

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

King of Ranleigh: A School Story



Frederick Brereton

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F. S. (Frederick Sadlier) Brereton

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CHAPTER I

THE CONSPIRATORS

Clive Darrell took from the pocket of a somewhat tattered coat, which bore many a stain and many a sign of hard wear, a filbert of good size, and having admired it in silence cracked the same by placing it upon a miniature anvil and giving it an adroit blow with a hammer. There was a precision about his movements and his action which spoke of practice. Clive was inordinately fond of nuts. His pockets bulged widely with them. As he ate he extracted a handful and presented some to each of his two comrades.

"Here, have a go. I've heaps to draw from. Well?"

"Well?" came from Hugh Seymour, a boy of his own age, just a little more than thirteen.

But Bert Seymour, brother to Hugh, made no answer. Taller than the other two, a year older than his brother, he was a weedy, lanky youth, running to height rather than to breadth. He had tossed his cap on to the bench, so that he presented a tousled head of hair, above a face thin like his frame, but ruddy enough, with keen penetrating eyes which wore a curiously dreamy aspect for such a youngster. He was cogitating deeply. That was evident. But being the prince of good fellows, one who made a point of returning hospitality, he rummaged also in his pocket, producing a medley of articles to be found nowhere else save in the case of a schoolboy. A piece of tangled string, half a broken hinge, a knife, a second knife, somewhat bigger and distinctly rusty, a length of galvanised wire which made one wonder if he were a jack-of-all-trades, three handkerchiefs, each more terrible in appearance than the last, a number of air-gun slugs, a broken box for the same, now empty and severely damaged, and lastly, that for which he searched, a respectably sized piece of toffee in a wrapping of paper which was broken at one corner, and through which a half-dozen slugs had contrived to insert themselves and were now nicely imbedded in the sweetmeat.

"Have some," he said laconically, handing over the packet to Clive.

"Fair does then. Thanks."

There was a strange taciturnity about these three lads. A silence and absence of words to which they were unaccustomed. But then, great events bring about equally great changes on occasion, and this day saw the trio face to face with a circumstance which baffled them, rendered them almost inarticulate, when they were accustomed to chatter, not seldom either in the lowest tones, and made of them a somewhat morose gathering.

Clive split the toffee into three equal-sized pieces with the aid of a huge pair of metal shears, distributed two of the pieces, and thrust the third into his mouth.

"Well?" he asked again, almost inarticulate since the sticky piece held his jaws so firmly. "We've got to move."

"Or funk."

"Or go on getting kicked."

"Not if I know it!" ejaculated Clive, with a distinct effort, tearing his two rows of shining teeth asunder. "Who's he? We've been here ages, and he has the cheek to order us about."

"Suppose he imagines we're going to fag for him," exclaimed Hugh, pulling his piece of toffee into the light of day as speech was otherwise almost out of the question. "He's a cad, this Rawlings. Vote we go for him."

"How?"

It was almost the first word which Bert had uttered. A keen glance shot from those dreamy eyes, searching the faces of his two comrades. He borrowed Clive's hammer and mechanically cracked the handful of nuts presented to him, preparing a store for consumption after the sweetmeat was finished. His dreamy eyes slowly travelled round his immediate surroundings, noting without enthusiasm the many tools and appliances which to boys as a general rule are the greatest of attractions. For Bert was no mechanic. At the precise period of which we write he was immersed in the intricacies of a calculation having for its object the purchase of sundry cricket stumps, bats and a ball with a sum raked together after noble self-sacrifice and still all too small for the purpose. He was, in fact, keen on cricket, and no dull hand at the game. Fair at the wicket, he could send down a ball at any time the varying length of which might be expected to baffle one who had not stood up to his bowling before. While at "point" he had already gathered laurels in the village matches, to which residence in the depths of the country confined him.

Mechanics distinctly bored Bert. He had no use for hammers, other than that of cracking nuts, and even then he managed to hammer his fingers fairly often. And there he differed from his brother, just as the latter differed from him in appearance. For Hugh was a rosy-cheeked fellow, short and active and strong, quick and brisk in his actions, and with eyes which sparkled and could never be accused of presenting a dreamy appearance. Always ready for cricket or football or any other game that might be suggested, and shining particularly in the gymnasium, there were two hobbies which absorbed his every waking thought, and contrived to make him Clive Darrell's boon companion. For both loved the wild things they saw about them. They were the terror of gamekeepers in all directions, and there was not a copse nor a cover for miles around which they had not visited in their search for nests. And the winter season found them both for hours together in this workshop, once the happy rendezvous of Clive's father. What wonder if they were enchanted with the place? Imagine a large room, with steeply sloping roof, in which were a couple of lights. A range of shelves down one side, each carrying planes or cramps or wood tools of some description. While against the farther wall stood a cabinet, glazed at the top, and presenting a range of calipers, micrometers, drills, gauges, taps and dies and what-not; while nests of drawers beneath contained every tool necessary for both wood and metal turning. That was the triumph of this workshop. A five-inch lathe stood against the far wall, the floor beneath stained with many a splotch of oil. A belt ran to it from a shaft overhead which travelled the length of the shop and was there fitted with a wheel of large diameter to which a second belt was attached. This latter travelled to the fast and loose pulleys of a second shaft, and thence to a petrol engine, which puffed and rattled at the moment.

Clive toyed with the lever which operated his pet lathe. As he and his comrades cogitated, he pushed the lever over, setting the shaft above in motion and the spindle of the lathe revolving. A chunk of brass bolted to the face-plate of this latter spun round at speed, while the tool he had fixed in position shaved a neat ribbon of metal from it. Then the lever swung back, the spindle of the lathe came to a rest, while the shaft above ceased to rotate, leaving the engine still running.

"I know. We'll make a trap for the ass. Catch him as they catch elephant and rhinoceros in Africa," he suddenly blurted out as he turned from the lathe. As for his hearers, they received his suggestion with scant sympathy.

"Trap! How? Where? Rot!" ejaculated Bert. "What's the good of trapping an idiot? – unless, of course, you mean setting a thing like a rabbit-trap. That'd fix him. Imagine the great and noble Rawlings, fresh from a public school, lord of all he beholds, caught by the toe and left singing!"

A wan smile wreathed his lips. Hugh giggled, and then looked serious. "A precious row we'd get into, too," he cried. "Try again, Clive. Don't talk rot; we're serious."

"So am I; we'll fix a trap for this bounder, a trap that'll not hurt him, you understand, but one that'll make him look a fool and an ass, and'll teach him not to interfere with his betters."

"Meaning us," grinned Bert.

"Of course! Who else? You don't imagine that an ass like that's on the same plane, do you?" demanded Clive loftily. "Now I'll tell you how we'll do it. There's the path down the spinney."

"Ah!" A frown crossed Bert's face. Hugh's ruddy cheeks grew redder. For that path happened to be the bone of contention which had brought about this meeting. But for that, Clive and Hugh and Bert would not have been gathered in the workshop on this fine morning, cracking sundry nuts upon a miniature anvil, and sucking sticky toffee. Bert, for instance, would have been down at the one single store which Potters Camp, their local village, boasted, where he would have painfully haggled for the stumps and other goods he coveted. Then Clive and Hugh would have been otherwise occupied. They had a big mechanical scheme on foot, no less an undertaking than the manufacture of a motor-car, a real motor-car to run upon the high-road. Morning and afternoon and evening they had been at it through these holidays. And the scheme was so very simple, and promised such certain success! To begin with, there was the petrol engine at that moment puffing and rumbling in the shop. The framework they had made was the precise thing for it. They had only to erect a species of crane above the engine and they could lift it into the frame and bolt it down. That was childishly easy. The rest was a triumph, or almost so, inasmuch as it was on the high-road to completion. For the front axle was already fitted. True, it was not quite up to modern form, since stub axles at either end were missing. But then necessity is the mother of invention, as Clive had told his chum often and often. That axle was bored at the very centre and swivelled about a pin bolted to the framework. As for springs, who wanted any!

"Tosh!" declared Clive.

"Meant for ladies and kids and invalids," said Hugh, equally emphatic.

"It'll shake about a bit, of course," admitted the former grudgingly. "I reckon she'll do a good twenty miles an hour, and on the awful apologies for roads round about here, why, naturally, she'll hop and bump no end. But who cares so long as she goes? Not me. Only those wheels look a bit rocky, eh?"

Hugh must have been an enthusiast, or else he would not have denied the obvious fact to which his fellow inventor had drawn his attention. For the wheels of this car-in-making were decidedly groggy, to use an expression common to this mechanical couple. But then again, necessity was here the mother of much inventive genius. Lack of funds could not cripple the enthusiasm and ambition of our two mechanics. Wheels they must have if they wished their car to run upon the road, while cash was decidedly lacking. But both had a bicycle the back wheel of each of which fitted with commendable niceness upon the spindle ends of the steel bar which Clive had used for a front axle, while the back axle and its wheels were supplied from the stable of no less a person than the Rev. James Seymour, the respected parent of Bert and Hugh, Rector of the parish, and owner of a tricycle.

"Fits rippingly! Just the thing!" commented Hugh, when he produced the article for Clive's approval. "Only it'd be a bit unlucky if the Governor wanted to trike just at this moment. Of course, he can't. Dare say he'd be ratty, but then, think of how he's helping. It's just the thing."

"Just!" Clive whetted his lips at the sight. The one great difficulty of this ambitious undertaking was conquered, and, of course, they were only borrowing the axle and wheels for a time. They'd have a run on the road and then bolt them back into position. No one'd be the wiser, certainly not Hugh's Governor. "But – just a trifle light for the job," he added. "Still, you never can tell till you try. But it'd be mighty awkward if there was a bust up. There'd be a ruction then."

Hugh had agreed to that point, and for a moment had repented his action. But then, think of being beaten just for the want of a little courage! After all, the wheels and axle of the tricycle might be the very thing. They certainly looked it. And the Rector had not ridden his machine for a month at least, and for all he knew might have discarded it altogether. In any case, the parts had been borrowed, and as the trio stood about the lathe Hugh's admiring eyes were upon it.

"Pity this cad's come along just now," he grumbled. "Everything's ready and fitted. A morning's work would drop the engine in and connect up the levers and the chain. That steering gear ain't too

magnificent. But then, if one manages the engine and the other steers her, it'll be as right as anything. Hang this Rawlings!"

Others echoed the same malediction. For the Rawlings family were not popular in the neighbourhood of Potters Camp. In the first place, they were new-comers, and in the depths of the country that is sometimes a sufficient offence. Then they were purse-proud and apparently rich, and apt to patronise their country cousins. Mr. Rawlings was of decidedly pompous appearance. Very stout and heavy, he had a way of lifting a condescending stick when greeted by neighbours. And Albert, his son, was a shining copy. He looked down upon the village youths from a lofty pinnacle. He nodded, when he remembered to, to Hugh and Bert and Clive, though to the latter he was not always so gracious. For Clive had once been master where the pompous Rawlings now stepped. Once he and his people had lived in the big house at the top of the hill, with its acres of park land about it. But times had changed sadly. Perhaps his father had been too immersed in his workshop, and had given little attention to the more serious affairs of life. Whatever the reason, his riches had left him, and here was his widow, with her only son, living in a small house at the far corner of the park, and once occupied by a bailiff. From the said house a path led through a long spinney to the high-road, and made a short-cut for its inhabitants. Otherwise they must needs go a long way round to get to the village.

"And the cad forbids us to use it!" ejaculated Clive, as he recollected the occurrence. "Of course, the father's behind the business. He must be. But the son does the talking. A precious nice business."

"Here, you get off! This isn't yours. Just cut it!" Hugh deliberately mimicked the youth of whom they were talking. "A fine sort of fellow," he exclaimed. "So you'll set a trap for him, Clive?"

