through it like a rabbit diving through a hedge and with a thrill dashed on. He did not mean to stop until the last whitewashed line was behind him.

In front, the Wilton quarter-back was crouching tensely to intercept him. Teeny-bits shifted direction to pass him, but the quarter-back was not only wily, but swift; he was after Teeny-bits like a cat and began to force him to run diagonally across the field. Two Wilton players converged on Teeny-bits from the other side and one of them made a desperate tackle. Teeny-bits used his straight arm to ward off the attack and succeeded in slipping from the tackler's clutches, but the fraction of a second that he lost opened an opportunity to the Wilton quarter-back. Teeny-bits felt himself tackled heavily; he fell against the player who had first tackled him and to his utter dismay felt the ball knocked from his grasp and saw it go bounding over the ground. He lay sprawling, so tangled with the Wilton players that for the moment he could not rise. With horrified gaze he saw the leather oval roll free and he felt the overwhelming shame of one who has failed to be equal to the demands of a crisis. But his feeling of self-condemnation immediately gave way to an entirely different emotion, for a swiftly moving pair of legs incased in the Ridgley red and white came within the range of his vision. He glanced up and saw that it was Neil Durant. Two Wilton players were after the ball also, but the Ridgley captain was before them; he scooped it up and ran swiftly down the field. While the stands roared in a frenzy of delight, Neil crossed the goal line and circled round till he placed the ball squarely behind the posts. Tom Curwood kicked the goal, and two minutes later the game ended with the ball in mid-field and the score 13-13.

"I'm glad you dropped that ball," said Durant, joining Teeny-bits as the substitute half-back was walking off the field; "it came just right to bounce up into my hands."

"It *was* lucky," admitted the candidate, "but I was mighty ashamed of myself."

"Well, it was a hard tackle," said Durant. "I don't blame you for dropping the ball."

Teeny-bits was about to make a reply when he saw coming toward them a white-haired man who walked with a limp. "There's Dad," he said, "I didn't know he was coming to the game."

Old Daniel Holbrook approached them with a beaming face. "Well, well, son!" he exclaimed, "I thought maybe you'd play, so I came to see the game."

Teeny-bits introduced Durant and tried to smother a feeling of embarrassment, the source of which he would not have cared to probe.

"Your ma, Teeny-bits, wants you should come down for Sunday dinner to-morrow," said the station master, "and she's particular for you to bring a friend. I've killed two young roosters and ma's fixin' 'em up with the kind of stuffin' you like. Now if this friend of yours here would like to come down with you I'll drive up and get both of you in the morning after church. He looks as if he'd have a good appetite."

Teeny-bits expected to hear Neil Durant express courteous regret; he did not for a moment think that the son of Major-General Durant and the most popular member of Ridgley School would be interested in visiting the humble Holbrook home. He was even a little ashamed that Dad Holbrook had extended the invitation with so much genial assurance.

"I'll be mighty glad to come – if Teeny-bits wants me to," said Durant, and Teeny-bits looked at him with such a queer expression of surprise and pleasure that Neil added: "You didn't expect me to refuse an invitation like that, did you?"

At the steps of the locker building Durant left them, and Teeny-bits remained outside for a few minutes to talk to the station master. Then he said good-by and went inside to take his shower.

He found his team-mates discussing the game in detail and bestowing praise on Neil Durant.

"Well, cap'n, old scout," Ned Stillson was saying, as Teeny-bits came clamping in, "you sure were Johnny-on-the-spot."

Though there was nothing in the words to signify actual criticism of any one, Teeny-bits felt that the real meaning behind them was that when some one else had failed, Durant had saved the day. That some one else was himself, and, though the members of the team treated him as cordially as ever, he had the unpleasant feeling that they looked upon him now as one who had failed in a crisis, and he had to admit to himself that their opinion – if they held it – was justly founded. He went back to his room and for half an hour before supper sat by his window, thinking deeply. The conclusion to which he came was this: if he ever got another chance to run with the ball for Ridgley he would squeeze that leather oval so hard that the thing would be in danger of bursting. He resolved to make no apologies to Coach Murray, but to show by future deeds that he could be trusted. When he went over to Lincoln Hall for dinner he found the fellows at his table apparently unchanged in their attitude toward him. They seemed to have forgotten that he had covered himself with no glory.