"Now. Without waiting. I'd fifty times rather stay along here and finish this job. Just think, this evening we'd be ready for running. We'd have a trial spin on our car, for there's certain to be things to adjust. But we'd have her running top hole before it got dark. Then we'd make a trip to London."

Hugh's eyes opened wide at the statement.

"It's seventy miles if it's an inch."

"Who cares? We can do it. But –"

"Eh?" asked Hugh, scenting another difficulty just at the moment when he felt confident that all were overcome successfully.

"How long would it take? Let's see. We do twenty miles an hour."

"Hardly that all the way."

"Why not?" demanded Clive, in whose fertile brain the whole scheme had originated, and who panted to be testing his first attempt at road locomotion. "Why not?"

"Well, there's punctures," said Hugh lamely, and without thought of grammar.

"Yes; possible."

"Then there's traffic. Besides, we've got to eat."

Yes, they had to do that, without a shadow of doubt. Seventy miles, with sundry delays – which, however, were not likely, oh, certainly not! – meant four hours on the road. A fellow couldn't hold out all that time. Impossible!

"We'd have a blow-out before starting," declared Clive, his eyes on the machine he and his chum had been so diligently building. "Then we'd be off before nine. We'd get a real good feed at one. By then we'd be in London. That means we'd have to go to rather a swagger sort of place. I say, that's a bit awkward. How's the cash-box going?"

There wasn't a cash-box. Hugh was the treasurer, and he slowly and somewhat sadly counted out three shillings and fourpence halfpenny. Not a big sum, perhaps, but nearing the end of the holidays, and after considerable expenditure already on their ambitious project it was certainly a triumph of management.

"Bit short," said Hugh. "But it'll do. We must fill up well before we start, and take things in our pockets. I dare say we'll be able to find a place where you can get a feed for a shilling. Perhaps they'd take two for less. Things like that are easy to arrange in London."

"Easy. But I was thinking of the return journey. There's a lamp wanted."

"And numbers, and a licence," said Hugh, aghast at the thought which had never previously occurred to either of them. "My eye, that's a deuce of a job. The police would be on to us."

Clive's was one of those jovial, optimistic natures which overrides all difficulties. "Hang the police! We'll chance it. We'll stick up a number of some sort. I'll ink one out on cardboard this evening. As for a lamp, there's the gardener's. I'll borrow it. It'll do, hanging on in front. It'll make us go slow, of course, but all the better. It'll be a joke to be kept late on the road and have everyone in fits about us. But we can't move to-morrow. It'll have to be the next day."

Ruefully Hugh agreed to the plan, for he would have loved to proceed with the finishing of the car now so nearly ready. He sighed as he looked at the framework at the end of the shop, with its somewhat flimsy front axle and bicycle wheels, its borrowed back axle, its steering gear, a complication of steel wires about a drum mounted on a raked tubing, and surmounted by a cast-iron wheel at one time adorning the overhead shaft which drove the lathe. What thought that gear had cost them! What a triumph its construction had been, and how well it seemed to act now that it was duly assembled and mounted on the wooden chassis of the car! Only the engine needed now to be lifted into position, a chain run from it to the sprocket on the back axle till a few days ago part and parcel of his father's tricycle. There was the mere matter of a lever or two to control the engine, that strip of cardboard, with a number inked upon it, and they would be off. His imagination whirled him to the giddy heights of enjoyment as he thought of the trip before them.

"But that cad's got to be dealt with," he agreed. "Right! What's the particular movement?"

"A trap," interjected Bert. "A man-catcher. Go easy with the saw-edge of the concern and the spring, or you'll break his legs. We don't want that, even if he is a bounder. You'd have thought, considering Clive was the owner of the spinney only a year ago, a fellow would have been ashamed to order him off what had been his own property. But there's no counting on what cads'll do, or won't do. He threatened to throw us out. He's big, though only fifteen, they say. But if we tackled him together we'd make mincemeat of him."

"Better make a fool of him, though," said Clive. "You come along with me now to the spinney. We'll fix the thing so as to make as big an ass of this Rawlings as possible. We'll rig a trap that'll hold him tight, and yet not hurt him. It's near twelve now. By two hours after lunch we'll have it finished. It'll be ready and working by to-morrow morning."

They shut off the engine destined on the morrow to be lifted into their motor-car and provide the propelling force, and shutting the shop went on their way to the spinney. And the same hour found them hard at work upon another contrivance, conceived by Clive's inventive brain, and prepared for the purpose of lowering the pride and dignity of one who had given them mortal offence. Rawlings, the fifteen-year-old son of the pompous new-comer to the parish of Potters Camp, little dreamed of the consequences of his loftiness and of his churlish treatment of Clive Darrell.

CHAPTER II

A BOOBY TRAP

"Five feet and a bit," announced Bert Seymour with gusto, measuring the depth of the pit which he and Hugh and Clive had been digging in the centre of the path leading down the much-discussed spinney. "Two feet either way, and a precious job to dig it on that account. Jolly well too narrow."

"For working in, rather," agreed his brother. "But about right size for a trap. A bit big, if anything. Top edges nicely sloped off, so as to give nothing for a fellow to cling on to."

"And a good foot of sticky clay pudding at the bottom," grinned Clive. "That'll hold him like bird-lime. It'll be bad for his boots and his pants. But, then, it can't be helped. He shouldn't be such a cad. It'll help to teach him manners. I say, do you think a foot of pudding's enough? Suppose we make it two. It'd make things certain."

A second foot of the sticky puddled clay was therefore added, and Hugh tested its adhesiveness with a long stake he had discovered in the forest.

"It'll hold him like wax, till he hollers for someone to help him," he announced, with radiant face. "Of course, we ain't likely to hear him for a goodish time, are we? and there's no one else who'll be about. Old Tom knows what we're up to, of course, but he's a clever bird. He'll be out of the way, or deaf or something. Tom don't like the Rawlings."

That was true enough. If Clive and his chums had suffered from the loftiness and condescension of the new-comers to Potters Camp, Old Tom, Mrs. Darrell's gardener, had likewise suffered. He'd been used to quality.

"The folks up at the house was different to that," he had assured his cronies in the village. "The old master'd never have thought of passing without a nod and a smile, and most like he'd have pulled up his hoss and had a chat about things in general. As for being proud, why he'd have his hand out to shake whenever he came back home after a holiday; while he'd come to the wedding of his gardener's daughter, and it was a five-pound note, all clean and crisp, that he'd slipped into her fingers. He was quality. These here Rawlings ain't the same product. They're jest commoners. And I'll tell yer more," observed Tom, dragging his clay from between a pair of fangless gums and looking round at the company slyly and cautiously.

"More?" ejaculated one of his cronies, encouragingly. "More, Tom? Then let's have it. We don't hold by new-comers."

"Then here it is. But no splitting, mind you. No going about and telling others. Else the whole of Potters Camp and the neighbourhood'll have it before evening."

He lifted an admonitory finger, and glanced sternly at his audience, a collection of village gossips of the type usually to be met with. There was Tom himself, tanned by exposure, his rugged face wreathed by a pair of white whiskers of antique fashion. A bent but powerful figure was his, while in spite of his stooping shoulders he stood half a head above his companions. Then there was the publican himself, rubicund and round and prosperous, his teeth gripping the stem of a favourite pipe. Mrs. Piper also, the said publican's helpful wife, ensconced behind the bar, clattering glasses and bottles and yet managing to hear all that was of interest. Joe Swingler, groom at the Rectory, fondly imagined by his employer never to frequent such a place as a public-house, was in a corner, jauntily dressed, the fit of his gaiters being the despair of Jack Plant, the bailiff's son. But the latter could at least display a suit to attract the fancy of all in the village. There was enough material in his riding-breeches to accommodate two of his size, while the cut of his jacket was ultra-fashionable. The slit at the back extended so high, and the tails were so long, that one wondered whether the garment were actually divided into two portions. For the rest of the audience, they were shepherds, pig men – for Potters Camp prided itself on its pigs, while there was even a small bacon factory – cattle men,

carters and agricultural labourers, and all, without exception, agog to hear news of the Rawlings. That caution which Old Tom had given was as certain to have its effect as if he had gone upon the house-tops and called therefrom the news he was about to give to his audience on the promise of their secrecy. It was certain, in fact, that within a short hour every inhabitant of Potters Camp of adult age would be possessed of the information.

"It ain't to go further, mind that!" repeated Tom, wrinkling his face and glaring round. "It's a secret; but it's got truth behind it, so I tell ye. I ain't so sure that these here Rawlings come by the house and the park in a square sort of way. You take it from me, I ain't so sure. There was queer doings afore the old master died. He got to runnin' up to Lunnon, which ain't no good for anyone, least of all for a squire as has things to see to in the country. There was letters to this man Rawlings. I knows that, 'cos I posted 'em, as I always posted all the letters from the house. Then the master dies, and this here Rawlings come down and takes the place and starts ordering people about."

"And he ain't got it fair?" asked one of the hearers.

"I ain't a-going to say that," nodded Tom cautiously. "But I kin think as I like. You can't go and stop a man thinking, can yer? No. I thought not. You can't. So I thinks what I like, and thinkin' with me's precious nigh knowing."

The old fellow gave the company generally the benefit of a knowing wink, and lapsed into silence. But from that moment all who had heard him speaking thought as he thought, and were as equally certain. Such is the unstable foundation of tales which at times go the round of the country. Not that Tom was altogether wrong. There were others who might have said more, others in the city of London. But Tom did not know that, nor any of his audience. But the conversation at least gives one the impression that if Clive and his chums were not enamoured of the new-comers, Tom was even less so.

"It'll come to blows atween that ere son of Rawlings and Master Clive and his friends," he observed to the company present. "There's been words already, and ef Master Clive's like his father – which he is – why, it's 'look out' fer this here Albert Rawlings."

That pit so craftily constructed would have made Tom even more emphatic. For when all was ready, and Clive and his accomplices had completed their work to their own satisfaction, even they could hardly say where the pit existed.

"Of course," observed Hugh, with that grin to which his friends were accustomed – "of course, if we were actually setting the proper sort of trap we'd have to bait it, eh, and put sharpened stakes in it to kill the game. But it isn't necessary here, eh?"

"To bait? – not a bit. This is a booby trap," laughed Bert. "It's meant for an ass, and an ass is the one that'll fall into it."

It came as a shock, rather, to this lanky young hero that he himself was trapped within the minute. For Bert was not too observant. That dreamy eye was not meant for close watching, while here it wanted the eye of a hawk to detect the presence of a pit. For Clive had been very thorough. To the covering of reeds and light sticks laid across the pit mouth had been added a thick sprinkling of leaves which were most bewildering. Bert's description of the trap as a booby one carried him away into a whirl of delight, during which he strutted aimlessly along the path. And in an instant he was immersed. There was the sound of rending reeds, his lanky figure disappeared as if by magic, and only the top of his cap remained in view, frantically bobbing.

"Hi! Here! What's this?" he shouted, roused to a pitch of indignation.

"Booby trap. Well caught!" cried Clive, dancing with delight at this unexpected demonstration of the successful working of his invention.

"And done without baiting," giped Hugh, shaking with laughter. "Now, Bert, you've spoiled the thing. Come along out. Don't stop hiding in there."

That was an impossibility. Two feet of glutinous clay adhered to the boy's boots and trousers and refused to be shaken off. He raised one leg with an effort, gripped the sloping side of his prison,

and endeavoured to raise the other limb. The result was that he was dragged back into the depths promptly.

"Well, it's a beauty," he grinned at last, beginning to relish the fun of the scene himself. "Regularly tested the trap, eh? and been badly had myself. But lend a hand. This stuff'd stick old Rawlings himself, let alone his son. And it's beautifully hidden. I was never more surprised in my life."

"Then it'll be ten times more of a jar to the fellow we're after," gurgled Clive. "My! You do look a beauty! And what a mess you've got into!"

Bert was smothered in sticky clay from the knees downward, and had need to stand in the stream adjacent and wash his boots and clothing. Meanwhile Clive and Hugh completed their repairs to the covering of the pit, scattered leaves about till the surroundings looked quite natural, and having concluded matters to their satisfaction passed out of the spinney.

To-morrow, they promised themselves retaliation. "And it's not been such a long job as I thought," said Clive, as he put Old Tom's garden tools back into the shed from which they had been taken. "Supposing we tackle the car again. She'd be ready, perhaps, by the morning."

But tea was of almost equal importance. Hugh and his brother therefore partook of Mrs. Darrell's hospitality, the state of Bert's trousers and boots being skilfully concealed by that young gentleman by the simple expedient of standing well in the background. But he left a stain here and there. Peering through her spectacles on the following morning, Clive's mother was astonished to find red lines of clay on the chintz cover of one of her chairs.

And then the workshop claimed the three young fellows.

"Ready for dropping the engine in," declared Clive, surveying the skeleton of his motor. "By the way, we've forgotten seats, haven't we?"

"That's a nuisance!" admitted Hugh. "But we'll not let that bother us. We'll fix it by nailing boards across. I know. We'll get a box and make that fast. That's what all the garage people do. A shop body, you know. Smart! Eh? I rather think so."

Behold them, then, struggling with the sheer legs erected over the petrol engine so nicely fitted in the workshop. Watch the pulley contrivance secured to those legs above and the rope passing about it. The slipping of the legs of this improvised crane was a distinct nuisance at first, and made the lifting of the engine difficult, if not impossible. But an iron peg driven in between the tiles of the floor put an end to the trouble, while, once the bolts of the engine had been freed, Bert and Hugh were easily able to haul the engine clear of its foundation.

"Hoist!" shouted Clive, "and stand clear. I'll shove the chassis beneath the engine. Then lower gently. I don't want to have my fingers pinched off, remember that; so slack an inch at a time, and be ready to haul again."

Oh, the triumph of this final achievement! That engine went into position with the docility of a lamb. The chassis framework might have been its intended resting-place from the very commencement. It bedded down on the wooden frame snugly, hugging the timber. The bolt holes matched beautifully with those bored by Clive perhaps a week before, calling shouts of approval from his comrades. And when the hoisting rope was thrown off, and the sheer legs removed, there the engine was in position.

"And the wheels don't even feel the weight. Look. See if they do," cried Clive.

"A bit wobbly, eh?" suggested Hugh grudgingly, pushing the chassis from side to side, when it certainly had what might be described as freedom of movement. "Just a bit, eh? Still, that don't matter. Make her run all the better. But I'm glad she hasn't springs. She'd fairly roll herself over if she had them."

"But the back part's as steady as a rock," reported Clive enthusiastically. "Don't rock. Not a bit. Anyway, she runs forward and backward easily. By George! That's a bother!"

"What? You make a fellow ask such heaps of questions," grumbled Hugh, dismayed himself at the sudden fall in Clive's features.

"We've forgotten something else, and the bally thing's frightfully important."

Hugh gaped; Bert looked somewhat amused. To tell the truth, though glad always to lend a helping hand, he looked upon all this unnecessary work as a species of madness.

"You'll have to sweat at things like this when you're older," he declared. "No one's going to let you live at home and walk about doing nothing. You won't have time for games, and this sort of thing'll keep you from morning to evening – that is, if you take up engineering. Then why not make use of the good times and freedom now and play cricket?"

That had led to a somewhat animated discussion on the subject and seriousness of games as compared with mechanics till Hugh and Bert were within an inch of a struggle. But that was in the past. The plot they had so recently discussed, and the pit they had dug for the downfall of young Rawlings, had drawn the bonds of friendship more closely together. So Bert changed his expression of amusement to one of concern.

"What's the jolly thing?" he asked. "It looks complete – in fact, ripping. There's an engine and wheels and steering gear and frame. What more do you want? Ah! Got it! There's nothing there with which to cool the engine. Well, you two are precious mugs! Just fancy, taking all the sweat to mount an engine and then forgetting such an important matter!"

Clive's eye kindled, while his cheeks reddened. He could afford to pity a chap who showed such tremendous ignorance; only, coming as it did at a moment when he himself was distinctly distressed, the idiotic suggestions of this ignoramus made him angry.

"Hang it!" he growled. "Don't talk such rot! Cooling indeed! Why, even – even Rawlings could tell you that the engine's air-cooled. There's the fan, stupid! staring you right in the face. The thing that's worrying me is the lever for chucking the concern out of gear."

Hugh gripped the side of the chassis as the secret was mentioned. It made him shiver to think that just as every difficulty that could be foreseen had been surmounted another had cropped up.

"And it's a beast," he groaned.

"A teaser," admitted Clive desperately.

"What's a gear lever?" asked Bert, with aggravating coolness and flippancy.

"What's a gear lever!" growled Clive, regarding him with an eye that positively glared.

"What's a mug?" shouted Hugh, ready almost to strike him.

"Someone who forgets that there is such a thing as a gear lever, and then can't or won't explain," came the irritating, maddening answer.

"Look here," began Clive, flushing hotly, and stepping nearer to Bert, "I've troubles enough already. I'll trouble you to –"

"He's punning," shouted Bert, seizing the angry Clive by the shoulders and shaking him. And then, careless of the anger he had aroused, for that was the way with him, he began to cross-examine the two mechanics on the uses and abuses of every class of lever. The meeting, in fact, was in grave danger of a sudden break-up. But a shout from Hugh helped matters wonderfully.

"I've got it!" he bellowed.

"What? The lever or the measles?" asked Bert, still amused and facetious.

"Shut up, you ass! The measles indeed! No, the bally difficulty. I've a way in which to work it."

Clive agreed with the suggestion when it came to be put to him, agreed with ungrudging enthusiasm. "It'll be as easy as walking," he said.

"Or falling," suggested Bert.

"You'll get your head punched yet," growled Clive. "But it's fine, this idea. You see, we start our engine. That's easy enough."

"Well, it may be," from Bert. "I'll believe you."

"Then we take our seats."

"Don't see 'em," came from the critic.

"Ass! You've heard of the box we're going to fix."

"But that's a box. It's not a seat."

"Go on with it, Clive," urged Hugh, looking as if he would willingly slay his brother. "Take no notice of the ass. We start her up, and then get seated."

"On a box."

"Yes," agreed Clive, glaring at Bert, who had again interrupted. "The engine's going. The chain's free-wheeling. We have a lever somewhere."

Hugh pointed out its position with triumph, and the two promptly proceeded to fit the contrivance. But levers are not made in a moment. It was, in fact, noon of the following day before they were ready for an outing.

"You manage the steering, that's agreed?" asked Clive, when the amateur-constructed motor-car had been pushed as far as the road.

"That's it. You control the engine. Don't let her race too much at first. Remember I ain't used to steering. Besides, those front wheels are frightfully groggy. She'll sway at corners, and if we put on the pace I shall be piling the whole bag of tricks up on one of the banks. Bert'll keep cave. There's no police about here to matter. Jimmy, the local constable, 's a real good fellow. He'll see the thing from the right point of view. He knows we're experimenting and'll sympathise."

"Particularly if he's called in at the inquest," gurgled Bert, irrepressible when his chums desired to be so serious.

"Inquest. Eh?" asked Hugh. "What's that?"

"Enquiry held on the bodies of Clive Darrell and Hugh Seymour, late of this parish, killed on the high-road. Died in the execution of their duty'll be the verdict. Great inventors cut off in their prime!"

Bert had to run an instant later. For Clive came at him with a hammer, while Hugh looked distinctly furious. However, the incident quieted down, the inventors took their seats on this chassis of their own making, while Bert, having seen that the coast was clear, listened to the puff of the engine. Hugh gripped the steering gear. True, it was somewhat flimsy, and bent easily from side to side. But nothing can be perfected in a moment, he told himself. It would do for this first experimental run, at any rate.

"Ready?" asked Clive deliberately.

"Let her go."

Clive did. There was a painful clattering of gears. The lever jerked violently, while the engine almost came to a stop. However, a touch of the throttle and ignition levers put that right, while the gear lever behaved itself of a sudden. The chassis bounded forward, very nearly hurling the box which acted as a seat from it. But for the steering wheel Hugh would have been deposited in the gutter. But he clung manfully to the frame, and in a moment was hurtling forward.

"Steady!" he called. "She don't steer so nicely."

She didn't. She – that is, the car – swerved frightfully. Those front wheels had rather the appearance of wheels trying to twist round to look at one another. Then the swivelling axle wasn't altogether a brilliant success. It refused to swivel at inconvenient moments. The heroes of this expedition were within an inch of the ditch lining the road.

"Near as a toucher," cried Clive. "Keep her up."

"Can't! The brute won't steer. She likes the ditch," came the answer.

"Then I'll stop her. Some of those wires want tightening. Then she'll steer."

But that troublesome gear lever was determined to ruin the hopes of both inventors. Perhaps it was because it had been forgotten till the very end and felt neglected. In any case, it refused to disengage, while owing to the awkward fact that the throttle and ignition levers had dropped away and gone adrift, Clive could not control his engine. It raced badly. It snorted as if it felt that it could do as it liked. It sent the swaying car hurtling along like a bullet.

"Look out!" yelled Bert. "The bally thing's pitching like a ship at sea. Stop her!"

"Can't! The brute's got the bit between her teeth badly," shrieked Clive. "I can't quite reach the throttle, and till I do she'll go plugging ahead. She runs like a demon."

"Top hole!" gurgled Hugh, whom it took a lot to frighten. "Ain't she got pace? But she'd be better if she didn't rush so much from side to side. Look out! There's a cart coming our way."

He set his teeth, endeavoured to make his figure adhere to the top of that egg box which did duty as a seat, and braced himself for the encounter. For encounter it seemed there was to be. The wondrous car which he and Clive had called into being romped towards the unsuspecting cart. It waltzed merrily from side to side of the road, seeming to take an uncanny delight in racing within hair's breadth of the ditch on either hand. It mounted the rough footpath with impunity, careless of the law and of possible policemen, its springless axles bending and bumping. It actually appeared to sight that approaching cart itself, and as if filled with fiendish delight at its unaccustomed freedom, and filled with knowledge of the helplessness of its inventors, it sped toward the vehicle, pirouetted before it, skidded badly, removing in the space of a bare five seconds one of the Rector's expensive back tyres, and then, mounting the pathway again with startling abruptness, it pitched its nose into the air, shuddered with positive glee, and having thrown its drivers into the ditch subsided into match-wood and scrap-iron. Those back wheels and their axle, borrowed for this memorable occasion, had the appearance rather of a couple of inverted umbrellas with the sticks tied together. The framework was torn asunder, and only the engine remained in recognisable condition.

As Clive and Hugh picked themselves up from the ditch and surveyed the wreck, with the driver of the cart and Bert giggling beside them, there came a horrid shout from behind them.

"Eh? What's that?" demanded the baker, for he it was who had so wonderfully escaped annihilation.

"Someone in trouble," said Bert. "Calling for help. Let's go."

"You ass!" grinned Hugh, gripping him by the sleeve. "Can't you guess? It's that Rawlings cad. We've bagged him."

"It's someone as is in trouble," exclaimed the worthy baker, not hearing the above. "Wonder if it's that Mr. Rawlings?"

"Young Rawlings?" asked Clive, with a horrible presentiment of coming trouble.

"Mr. Rawlings," came the emphatic answer. "Him who's bought the house. I seed him walking to the path through the spinney. He's been away up to Lunnon."

Clive and his fellow conspirators looked at one another painfully. Then they regarded the wreck of the motor. That was bad enough. Admission must be made to the Rector, and his axle and back wheels brought for inspection. Common honesty demanded that of them. It wouldn't be playing the game to borrow and smash and then hide their guilt in some underhand manner. And here was an addition.

"I'm a-going to see what's up," declared the baker. "You young gents had best come along too."