While the soup was being disposed of some one who came in late brought a bit of news that spread from table to table as if by magic. It seemed to fly from one end of the room to the other and instantly it became the topic of excited conversation. Everywhere it went it created looks of dismay on the faces of the Ridgleyites, for there was a portentous quality in it that boded bitter things for "the best school in the world."

While Ridgley had been striving mightily to hold its own against Wilton and had found its opponent so redoubtable that the tie score seemed to be fully as much as it deserved – and perhaps a little more – Jefferson, the big rival of Ridgley from time immemorial, had been winning the laurels. Jefferson had trampled mercilessly upon Goodrich Academy and with seeming ease had scored touchdown after touchdown. The final score was 34-0 and herein lay the menace for Ridgley: only a week before, Goodrich had defeated Wilton 7-0. If Goodrich were better than Wilton and Wilton were as good as Ridgley, what chance did Ridgley stand against Jefferson, which had apparently toyed with the Goodrich eleven and scored at will? It was a problem that would seem to be answered correctly only by three dismal words: None at all! A buzz of talk filled the dining hall and every one knew that Ridgley was face to face with a forlorn hope.

"Well, we'll have to fight," said Mr. Stevens, who sat at the head of Teeny-bits' table, "and fight hard – it will never do to get discouraged."

But discouragement is subtle; there was good need of something to instill spirit into the Ridgley team, for in the days that followed, rumors like the fables of old began to reach the school on the hill. It was said that tacklers found it almost impossible to stop Norris, the Jefferson full-back. Half a dozen colleges were begging him to bestow honors upon them by making them his Alma Mater. He could run a hundred yards in ten and one fifth seconds and he weighed one hundred and seventy pounds stripped. In the Goodrich game time and again he had made ten yards with two or more of the Goodrich players clinging to him as unavailingly as Lilliputians clinging to a giant. No less fearsome tales were told of Whipple, the Jefferson punter, and of Phillips and Burton, the two ends.

The punter could send a wickedly twisting spiral sixty yards, and the ends had an uncanny way of catching forward passes. Through the newspapers, through word of mouth and by letters the news arrived, – and it became increasingly disconcerting. Unless Ridgley wished to be disgraced before the eyes of the world something must be done – and done soon – to bolster up the team.

CHAPTER IV
TWO VISITS AND A THEFT

True to his word, old Daniel Holbrook drove his sorrel horse up to the school at noon on Sunday and brought Neil Durant and Teeny-bits down to the little white house that had been his home for thirty years. "Ma" Holbrook was a motherly person, plump, gray-haired and smiling.

"I do hope you two are good and hungry," she said, after Teeny-bits had introduced Neil. "We'll sit right down and keep sittin' till we're full."

It came over Teeny-bits suddenly as he sat down at the oval table and faced the familiar array of thick china, glassware and inexpensive cutlery what a different life he had been leading for the past few weeks, and he glanced at Neil to see what effect this homely air of simplicity would have on the son of a major-general. But the football captain showed by neither word nor sign that he noticed anything crude or unfamiliar. Dad Holbrook whetted the carving knife briskly on a steel sharpener and stood up to attack the two roosters. He heaped a bounteous supply of white and dark meat and "stuffing" on each plate and passed it to "Ma", who put on brown corn fritters and sweet potatoes baked with sirup.

"I never saw anything look so good in my life," said Neil, and a moment later he added: "Or taste so good, either."