They couldn't very well hang back, and had perforce to visit the scene of their late labours. And there was the fat Mr. Rawlings, imprisoned in a pit which needed no adhesive clay pudding to hold him. For this London gentleman was of portly structure, and the narrow pit held him as if his fat figure had been poured into it. He could hardly shout. Even breathing was difficult, while his rage and mortification made him dangerously purple. Then, when at length the efforts of the four had released him, and he sat at the side of the pit besmirched with clay from head to foot, his rage was almost appalling.

"You little hounds!" he stuttered. "You did it. Don't tell me you didn't. I know you did. I'll set the police on you. You were trespassing. This is my property. I'll send Albert down to give you a hiding, and he'll be glad to do it. I'll – I'll – " His breath was gone by now, and he sat back gasping. But his anger did not subside, and Clive's prediction of coming evil was speedily realised.

"I shall send you off to school," said his mother. "You ought to have gone long ago. I really do consider your conduct to have been disgraceful."

"A piece of unmitigated mischief, and not of a harmless character," growled the Rector, who was given to choosing long words where possible. "Unmitigated mischief, Bert and Hugh. First you have the temerity to carry out something approaching a theft, a common and nefarious business. Then you implicate a respected neighbour in a catastrophe which might have terminated in his entire and total undoing. Bert, bend over."

Dear! Dear! It was a painful and humiliating week which followed. Young Rawlings up at the house giggled secretly at his father's discomfiture. But he threatened openly when he happened to come across Clive one morning. As for the three conspirators, they were not allowed to see one another, nor to communicate.

"You'll go on Wednesday," said the Rector. "I've written about you."

That was ominous. "We'll catch it hot," said Hugh. "I don't care. I'm jolly glad to be going. A chap ought to go to a big school, not stick always at home. There'll be a workshop. That'll be ripping."

"And cricket. That's better. Wish Clive were coming to the same school. Old Tom tells me he's led a dog's life these last few days."

Clive's existence had been wretched. He was glad, delighted in fact, when the day for departure arrived, and he took his place in the train for Ranleigh.

"That cad travelling too," he said, seeing Rawlings entering a distant carriage. "Glad he's going to some other place than Ranleigh."

He saluted his mother, waved to Old Tom, and sank back on his seat as the train started. If Bert and Hugh were glad to go to a public school, so also was Clive. He had longed to see life outside the village of Potters Camp with an intense longing. And here he was on his way. What would it be like? Was there bullying? Would he have to fag? and what sort of a place was Ranleigh?

CHAPTER III

OFF TO RANLEIGH

Going to school arouses a variety of emotions. In the case of Clive they were decidedly confused and jumbled, happiness, however, at the prospect before him predominating. For residence for a high-spirited lad at home, tied to a somewhat doting mother's apron-strings, is somewhat dull, and hardly conducive to good results, while the absence of a father had not improved matters. Indeed, it may be agreed without debate that the incident of that wonderful motor-car contrived by Clive and Hugh and the ingenious trap they had set for Rawlings had not been entirely mischievous. For here was Clive about to be launched on the schoolboy world, while Hugh and Bert, having listened to a long and verbose lecture from their father, hitherto their tutor at home, had entered a train and gone off likewise.

"What'll this Ranleigh be like?" Clive asked himself again and again. From taking an interest in passing scenery, he soon began to look forward to another stop with eagerness. For at each station there were boys. Some big, some small; some jolly and whistling, others glum and thoughtful. Not that glumness was the order of the whole day. For at one station Clive observed with some amusement one youngster under the escort of a fond father and mother. The lad had much ado to keep the tears back as the train departed, while his mother wept openly into a handkerchief of diminutive proportions. Within a minute, however, there came shouts of laughter from the next carriage into which this hopeful youngster had stepped, and peering in at the next station, Clive found the lad as merry as a cricket. He was beginning to wish that he could join them.

"I say," he began, somewhat lamely, "going to Ranleigh?"

A fat youth, with a greasy, pallid face, pushed his head out of the window and surveyed Clive as if he were an inferior beetle.

"Who on earth are you?" he asked, with some acerbity. "Who invited you to speak? that's what I want to know. Jolly cheek, I call it!"

Clive was taken aback rather considerably. This was not the sort of treatment to which he was accustomed. His gorge rose at it.

"Cheek yourself! Who are you, then?"

It seemed for a moment as if the fat youth would have an apoplectic seizure. His pallid face became suffused a dull purplish red. His neck swelled in fat folds over his collar. If looks could have killed, Clive would certainly have been slain on the spot. But the engine shrieked just then, while someone within the carriage seized the tails of the fat youth, who disappeared precipitately.

"Come in, Trendall," he heard a voice shout. "One would think you were a king, never to be spoken to. But who is he? My word, I got a glimpse of his phiz, and he looked as if he'd hammer you with pleasure."

Another mile on this almost endless journey and the train again panted into a station. Clive hung out of the window, and then became aware of the fact that two individuals were approaching his carriage, while from the one next door the youthful Trendall glared at him. Rawlings was one of those approaching. He descended with majestic step from his own compartment and hailed a porter.

"Hi! Portar!" he called. "Carry these things along hear. Someone's wanted to keep ordar."

Tall for his age, decidedly podgy, and with a cast of countenance which was not too attractive, Rawlings just lacked that brisk, clean appearance belonging to young men who go to our public schools. Despite expensive and well-fitting clothes, an immaculate tie and hat, and socks of most becoming pattern, the fellow did not look a gentleman. His air was pompous. His manner of addressing the porter ludicrous. He stepped up to Clive's compartment, nodded grandly to Trendall, and pulled the door open.

"He-e-ear, portar."

The magnificent one proffered a tip without looking at it, and Clive noticed that the man took it with alacrity.

"All fer me, sir?" he grinned.

"Of course! I'm not a pauper."

Rawlings waved him away magnificently, flopped on to a seat, taking the far corner, arranged his feet on the one opposite, and then began to take close scrutiny of our friend Clive. Meanwhile, another individual had entered the compartment. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, shambling youth, of decidedly foreign appearance, with clothes which spoke of a French provincial city. He stooped a little, was slow and ungainly in his movements, while his powerful shoulders were bent forward. But the face was striking and taking.

"Pardon," he said politely, lifting his hat as he entered. "This is for Ranleigh, is it not so?"

Rawlings regarded him stonily. "The cheek!" he muttered. "Is one to answer every bally foreigner? I'm not a portar!"

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and glared at the intruder. For the new-comer was an intruder. Rawlings had made his way to this compartment with a view to discussing certain matters with Clive, and letting that young gentleman thoroughly understand who was the master. But that last movement was his undoing for the moment. The fingers deep in one pocket struck upon certain loose cash, and withdrawing the same, Rawlings was at once stricken with a terrible discovery. He had had certain silver coins there before, and twopence in coppers. Those he had intended to present to the porter. But they were still there, while two half-crowns were missing. In fact, in his lordliness he had presented the grinning fellow with five shillings! No wonder the man smirked and touched his hat. That had pleased Rawlings at the time. Now, as the train swung out of the station, he dashed to the window.

"Hi! Hi! Portar!" he bellowed. "Hi! You come back with those half-crowns. It was a mistake."

But the whistle drowned the sound of his voice, while the porter, half hidden behind a barrow, waved a farewell to him. Rawlings threw himself back in his seat with a growl of anger.

"You're going to Ranleigh, aren't you?" he demanded fiercely of Clive.

"Yes."

"Then just you look out for squalls. What dormitory are you in?"

"Don't know," came Clive's sullen answer. This Rawlings was considerably bigger, though little older, but still Clive was not going to be bullied. "How should I?" he demanded. "What's the place like?"

"You'll find out in time. And don't you try any traps there, youngster. See?"

Rawlings was determined to let there be no misunderstanding. He stretched across the carriage and took Clive by the ear.

"None of your caddish games at Ranleigh," he said, "or you'll get something worse than this, by a long way."

Clive beat him off with a well-directed blow on the arm. In fact, with such heat and violence that Rawlings, still enraged at the loss he had so stupidly made when tipping the porter, lost his temper, and it looked as if he would at once take in hand the chastisement of the lad who was such a near neighbour. But the third individual suddenly distracted his attention. Could Rawlings really believe his eyes! This new chap, whoever he might be, a froggy probably, had asked if the train went to Ranleigh, and therefore, obviously, was bound for that destination, and must be a new boy. He was actually stretching himself out across the carriage, with one boot resting against Rawlings's immaculate trousers, while – worse than all – he had a cigarette in his mouth and was setting a match to it. It wasn't the fact of smoking that horrified Rawlings. He had broken that rule himself, and been dreadfully ill, much to his chagrin. But Rawlings was getting up in the school. He was in the lower sixth, would probably be a prefect this term, and such an act was an outrage to his dignity.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he spluttered. "What on earth do you mean by that? Smoking! Here, stop it!"

But the one addressed merely viewed him mildly. His brows went up questioningly, while he stretched himself a little more at his ease, causing Rawlings to remove his immaculate trouser leg with swiftness.

"Do you hear?" he cried threateningly. "What's your name?"

"Richard Feofé."

"Hang the Richard! Feofé, then. Look here! Stop that smoking."

But Feofé still regarded Rawlings mildly, and taking a deep inspiration filled the carriage with smoke.

"You do not like it, then?" he asked. "Monsieur can then get into another carriage."

Rawlings went crimson with rage, and then pallid, while Clive began to enjoy the joke immensely, for long ago he had sized his near neighbour up, and knew him to be nothing more than a purse-proud bully. But for the disparity in their two weights and heights he would have long since openly defied the fellow. But it was better to see someone else do that. And here was a hulking, good-natured Frenchman doing it splendidly.

"Where do you come from? Who's your father?" demanded Rawlings roughly, as if to gain time in which to decide how to act.

Feofé was not to be hurried. He had never been to a school of any sort before, save the local one he attended in France. But he had met boys and youths in plenty. And always this quiet, shambling boy, with his broad shoulders and appearance of hidden power, had won respect without recourse to violence. He took another puff at his cigarette, a habit, by the way, rather more indulged in by boys in France, and regarded the resulting smoke with something approaching affection. His eyes twinkled. He shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Monsieur is somewhat curious," he said, using excellent English. "I am from Lyons. My father, he is a banker. My mother, ah, she is his wife, you understand. Then there is a sister. Susanne, Monsieur, younger by a year than I am. That is the sum of the family, but I will tell you all. There is a dog – yes, two – and a cat, and –"

Rawlings was purple. Beads of perspiration were breaking out on his forehead. Catching a sight of Clive's grinning face he ground his teeth with anger.

"Hang your family!" he shouted at Feofé. "Who wants to hear about Susan?"

Feofé shrugged his shoulders. "You were so very curious," he said. "But I will proceed. We live at Lyons, but sometimes we go to Paris. There I have an aunt and two uncles, Monsieur. Ah! Yes, I must tell you all. The aunt is Susanne also. A pretty name, Monsieur."

Rawlings was on the point of exploding. His dignity had long since gone to the winds. If he dared he would have seized this Feofé by the neck and shaken him. But the young fellow's broad shoulders and smiling, easy assurance warned him that that might be dangerous. But he must assert himself. He must show this Frenchman that he was a superior, and that that must be the light in which he must view him.

"Look here," he said at length, smothering his anger, "no more of your confounded cheek. Susanne's good enough for you, so just remember. You're going to Ranleigh, and it's just as well to tell you that I shall be a prefect. Know what that means?"

Even now he hoped to impress Feofé with his magnificence. But the lad merely raised his brows enquiringly, and shrugged his shoulders still lower against the upholstery of the carriage.

"A prefect. Someone in authority. Well?"

"And to be obeyed. Just chuck that smoking."

"But," began Susanne mildly – we call him Susanne at once, seeing that that name stuck to him forthwith – "but, by the way, what's your name?"

Imagine the impertinence of such a request! A new boy actually having the temerity to coolly ask the name of one who had been three years at the school. Rawlings gasped; he mopped his damp forehead.

"Rawlings," he growled.

"Then, Rawlings, you're a prefect, yes?"

"Not yet," came the somewhat confused answer. "But I shall be this term. It'd be a confounded shame if they passed me over."

"Quite so. A confounded shame. You would be a loss to the other prefects."

Susanne took another appreciative suck at the weed, while Rawlings went hot and cold. Satire went to the depths of his being. This Feofé was covering him with derision.

"Look here," he began threateningly, "it's about time you understood who you are and what I am."

"You're a prefect, yes?" answered Susanne, not the least distressed, his little eyes twinkling, "or will be, at Ranleigh. But you are not one here, in any case. Is it not so? Therefore, Rawlings, get into another carriage if you don't like smoke, and do let us be pleasant."

Never was a man more demoralised than Rawlings. He had made an entry into the carriage with the set purpose of bullying Clive, and of letting that young gentleman see who was to be the master. The commencement of the movement had cost him five precious shillings. That was sore enough. And then, naturally enough, he had addressed himself to this new boy – and had been worsted. It goaded him to madness to see Clive grinning still.

"Well done, Susanne!" called out that worthy, delighted at the turn events had taken. "Rawlings ain't a prefect yet, and in any case we're not at Ranleigh. I say, I'm a new boy too. He lives quite close to me."

He pointed a deprecating finger at Rawlings, and crossed to join Susanne. That young man welcomed him with open arms. The twinkle in his eye brightened, while he eyed Rawlings in a manner which made that individual squirm. In fact, never was the wind taken out of anyone's sails more completely. Susanne had reduced him to silence. Thenceforth Rawlings sat screwed into the corner, regarding the landscape with a face which showed the severest displeasure, while his lips muttered and twisted angrily.

"Wait till I get 'em to Ranleigh, that's all," he was promising himself. "The first thing I do is to kick this Darrell fellow. Then Feofé shall have a turn. I'll get my own back whatever happens."

Clive was no smoker. He was sensible enough to know that it would be harmful to him just as it would be to any other fellow, and for that reason refused the cigarette Susanne offered him. He wedged himself up close to his new chum, and commenced a long and intimate conversation. Meanwhile, other boys entered the train. Some in the next compartment, from which howls of laughter sounded, some in their own. Fellows nodded curtly to Rawlings. The fat Trendall came in at one station to have a chat with him, and found his chum curiously glum and silent. He couldn't understand him at all, nor fathom the movements of the two opposite. For Susanne and Clive regarded Trendall with the smallest interest. According to all the canons of school life they should have looked askance at a fellow who had been at the school a couple of years or so. In Clive's eyes Trendall should have appeared enormous. And, no doubt, had Clive been alone in this adventure, he would have been far less uppish. But Susanne was incorrigible. If he had never been to school before, he was at least not to be frightened by what was before him. To Clive, his easy, calm assurance was refreshing. To Trendall it was inexplicable. Finding conversation lagging he took himself off at the next station, his place being taken by two big fellows, who nodded cheerfully to the occupants of the compartment.

"Hullo, Rawlings!" called one, a very tall, slim young man, on whose upper lip there was a respectable growth of downy hair. "Not dead, then?"

"No," answered that individual sourly.

"New youngsters, eh?" was the second question as the tall fellow turned to Clive and Susanne.

"Yes," answered the former. Susanne took his hat off politely.

"Help!" called Harvey, for that was the name of the youth speaking, grinning at this quaint exhibition. However, he returned the compliment by lifting his own. "We don't do that sort of thing in England," he said, quite kindly. "I shouldn't if I were you. Fellows would start rotting. I say, can you play footer and cricket?"

Susanne's eyes sparkled. "I like them both tremendously. But play, ah, that is another question. In England fellows get a chance. In France you may say that games are only beginning."

"Book him for a trial next scratch footer," exclaimed Harvey, addressing his comrade. "Look here, you two, I'm Harvey. This is Bagshaw, secretary of our Games Committee, and of everything else that's useful. He's head bottlewasher to every institution at the school, and don't you forget it. I say, how do you call yourselves?"

How different was his manner from that of Rawlings. Feofé gave his at once, while Clive was not backward. The latter took an instant liking for Harvey. Of course, he must be a tremendous fellow at the school, top of all probably. Or was he a master? He looked almost old enough. Besides, he had a moustache, quite a decent affair. As to Bagshaw, he was a delicate-looking fellow of eighteen, perhaps, with a kindly, wizened face. A calm, studious man. The scholar of the school, no doubt, but not a games player. Nor was Clive far out in his reckoning. For Harvey was head scholar, a man head and shoulders above his comrades. Good at work, keen on books and such things, a decided master at debate, he was still a first-rate man at games, and perhaps shone still more as a leader. His clean-cut figure was the observed of all observers in School matches. His had been the fortune to listen to howls of appreciation when he had carried off the hundred yards, the quarter mile and the long jump at the School sports, while one and all, his football team or his cricket eleven watched his every move and gesture, loyal observers of all his wishes.

As to Bagshaw, he was almost as popular. No one expected him to play games. It was well known that he had a weak heart, and with that, of course, no fellow could play. But his Ranleigh Gazette was a masterpiece. His poems were enthralling; while, strangely enough, this delicate-looking fellow, a scholar also, could hold the boys spellbound. When taking "prep." Bagshaw was not one to be trifled with. There was no nonsense about this delicate, ascetic fellow. He was cool, calm and commanding, and to those who had the sense, a real help in difficulties.

"Ranleigh. All change!"

The lamps at the station were lighted now. Clive tumbled out on to a platform seething with boys of every age. Boys laden with footballs and bags. Boys clad in warm overcoats, and others nobly discarding the same for the walk up to the school. Caps were lifted in recognition of one of the masters. Clive found himself doing likewise and wondering whether all masters were the same. For this one, a fair giant, of ample proportions, smiled down upon them all. He gripped Harvey's hand with a vigour there was no denying, while still smiling round at the company. And then in twos and threes, and here and there in forlorn ones, for your new boy is not quick to discover chums, the contingent of Ranleigh boys took the road for the school. Through a portion of the village they went, leaving the Village Jubilee Memorial behind them. Up towards the common, all railed in, where sports and cricket matches are held, up past the butcher's shop, with its slaughter-house close handy, and so onward through the tree-clad lane, past the master's entrance, giving access to the Sanatorium also, past an even more important institution, the tuck-shop to wit, and so to the gates of the school. Above, a third way down the hill, myriad lights flashed from the building. Clive forged his way up the front drive with Susanne beside him, up the steep slope to the front doors, never entered except in the case of a few, save on arriving or departing on the first or last days of the term. And so into the wide space past the chapel entrance, between Middle and Second Form rooms. And there, swept continuously by a seething mass of boys, stood a short, bald-headed master, nodding here and there, smiling all the time, evidently delighted to welcome everyone.

"Darrell!"

Clive heard his name and stopped. The lynx-eyes of the bald-headed master had espied him.

"Sir," he gulped. He felt almost frightened. There were so many boys, and there was such an uproar.

"One South, Darrell," he heard. "How are you, boy? Glad you've come. Hop up the stairs there and you'll find One South dormitory. Your name's on one of the beds. Put your bag down on it, and then go to hall. You'll get tea there. Chapel'll be in ten minutes."

How did he know that this was Darrell? Clive found himself wondering that. And what about Susanne?

"Feofé," he heard, as he ascended. And then less distinctly, "One South," with the same instructions.

"I'm glad," he thought. "Susanne'll be with me. Wonder about that howling cad Rawlings. What a downfall! He'll not meddle with Susanne whatever happens. But he'll have his pound of flesh from me if the chance comes. Wish Harvey was to be in One South also."

He clambered up the steps and turned into a dormitory but dimly illuminated. But it was big and clean and airy, and bore an appearance of comfort, some thirty beds being covered with cosy-looking red coverlets.

Clive found his bed, deposited his bag, and then enquired his way to hall. Thick slices of bread and butter – known colloquially as "toke" – appeased a ravenous appetite. He had not even time to admire the huge proportions of the Hall, the many long tables, the names of boys long since departed who had won honours at the school, and the few pictures and portraits. A clanging bell summoned him he knew not where. He found himself processing with a number of others. Through that gallery they passed, with Middle and Second Forms on either side; then sharp to the left down a paved corridor, to a wide, arched entrance. They were in the chapel. Clive passed through the handsome raised seats of the choir, down the central aisle, and drifted aimlessly to one side.

"Here," someone whispered. "One South?"

"Yes."

"Then this'll do. Squat here."

The fellow made room for him. Clive squatted and listened. The organ was filling the whole beautiful chapel with the sweetest sound. Boys had ceased entering. He raised his eyes to the entrance through which he had come, just to be seen above the choir. "Be sure your sin will find you out," he read above the doorway. The bell ceased ringing, the notes of the organ were hushed, a low "Amen" came from the vestry. And then the choir processed to their seats. Harvey was amongst them, and Trendall, his fat cheeks shaking. There was a string of masters, of all ages almost, all appearances and all sizes, looking somewhat out of their element. And last of all came the Head. Not so very tall, not big, not imposing, there was yet something about him which called for another look. But the organ was pealing again, filling this magnificent building, with its high arched roof, to the depths of every crevice.

Clive cast his eyes aloft over the screen – in itself a thing of surpassing beauty – to the curtains about the organ loft, above which showed the foreheads and eyes of two of the school. And then the notes died away in a sob, which somehow seemed to have a welcome in it. The congregation kneeled. Then the voice of the Head broke the silence with the opening of the evening service, calm and dignified and musical. His eyes wandered round the assembled boys, not curiously, not with recognition in them, but with a welcome for all.

Ah! Clive shivered just a little. Of a sudden it had come to him that he was one of them, that he was a Ranleighan, that the school honour was his honour, its prowess his, its victories his to boast of. And then the singing of the choir thrilled him as he had never been thrilled before. He felt as do those old, loyal Ranleighans who visit their Old School after the lapse of years. The music, the lighting of the chapel, the very scent of the stone and bricks awake old memories, sweet memories and thrill them. So with Clive. He sang lustily with the rest, and then sank to his seat to listen to the

lesson. There was Harvey at the lectern. Harvey the hero of the school, looking magnificent in his simple surplice. Harvey with head erect, his fair moustache curling, reading to them in a voice that showed no sign of trembling. How Clive would have shrunk from such a task! He shivered again at the thought of such a possibility.

Then came a hymn, the last prayers, and the thunder of the organ following. The choir filed away as they had come, the school remaining motionless till they heard the last "Amen" from the vestry. Then came movement. The boys were beginning to file out of the chapel and Clive prepared to follow. His eyes strayed this way and that, as he waited for his turn. All of a sudden he received something in the nature of a shock, something which set his heart thumping. For opposite him, waiting also to take their place in the procession of slippered boys, were two with familiar faces. Clive could have shouted their names. He almost did in his excitement and delight. For within a short dozen yards of him, as yet unconscious of his presence, were Hugh and Bert, his fellow conspirators, sent from their home as a direct result of that booby trap prepared for the unpopular Rawlings.

CHAPTER IV

SOME INTRODUCTIONS

"At last! Got you, you little demon! I'll teach you to laugh when a beggarly froggy gives me sauce. This'll help to make you remember manners, and is just a sample of what's to follow."

The amiable Rawlings, still smarting after his downfall in the train, had waylaid Clive Darrell. He pounced upon that youngster just as he issued from the chapel corridor, and with a heave and a jerk forced him through the narrow entrance into Middle School. A dim gas jet only served to show the immensity of the place, and its uncomfortable bareness. It was tenantless, save for the two who had now entered.

"No use your howling, my son," exclaimed the brutal Rawlings sneeringly, twisting Clive's arm till it was a wonder it did not break, and holding it so firmly behind his back that the lad could not move. "We'll commence with your lessons now, before school begins to-morrow."