Ma Holbrook beamed with pleasure, and said to herself that Teeny-bits' friend was "real nice." Teeny-bits himself ate with relish and enjoyment, and at the sight of Neil's contented manner of attacking the food lost most of his feeling of uneasiness.

"Land of Goshen!" Ma suddenly exclaimed, "I forgot to bring on the conserve!" And getting up hurriedly from the table she stepped quickly out into the pantry. From that little room presently came the sound of a creaking chair, and Teeny-bits knew that Ma was standing on the seat to reach one of those richly laden jars that adorned the upper shelves, row on row. There was the scrape of a spoon against glass and then Ma Holbrook appeared in the door, bearing a dish full of a golden substance that Teeny-bits recognized as her famous preserved watermelon. No one had ever failed to become the slave of his appetite when confronted by this masterpiece of Ma's handiwork, and Neil Durant, after putting one mouthful to his lips, looked at Teeny-bits with such a blissful expression that Teeny-bits felt all constraint and uneasiness slip suddenly away.

"You can't beat it anywhere in *this* world," he said with a smile.

It was an unpretentious sort of pleasure that Teeny-bits and his friend shared that Sunday afternoon. When the meal was over they walked lazily through the village to look at some of the old buildings that were standing in Revolutionary days and then they came lazily back and Dad Holbrook harnessed the sorrel horse and drove them up to Ridgley. Neil Durant spoke sincerely when he said:

"I don't know when I've had such a good Sunday, and as for the dinner – I could talk a week about it."

While Teeny-bits and the football captain were spending the afternoon in Hamilton, two of their schoolmates, Campbell and Bassett, were using their time, as it seemed to them, to no little advantage. Campbell had telephoned to his mother and had persuaded her to send the family automobile – a heavy, seven-passenger machine – to the school for him.

The chauffeur brought it to a stop in front of Gannett Hall at twelve o'clock and Campbell had the satisfaction of ordering the driver to take the rear seat and, with Bassett at his side, of piloting the big car out of the campus. He went by the most roundabout way and cut the corners of the gravel drives at a pace that was intended to make the Ridgleyites who were lounging in the dormitory windows sit up and take notice. After a spin out through Greensboro they arrived at the Campbell place in time for dinner and Bassett had an opportunity to see the "got-rich-quick" pictures and to

eat from plates that were lavishly decorated in the best style of the shops that cater to the tastes of those persons whose family crest is the dollar sign. Bassett thought it was "grand and gorgeous" and he made a mental note of several things that he intended to have duplicated in his own home at the next available opportunity.

Campbell, Senior, was away on a business trip, but Mrs. Campbell succeeded in making the dinner sufficiently impressive. She was a large woman with a heavy, double chin and a high, somewhat whining voice which she kept in constant use. Obviously she was much attached to Tracey, and Bassett could see with half a glance that her son could, by using his talents, persuade her to do almost anything for him.

"I suppose you two are great friends," she said to Bassett. "Every one likes Tracey."

"Oh, yes, we go around together a lot," said the Whirlwind with his most winning smile.

"And are you as athletic as Tracey is?" asked Mrs. Campbell.

"Well, you see, I've got flat feet," said Bassett in a tone that implied that if he were not so afflicted he would be captain of all the major sports in the school.

"You're on the first team now, I suppose, Tracey," said Mrs. Campbell.

"No," said Tracey, "they're still making me play with the scrub."

"Why?" demanded his mother, raising her shrill voice. "You told me two weeks ago that the coach was going to promote you. What happened, will you tell me?"

"They're not giving Tracey a fair show, Mrs. Campbell," declared Bassett. "The coach has a few favorites and he can't see *anything* that any one else does."

Mrs. Campbell let her fork fall into her plate with a clatter. "I'm going to see Doctor Wells about it!" she declared. "Such a condition is perfectly shameful! Why, it's – it's – "

"Now, mother, don't do anything like that," warned Tracey. "You'd only spoil what chances I've got."