He kned the youngster unmercifully, shaking his whole body till it was a wonder his teeth were not jerked down his throat, and repeated the dose promptly. Clive shouted and kicked. His face was pale with pain, for his arm was terribly twisted. And yet he was powerless to get free. He wondered if he were going to faint. He certainly felt very giddy. Beads of perspiration were rolling down his forehead, and no doubt, in a little while, had the torture been continued, he would have actually fainted. But there came a sudden interruption. A stout, square figure lounged into the class-room, while a head appeared at the door behind. The figure belonged to Susanne.

"Pardon," he began, with that peculiar politeness for which, in the course of a few days, he became notorious, "but you are hurting Darrell."

Rawlings swung round on him, thereby nearly completing the fracturing of Clive's arm.

"You get off," he cried angrily. "You've nothing to do with this affair, and if there's any more of your sauce I'll serve you likewise. Hear that?"

Susanne seemed to be completely deaf. Not for one second did he forget his politeness. Indeed, it came to be said of Susanne, the good-natured, stolid Frenchman, that nothing ever put him out, and that even in the heat of footer he was always himself, the essence of politeness. But he could be deaf to threats. Moreover, such a thing as temper seemed to be foreign to him. He strolled up to Rawlings, took him by the nose and pinched that organ very thoroughly – pinched it, in fact, till Rawlings holloed. He let go his hold of Clive instantly, and clung to the injured organ, while his vengeful eyes flashed over the edge of his hands at Susanne. What precisely would have happened next it is impossible to state, for there came now a second interruption. Harvey's voice was heard. He had entered the class-room and was just behind the three.

"Serve you right," he said bluntly; "and look here, Rawlings, understand this from me: while I'm Head Scholar and Captain of the School this sort of thing's got to be put a stop to. I'll have no bullying, mind that. And have the goodness to remember that Darrell's a new boy. Now, youngster, cut. It's time you were upstairs in your dormitory. Same in your case, Feofé. Rawlings, you can come along to the scholars' room. I want a chat with you."

Clive clambered briskly to One South. True, he became a little muddled between the passages and the staircases, and found himself in the wrong dormitory. But a howl from a fellow hardly as big as himself sent him running like a rabbit.

"Here! Who's this kid?" he heard, while a youth with red hair sticking up abruptly from his forehead, as if he had received a severe fright when very young and had never recovered from it, stretched out and snatched at his collar. "What dormitory?" came the curt question.

"One South."

"Then out you go. We don't have One South kids fooling about in Two South, I can tell you. Clear off!"

Clive was actually staggered by the insolent arrogance of this youngster. He bolted, whereas, with all his wits about him, it is probable that there would have been at least a wordy warfare for some few minutes. And then he dived into his own abode, and made for his own particular bed. The dormitory was almost full now. That is to say, there was a boy to every bed save one. Clive sat down on the box placed between his bed and the next, and looked curiously round. There was silence in the place. There came to his ears merely the pattering of many restless heels upon the floor, while from the other three dormitories which went to make up the four in the south of the school buildings there came not so much as a sound.

Was Rawlings in the place? Thank goodness, no! Then Harvey? Of course, he'd gone off with the bully to the scholars' room. So there was still the chance that ill luck might put Rawlings in One South. Opposite, smiling at him, was Susanne, his peace of mind apparently unruffled by the scuffle in which he had so recently taken a part. As for the rest of the thirty odd fellows, they were large and small and medium, shock-headed, sunburned after their holidays, rather clean and well groomed for schoolboys, but then they were fresh from home, and as jolly looking as one could wish for. Compulsory silence, however, muzzled them for the moment. At the call of "speak" within ten minutes such a babel of voices arose that Clive was almost deafened. Susanne grinned now and crossed to speak to him.

"I say," he began, "who's that fellow I caught twisting your arm?"

"Rawlings; he lives near us at home. He's an out-and-out bounder."

"Ah! And a bully. He'll not try again when I'm near. But when he catches you alone, then there'll be trouble. I say, er –"

"Darrell."

"Then, Darrell, pity we're not next to one another here. Wonder if it could be managed?"

The suggestion was hardly made before a hand was placed on Susanne's shoulder.

"Look here, you're a new boy, aren't you?" asked a voice. "Well, I'm Sturton, you know, prefect of One South, and chaps aren't allowed to move over and speak to one another without getting leave. Now you know, eh?"

Susanne apologised in his best manner, while Clive inspected the one who had spoken. He hadn't seen him before, for the simple reason that Sturton was one of those who ascended to the organ loft at chapel time, and was there invisible. He had come up to the dormitory after "speak," and here he was, admonishing and advising Susanne as if he were another Harvey. Clive liked Sturton at once, liked his clean-cut figure and features, his bold brown eyes, his crisp and yet friendly way of talking.

"I say, please –" he began, and then became somewhat abashed.

"Eh? Fire away! You say –"

"I was wondering, sir, if –"

"Oh, come now, none of your 'sirs.' What is it?" asked Sturton, thinking that Clive was quite a decent little fellow, an acquisition to the dormitory.

"Well – er – oh, I don't know."

Sturton laughed outright. Susanne grinned. If Clive suffered from bashfulness, at least he didn't.

"He doesn't like to say it; but we're chums – isn't that the word?" he asked. "You see, I got into the same carriage with him. There was another chap there, and he'd come to make himself disagreeable to Darrell. So I – er, chipped in, eh?"

"Got it right – chipped in's the word," admitted Sturton, looking interested, while Clive nodded vigorously.

"Chipped in, and together Darrell and I made him look foolish. Darrell's wondering whether we could have our beds close together, then I needn't bother to ask leave."

"Why, of course! Bring your bag over. Change places with one of these fellows on either side. I dare say they won't mind."

The exchange was made promptly, and Clive found himself chatting away with his new friend. He was half undressed when that fair giant whom he had first seen at the station, and then again amongst the masters processing into chapel, entered the dormitory. He went from boy to boy, shaking hands heavily but with sincerity and friendship.

"Well, Darrell," he began, accosting our young friend, and speaking in so gentle and subdued a voice that Clive wondered if he had a bad cold, or if the voice really belonged to him, "been digging any more pits of late, eh? Or making motor-cars? Tell me all about them."

There was such genuine interest in this master that Clive told the tale, till Mr. Branson – for that was this master's name – wiped tears of enjoyment from his eyes. Also the same eyes sparkled when the boy spoke of his motor-car, and forgetting all else in the depths of his interest plunged into a description of levers and gears, of throttle and ignition apparatus, of lubrication and cooling. Was Branson – Old B., as fellows spoke of him usually – was he a fellow enthusiast?

"So you like engineering things, then, Darrell?" he said in his sing-song drawl, "and digging pits too? Well, so do I. Er – that is, I like the first. You'd like to join the carpenter's shop, eh? and the smith's shop? But no motor-cars. Ranleigh can't afford to have its boys rushing about the roads. And there are the police to be considered. Well, boy, I'm your dormitory master; I hope you'll like Ranleigh."

It was Susanne's turn next. Clive watched the slouching figure of the young fellow bend politely, and marvelled as he discussed his coming with Old B. as if he were his grown-up equal. But that was the peculiarity about Susanne. Perhaps he had mixed more with men than with boys. Certainly he had an old-fashioned manner about him, while his self-assurance was far in excess of that usually displayed by one of school age. Then came the turn of other new boys, while the place of the master was taken by Sturton armed with pencil and paper, and rattling silver in his pocket. There were silver coins to be paid for the support of the football club run by One and Four South, a request to which Clive assented readily enough, though it depleted his purse sadly.

It was striking half-past nine when at length all had turned in save Sturton and Massey, the other prefect. They sat on the edge of the table occupying the centre of the dormitory, on a line with the two rows of basins running down the middle. Snuggled down on his pillow Clive watched them debating in animated manner, and rose on his elbow as a pair of heavy feet came thundering into the dormitory. A young man dressed in a blue cotton jacket hurried from jet to jet of the gas pipes, and with the help of a notched stick extinguished all but one. He was gone in a moment, his thunder resounding from the other dormitories.

"Good night, Darrell," called Susanne.

"Good night, Susanne."

Darrell dropped asleep feeling happy and entirely peaceful. He liked Ranleigh so far, liked it immensely. If there was a great drawback to the place, if Rawlings did happen to be there, and to have shown the most unfriendly intentions, at least there were good fellows enough. Bert and Hugh, for example. What luck their being at the school! And Susanne too, and Sturton, and Harvey. Yes, Harvey held pride of place. He was Captain, lord of all he surveyed, immeasurably above the head of the humble Clive Darrell.

The violent ringing of a bell awakened Clive. He started up in bed to find daylight streaming in through the high-placed dormer windows. That same youth who had operated the gas taps on the previous night was thundering through the dormitory with his hobnailed boots, swinging a bell of generous proportions. Later, Clive gathered that he was known as a "beaky." He crossed to a door at the near end of the place and tapped heavily upon it. Then he disappeared as if in a perpetual hurry, and the ringing of the bell resounded from the other dormitories. Clive hopped out of bed, thereby arousing the inmate of the next bed. That young gentleman raised a very sleepy face from his

pillow, hit rather snappishly at the hand which Clive had laid on his bed thereby to steady himself, and dropped back on his pillow.

"Hang you, waking me!" he grumbled, his eyes half shut, as if, too, there had been no such thing as a bellman. "It's always the same with new kids. Get funky when they hear a bell. Want to hop up at once. Here, you Darrell, call me when it's twenty past the hour. I give myself ten minutes the first morning, afterwards just five. Any decent fellow can wash and dress in that time."

Clive followed Sturton and a few of the others out of the dormitory, slippers on his feet and a towel about his waist.

"Swim, eh?" asked Sturton, giving him an encouraging nod.

"Rather!"

"You're the sort of chap we want then. Hullo! Masters still fugging. None of those old games, Masters," sang out Sturton, whose manner of addressing the one in question showed that he meant to be head of his dormitory whatever happened. "Here, out you come! Fugging may be allowed at home, but at Ranleigh, never!"

The unfortunate individual who lay next to Clive, and who had declared his intention of sparing a bare ten minutes on this, the first morning, for the purpose of ablution and dressing, was dragged out of bed without ceremony.

"Hop into your shoes and no skulking," said Sturton, standing over him. "I've had enough of your slackness, Masters. Every chap over twelve in this dormitory goes down for a dip every morning. The kids can, too, if they like. Same with those in Four South. I tell you One and Four are going to come out cock dormitory in footer this term if I can manage it."

Grumbling was of no use. Indeed, Masters showed no great inclination that way. Clive found him, after a while, when they had become more intimate, a merry, contented fellow, but dreadfully lazy.

"A regular slacker," Sturton declared on more than one occasion. "There's a cart-load of sisters at his home, and they molly-coddle the fellow. If he imagines an ache or a pain, even in his toe, he lies abed in the morning and is fed by one of the many sisters. But there's no bringing chaps up here on the spoon. No hand-rearing at Ranleigh if I know it. When a chap's ill, he can go to the sick-room. That's right enough. Or to the 'sanny' if he's really bad. Otherwise he's got to be fit – fit as a fiddle, Darrell."

Sturton was nothing if not open and straight-forward. Clive found in him something strangely akin to Harvey, the idol of the lower school, the man admired and envied by all the seniors. For Sturton was fresh and breezy in his ways. He addressed the juniors, not as if they were so many nuisances, or as individuals vastly beneath his notice – a manner much resorted to by Rawlings and the fat-faced Trendall – but as equals, cheerily; but always in a way that showed that he expected instant obedience.

His motto was perfection. He set an example of the strenuous life, and allowed no shirking where games were concerned. Nor was he backward where work came into account. His figure, dressed in an overcoat over his pyjamas, often with a towel about his curly head, was familiar to all in the dormitory who happened to open their sleepy eyes in the early morning. For Sturton was "swatting." He had some examination in view, and since the rules of Ranleigh forbade the burning of the candle at both ends, and indeed compelled the shutting down of all lights by ten o'clock at night, Sturton perforce had to burn the candle at one end only, and that the daylight one. Five o'clock found him poring over his books at the dormitory table.

And now he was ready to lead his juniors for the morning plunge. His conquering eyes viewed every bed in the place. Peremptorily he called to certain fellows. And then the procession set out for the bath, not sedately following Sturton, but in a rushing crowd, which went like an avalanche down the stairs, out of the wide passage between Middle and Second Schools, and then into the corridor about the quad. Clive peeped through the open windows, innocent of glass till the coming of December, when the school carpenter would put the frames into position. He saw a wide quad,

smoothly asphalted, and rising by steps on the north side to a central doorway. Those open windows ran round it on three sides, and doubtless there were corridors within them. But he had little time for observation, for as part of that scampering throng he went pell-mell down the corridor, swung sharply to the left, and then along the east side of the quad. Up a short flight of steps, worn into deep hollows by the shoe-leather of many a Ranleighian, to the right abruptly, and so down a whitewashed passage with an abrupt turn at the far end, and then through a doorway into the dressing-room of the bath. A stretch of water lay between concreted walls.

"Cold as ice," shivered Masters, still begrudging the comfort of his bed. "Sturton's a demon for hardening fellows. All the same, a fellow feels frightfully fit when he's had a dip in the early morning. But a bed pulls; I could always do two hours longer any morning."

What fellow in his schooldays couldn't? A cosy bed pulls very hard on a cold, dark morning; but, with a peremptory Sturton about, there was no shirking. One and Four South boys mingled with others from West, a single, large dormitory, with those from North and East, and splashed into the bath. Sturton had his own ideas as to how the plunge should be taken.

"Can't stand a chap who walks in," he said. "Might just as well have three inches of water in a tub in one's room. A fellow ought to dive, and he can go in off the board if he wishes. For me, there's no place like the shallow end. You've got to be canny when you dive, for there's not three feet of water, and if you scrape the bottom, why, concrete on a naked chest acts like a rough file on soft wood. It draws blood every time. So you've got to remember that. Now, young Darrell, show Susanne the way. Follow me to the deep end. The first plunge'll freeze you to the marrow. The swim down will warm your blood. You'll come out again with your skin on fire, feeling as fresh as a daisy."

Off he went, cutting the water obliquely. Indeed, the dive was bound to be almost a flat one. Sturton did not appear again till he rose at the far end of the bath. Down he sank again, pushed off from the far wall under water and came up under Clive's nose, to that young gentleman's wonder and admiration. Then Clive attempted the same thing, flopped badly, stinging his hide severely. The ice-cold water sent a chill to his very marrow as he entered it. And then, as Sturton had said, his blood seemed to boil up as he took a first stroke. He was in a beautiful heat when at length he returned to the shallow end and clambered out to watch Susanne. That young man – known already to his dormitory by the name Clive had given him – looked somewhat doubtfully at the bath.

"Swim?" asked Sturton, who had not yet got his measure, and who with insular pride and prejudice was apt to look down upon a foreigner. "Eh?"

"Yes, but –"

"What? Funk the dive?"

"Yes," admitted Susanne frankly. "But I'll do it if it kills me."

He went souse into the water, sending a huge wave before him, and rising a moment later to rub his knees and elbows.

"Come to ground?" asked Sturton sympathetically. "Well, you won't to-morrow. Nothing like having one jar to teach you to be careful. Off you go. We'll all of us have to be nippy."

Clive had never before had much need to practise haste, for at home breakfast had not been an early function, while the school he attended was within easy distance. But at Ranleigh he soon learned what it was to be something of a speed merchant where dressing was concerned. He could scrub his skin dry after his morning bath in a mere jiffy. The rush back to One South dried all the parts he had missed in his hurry. To dive into his clothing was a process facilitated by many an artful dodge. Masters, in fact, was a promising instructor.

"Stick your things overnight so as you can hop into 'em all together," he advised. "Vest and shirt always as one, mind you, and tie still on the collar. Of course, any juggins knows the dodge of getting into pants and socks at one operation, while if you don't bother to undo your shoes, you can push your feet into 'em in a jiffy. Five minutes is my time for washing and dressing."

"Was," corrected Sturton, who happened to overhear this edifying conversation. "Was, Masters. I've been doubtful about the efficacy of the washing part. Chaps in One South have got to be known as fresh-water fellows, and a piece out of your short allowance won't help us. Besides, you're over twelve. Don't you let me catch you missing your dip in the morning."

Once dressed on that first morning Clive drifted down the stairs to Middle School. There was no particular reason why he should go there. But numbers of the school were entering the narrow doors, and he followed. Bert was just within, looking thinner than ever, his eyes still more dreamy. And Hugh was beside him, vivacious and very wide awake.

"I say, how ripping!" he exclaimed. "But wouldn't the Governor be riled if he knew what had happened? It was the last thing he wanted to do to send us to the same school. What about that beast Rawlings? Thought I saw him in chapel last evening."

"Impossible! The lordly Rawlings go to Ranleigh!" exclaimed Bert. "Nothing less than Eton'd suit him."

"All the same, he's here. I travelled a part of the way down with him," said Clive. "I say, I'll tell you all about him later. He's a beast, and no mistake. But I want to get hold of that fellow. Hi, Susanne," he called.

The Frenchman shambled awkwardly towards them. His provincial clothes were in marked contrast to those of the other fellows. Not that that fact seemed to distress him. Susanne cared not a rap for popular opinion. Half-way towards Clive a big fellow jostled against him while deep in conversation with another, and jarred by the contact turned angrily upon him. It was Rawlings, with the oily, fat Trendall beside him. At once the bully's face reddened. He looked threateningly at Susanne, while the Frenchman regarded him with something approaching amusement.

"Pardon," he began, for he deemed himself the cause of the collision.

"Hang your pardon! Look here, you Frenchman, there's just one thing you've got to understand. I'm a prefect, and –"

"You're a new kid," chimed in Trendall, looking distinctly unamiable. In fact, this greasy, fat fellow had thrown in his lot with Rawlings since the previous evening. There had always been some sort of attraction between them. But Rawlings was to be a prefect. To the self-seeking Trendall that was sufficient, a friendship with him promised many advantages, and here was an opportunity to cement that friendship.

"Precisely," said Rawlings, "and the sooner you get to know it the better. You'll do well to sheer clear of this Darrell."

There was surprise in his eyes as he saw Bert and Hugh. A sneer gathered on his face, and then a scowl of anger. For Hugh grinned a grin of recognition. He remembered the pit, and the manner in which it had captured the wrong individual.

"You're here too; then you'll catch it," growled Rawlings, moving on with Trendall.

"Pleasant," smiled Hugh, when he had gone.

"A gentleman, eh?" asked Susanne, with a lift of his dark eyebrows. "But –"

"My friends, Bert and Hugh Seymour," introduced Clive. "That Rawlings is an out-and-outer. With Trendall as his toady, and perhaps another crony, they can make life unbearable here for us. That is, for Bert and Hugh and I."

"And Susanne," said that worthy, smiling. "Remember that I have been dragged into this matter."

"Tell you," cried Bert suddenly, "we'll send the beast an ultimatum. Tell him we'll hammer him if he interferes with one or any of us."

That scheme had to be put aside for the moment, for there came a clamour at the door. There arose a shout of "*Cave! Old B.*," and an instant later that fair giant entered the form room, obviously having easily overheard the warning. Boys ranged themselves up into line, and there began Call Over, Clive's and other new boys' names being tacked on at the end.

"Sum, 'sum, 'sum," the answers sounded, and then were punctuated by the ringing of the chapel bell. The door, shut a few moments before on those who were late, was swung open, and they processed to the chapel. After that there was breakfast in the Hall, and, later, form work began with a vengeance, Clive being placed in the Lower Third, while Bert attained to the Upper; Hugh ascended only as high as Upper Middle, while, to the surprise of all, Susanne romped into the Upper Fourth. It followed, therefore, that some time elapsed before the little quartette met again. But when they did, Clive drew up a letter, which, having received the signatures of all concerned, was duly posted to "Albert Rawlings, Ranleigh, Local."

"This is to inform you," it ran, "that we, the undersigned, have decided to lick you every time you touch one of our band. We refrain from giving you our private and confidential opinion of you. As gentlemen, we feel that we have no right unduly to hurt your feelings. And also, this opinion of ours must be very well known to you. Just sheer off and leave us alone is the sincere advice of

Clive Darrell,

Bert Seymour,

Hugh Seymour,

Richard Feofé (Susanne)."

CHAPTER V AN ULTIMATUM

"What'll you do?" asked Trendall, breathing heavily as he leaned over Rawlings' shoulder in Lower Sixth Form room and perused the ultimatum which Clive and his chums had sent. "Lick 'em all straight off, eh? But, of course, you'd have to catch 'em singly. That Feofé cad is as strong as a horse, and though he can't fight as an Englishman can, he'd kick like a horse."

It seemed likely enough that the lordly Rawlings had considered that side of the question, or perhaps was even then considering it. For he turned a furrowed brow to his comrade.

"I'm going to lie low," he said. "One thing's certain, the first chance I get I turn the Darrells away from our place. Of course, you know, Trendall, that we own the whole show that Darrell's father had. He made a mess of things, and my father came in and bought. That's why he hates me so much. As to this letter, pooh! I'll get even with 'em all before I've done. Feofé doesn't frighten me, not a bit."

Certainly not. Yet Susanne had pulled the great Rawlings' nose, and that brilliant and magnificent bully had not retaliated. But he would, some day, when the moment was propitious. For the time being he left the little quartette alone, and Clive and his fellows were therefore at liberty to forget the feud; which they did promptly. In the meanwhile, Ranleigh had many things of interest to show them.

"Look here, Darrell kid," observed Masters one day, presuming on his two months' seniority of Clive, and on the fact that he had been two terms at the school, "I don't mind taking you along to show you the sights. Been to the tuck?"

"What's that? Oh, tuck-shop, I suppose?"

"Of course, booby! You don't suppose it's a sort of place where they do the washing! Well, suppose we go there and introduce you? Eh?"

Clive agreed readily enough. He was beginning to find that life at Ranleigh opened up a wider prospect for him. At home he and Hugh and Bert had been the best of chums, and no one had been admitted into their close friendship. But here the matter was different, and better. For the difference in forms separated the chums often enough. True, Bert and Hugh were in the same class-room as Clive, for it accommodated the two Middle and the two Third Forms. But at Ranleigh every hour saw a change in the class-rooms occupied by the various forms. Sometimes Clive was in Middle class-room, a little later he'd be in the Lower Fifth, and yet again in the "Stinks" room, a department that began soon to fascinate him, and which proved to be the one particular attraction to Susanne.

Circumstances, therefore, separated the chums often enough, for Bert and Hugh were in Four South Dormitory. Not that that prevented communication when in their respective dormitories, for the inventive Clive soon had a species of life-line manufactured, and this, when Sturton's attention was occupied elsewhere, could be tossed over the partition right on to Hugh's bed. Notes could thus be dragged backwards and forwards, and continuous communication kept up.

"But it can be improved, of course," said Clive, to which Hugh readily assented. "We'll make a telephone, nail the wires up the walls of the partition so that no one can see 'em, and then we can talk just as much as we want."

It never occurred to either of them that they might get all their chattering over in the daytime. But that is just the little point which people sometimes fail to comprehend. It was the novelty of clandestine conversation which attracted, and set these two inventors to work to construct a telephone from plans and descriptions given in a book they had managed to borrow.

In One South itself, Clive had Susanne always beside him, and very soon a firm friendship grew up between them. While on his other side lay Masters, the slug, as Sturton called him, a decent fellow, nevertheless, and now anxious to act as guide and faithful friend to our hero.