"Well, if they can't treat you fairly, I'd rather have you leave the school. Your father will have something to say about this when he comes home. I don't doubt that he'll go right up there and make them stand around a bit."

"By the time he gets home I'll be on the team," said Tracey.

In the afternoon Campbell and his satellite rode out into the country without the chauffeur and Tracey took occasion to race any automobile that would accept an obvious challenge. It was his particular delight to drive alongside a car of one of the cheaper makes and to pretend that he was doing his utmost to pass and in that way to lure the small-car owner into competition. Sometimes he succeeded and after he had made his victim believe that the big car was about to be vanquished he would step hard on the accelerator and leave the scene of competition in a cloud of dust. On such occasions Bassett felt called upon to turn and thumb his nose at the crestfallen driver.

At dusk the pair came back to Greensboro for refreshment and Campbell declared that he would take Bassett to a "regular place."

Greensboro was a bustling town in which there were department stores, theaters and restaurants. The stores and theaters were closed, but the restaurants were open, though Sunday business was dull. Campbell drove the big car down a side street and stopped in front of a building that was decorated with an Oriental sign announcing to the world that this was the Eating Palace of Chuan Kai. "Here's where I feed you the dinner I owe you," he said.

Tracey seemed to be well known to the Oriental managers of the restaurant. Chuan Kai himself, a yellow Chinaman in American clothes, greeted him in with a smile that showed his tusks; he directed the two to a table set in a little booth that was decorated with panels showing dragons and temples. Here Tracey and Bassett lolled back at ease, ate chow mein and chop suey with mushrooms, drank tea from small cups without handles and smoked till the air of the little booth was blue.

Chuan Kai stole softly in and out and occasionally glanced with satisfaction at the two students. They were spending money freely and the wily old Oriental knew that young Campbell would drop a

fat tip into his yellow palm when it so pleased him to leave the restaurant. Silently the Chinese waiters in their slippers and loose trousers slipped in and out of the mysterious regions where the strange food was prepared. Tracey, displaying nonchalance for Bassett's benefit, declared that old Chuan Kai kept "a dozen Chinks on the job", and that they all slept in rooms directly above the restaurant. The persons who sat at the inlaid tables and leaned heavily on their elbows as they scanned the much-fingered menus were a nondescript lot – some the riff-raff of the town who found it cheaper to eat at Kai's than to eat elsewhere, others, more respectable in appearance, who doubtless had been drawn to the place by curiosity.

"Do you really want to give him a good jolt?" said Bassett to Campbell.

"I told you I did."

"Then why not try my plan? I know it will work."

Bassett leaned forward and talked in low tones as if fearing to be overheard, but there was no danger of that, for the other persons in the restaurant were too much interested in their own affairs to eavesdrop on two young fellows chatting in a booth.

At eight o'clock Campbell and Bassett sauntered out and Chuan Kai received his fat tip. The big car rolled out to the "mansion" on the hillock and, when the chauffeur had been found, sped to Ridgley School. Five minutes before nine it discharged its burden at the doors of Gannett Hall.

During the week that followed there was a frenzy of football talk in every Ridgley dormitory. At chapel on Tuesday morning Doctor Wells granted Neil Durant's request to speak to the school. The football captain mounted the platform a little nervously, but he made a straightforward speech in which he appealed for more candidates for the scrub. "There are a good many likely-looking fellows in this school who have never tried for the football team," he said. "It's late in the season, but there's a chance for them now on the scrub and, if they show any real ability, an opportunity with the team. We've got to do our best to beat Jefferson this year and we can't afford to overlook good material even now, so if you want to show your school spirit come down to the field this afternoon."

The result of the speech and of numerous personal appeals was that a dozen new players appeared with the scrub that afternoon; they were not a remarkable addition in respect to quality, however, and after a couple of days of looking them over Coach Murray remarked to Neil Durant that he was afraid that none of them would "set the world on fire."

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