They passed along those endless corridors to the back doors, through which law compels the boys to emerge, and sauntered down between the Fives Courts. On the left lay the Gym, where Hugh had already been practising. Then beside the Tennis Courts, and away across the field which fronts the school. And who could wish for a better place? What father or mother or fond uncle or guardian could hope to find a healthier, better spot than Ranleigh? The world has heard of the school. It has made its mark in many a walk of life, so that there is no great need to describe it minutely or to mention its precise position. Suffice to say that it is situated in Surrey, that it projects three parts of the way up a sloping hill, which is bathed by the sun on every side. There is not a musty spot about it, not a corner nor a crevice in which injurious germs may hide. See it, then, a red-brick pile, clad with creeper, with its clock tower and its chimneys and pinnacles. Cast your eyes upon the surrounding country, and admit, as admit you must, that never was there a more ideal position. For the village is a mile away. The school stands beautifully isolated. Fresh breezes sweep direct from pine tree and heather across its roofs and into its windows. Add to these charms playing fields which vie with those of schools of greater antiquity, and you have a description of Ranleigh.

But we are forced to admit that Clive gave not a thought to it. He scudded across the field with Masters, dashed through the front gates and away down the road till they came to the tuck. It is a fascinating little shop, and here again we must admit that its contents appealed more strongly to Clive than did the surroundings.

"Never been in before, eh?" asked Masters slyly, well knowing the fact that Clive had not.

"Never; wish I had. Rippin', ain't it?"

"Not half bad," admitted Masters casually. "A chap can stuff himself full here for next to nothing. By the way –"

"Eh?" asked Clive, who was regarding a pile of apple tarts with close attention. "How much, please?" he asked the attendant.

"A penny each, sir."

"Cheap!" murmured Clive. "Oh, what were you saying, Masters?"

He was carefully inspecting the contents of his purse by then, and not looking particularly at Masters. It was not precisely what that young gentleman wanted. He coughed loudly. "Oh, never mind," he said lamely. "I – I didn't say anything."

It was such an obvious fib that Clive stared at him.

"Oh, did I?" then remarked Masters. "Oh, yes, I remember. But it doesn't matter."

He thrust his hands into his pockets, turned to the door, and beckoned to Clive. "Come on," he said, somewhat sadly. "Let's clear. I'll take you in some other time."

That was just the very thing that Clive could not agree to. He had been thick-headed before. But now he was beginning to grasp the situation. It was awfully nice of Masters, too, he thought, though, to be sure, he didn't see the smile on the face of the attendant.

"What's up?" he demanded. "You're never going to leave the tuck without eating something?"

"Must," came the answer.

"Why?"

"Oh, never mind." Masters shrugged his shoulders, and went from the cottage, Clive following. "Fact is," he admitted, once they were outside, "I've forgotten to bring money with me. It's a beastly nuisance."

"But it don't matter," cried Clive. "I'll lend you some."

"And then, of course," Masters hurriedly interjected, "it's a sort of custom here, you know, for new kids to – oh, never mind, let's clear."

"To what?" demanded Clive, beginning to fathom the mystery.

"Well, if you must know, it's a sort of custom at Ranleigh for new kids to stand treat the first time they enter the tuck. But it don't matter, as I said. Let's clear. I never borrow money."

The generous-minded Clive could see only one way out of the difficulty. Indeed, he was eager to show his hospitality. And so five minutes later found the two youngsters securely seated in the little room beyond the tuck, their feet over a gas fire, their teeth busily engaged with apple tarts, while steaming cups of cocoa stood beside them. By then, Masters' modesty had entirely departed. It had been a wrench, of course, to allow a new kid to treat him! But in for a penny in for a pound wasn't a bad motto.

"Tried those big chaps?" he asked, pointing to a box of squares of chocolate. "Ripping! They're only a penny, and there's different colours all the way through. Tony – met Tony yet? He's a fellow with red hair in Two South – well, Tony swears that there's regular pictures worked up in those squares, and that if you bite carefully you can see 'em. I don't believe it myself, but it's a joke trying."

Clive did know Tony. He was the red-headed fellow who had shouted at him and been so very pugnacious on the first night of the term when Clive had entered the wrong dormitory. As to the squares, well, it would be rather a joke to test this theory of Tony's.

"We'll test 'em, then," he said. "How many, eh?"

"Well, of course," said Masters guardedly, "a fellow could do it with one, I suppose. But he'd have to be clever. Two'd give a chap a better chance, while –"

"Sixpenn'o'th of those square things, please," demanded Clive, who was warming to Masters, and who happened to have received a useful present from a distant uncle that very morning. "You try first, Masters."

"And those brandy balls are just the things for prep.," remarked Masters, some little time later, as if it were an afterthought and he had not meant Clive to hear. "They're hot with peppermint, and you can smell 'em all over the class-room. It makes the chaps look round and long for some themselves, while the prefect who's in charge of the room gets raging. Come on, Darrell."

It was perhaps a fortunate thing that Clive's stock of sixpennies was becoming small, or he would have listened further to the blandishments of the crafty Masters. As it was, he purchased a liberal quantity of brandy balls, divided them with his friend, and then went off to other fields.

"Sundy tuck's there," Masters informed him as they skirted the common, where cricket matches are played. "Of course, the Head knows that there is one, and would give his ears to catch chaps there. My word, they would get a licking! But he can't succeed, and for a very good reason. You see, a chap can slip in without being seen, and if the Head or any other inquisitive master happens to come along and suspect, why, you can bolt from the back door, up the garden and over the wall at the end. I've done it. So have other chaps."

Before three weeks of his first term had passed Clive had a nodding acquaintance with all the surroundings of the school, and with most of the fellows. Moreover, he had witnessed the first great footer match of the season, and his youthful chest had swelled with pride because of the prowess of Harvey and other men. In fact, he was slowly and steadily imbibing that spirit of *esprit de corps* which helps a school along. He was beginning to understand that self-effacement is a good thing at times, and that the good of the school as a whole is what should be considered. Else, why did Harvey work so hard to train the team while still doing his best in school time? Why also did Sturton work so loyally to support him, and still rise at cock-crow every morning so as to prepare his own tasks?

But early frosts somewhat upset the plans of the Captain, and saw letters innumerable despatched to some three hundred homes, demanding that skates should be sent immediately.

"Another day's frost and we'll be able to go anywhere. They say the canal's good," said Hugh, who had been making diligent enquiries. "But my mark is the lake at Ditton."

"Private, isn't it?" asked Masters, who had joined the little band of friends, and who, in fact, was often with them.

"Yes. But what's it matter? The Delarths are away from home. They'd never want to keep good ice all to themselves. We'll take french leave."

"Or write and ask. Why not?" ventured Bert mildly.

"Why not?" repeated Susanne, with sparkling eyes. "It will make the fun better. Besides, it is rude, is it not, to trespass on private property?"

They scoffed at him promptly, and the very mention of rudeness put aside the intention to write.

"It'll be part of the lark to go without being invited," said Hugh. "I know the place already, for I've been skirmishing round to discover likely spots for nesting. In the spring I'll be there. And if this frost continues, I mean to try what it's like on the ice. So there, Susanne."

Two days later, after an intervening thaw of some five hours' duration, whereat the hopes and the faces of every member of the school, save the Captain and the footer team, fell dismally, the ice was reported to be bearing on neighbouring ponds, and particularly on that one down by the common in front of the butcher's shop. It had frozen very hard overnight, and the ground was as hard as a stone. After dinner, therefore, Bert and Hugh and Clive set out, Susanne being in their company also, with Masters following behind as soon as he could get away, an "impot" of some length having detained him. Indeed, the self-same Masters had made a valiant attempt to complete the task during dinner-hour in Hall. A pen of Clive's own invention had been brought into request. Thereon were fixed no fewer than three nibs, all of which would write at the same moment.

"You see, it's not one of those clumsy things one's heard of," said the lordly inventor when he produced this wonderful time-saving implement. "Anyone can tie three nibs on to one holder and try to write with 'em all. But the blots he makes, my word! One nib rests nicely, but has too much ink. A second is too short to reach the paper, while the third sticks the point through and tears a hole. This pen gets over all three difficulties. So long as you dip her carefully, she'll write, for all the nibs are carried on spring holders. It's a champion. I'm going to bring out a self-filling six-line automatic writer before I've ended. I'll sell 'em by the ton to chaps at school."

No doubt he might if he were fortunate, and if all "impots" were of the same character as that given to Masters. That worthy having incurred the displeasure of his form master had been very politely and in dulcet tones requested to deliver five hundred repetitions of the following statement. "There's a time and a place for everything."

"And all because he scented peppermint," declared Masters hotly, when he reported the matter to his cronies. "That chap Canning's a bounder. He's always finding fault somewhere."

"But," ventured Bert cynically, "perhaps he doesn't like peppermint."

"Doesn't like peppermint! Rot!" cried Masters. "Who doesn't?"

"Well, you do," grinned Susanne.

"And so does any decent fellow. But that's where it is. Canning isn't a decent fellow. He's always grousing. Masters, you're talking. Masters, you don't answer. Masters, you're a fool. Masters – "

"You're a glutton," grinned Hugh, enjoying the indignation of that individual, and receiving a buffet for his pains. "Well, he clobbered you sucking brandy balls, given you by Clive."

"And told me that they were beastly, that I was making a beast of myself to suck 'em in class time, and that there was a time and a place for everything. Then gave me an impot."

"Which has to be done."

"That's it, and there's skating this afternoon. I'm going."

It followed that Clive's inventive genius was called in to help, and that day at dinner, Masters, having gobbled up his meal, spent the rest of his time crouching over a book resting on his knee, on which was stretched the paper on which he was operating. And all would have been well, for he was making amazing progress with that patent pen, but for the fact that a sudden and unforeseen difficulty had arisen. The penny bottle of ink he had requisitioned had the most idiotically narrow neck.

"Asses!" he growled, showing the difficulty to Clive, who sat next him. "What makes 'em turn out bottles like that? How's a chap to get to work?"

Clive had many brilliant ideas constantly occurring to him.

"Shove it into a spoon," he urged. "A tablespoon. Empty the bottle in, and then you can dip easy. It'll prevent you dipping too deep. Get on with it."

Masters realised the brilliance of the suggestion, and at once put it into practice. He took the biggest spoon to be had, buttressed it around with bread-crumbs, and then emptied his ink from the bottle. That was famous.

"One gets along like a house on fire," he told Clive triumphantly. "And the writing's ripping. Old Canning'll remark on it. George! Darrell, you might sell him one of your pens. Look! There's fifty of the beastly lines written. Here we go again. 'There's a time and a place for everything.' So there is, my boy. Hall's the place for writing rotten impots, specially when there's skating."

Hall, no doubt, was an excellent place. But accidents will happen, and here with the most surprising result. For Masters, after much diligence, had actually managed to complete three hundred lines when his sleeve got anchored in the handle of the spoon filled with ink. It jerked over, and in one brief instant the writer of the "impot" had the contents of the spoon in his lap, while some of the inky mess flowed over the table, making an excellent black map on the cloth.

"What a mess!" he groaned, when he had vainly mopped at his trousers with his handkerchief. "I'm sopping wet, and as black as a hat. And look at that beastly tablecloth. Here, Darrell, suggest something."

The best that Clive could do was to propose a covering of bread-crumbs and salt, with which the huge stain was promptly covered. But all to no purpose. The eagle eye of the Captain of the School going the round of the tables in Hall after "knock up," when there was compulsory silence, discovered the map which Masters had painted so unwittingly.

"Whose is that?" he demanded.

"Masters'."

"Ah! Writing at table. An hour's drill to-morrow, Masters. And that mess'll cost half a crown. Perhaps more. Why, your seat is smothered also. You're wet to the skin. Report to the matron afterwards, and get a change. I'll talk to you this evening."

There was Masters in trouble with a vengeance. His "impot" had to be commenced again, for ink had flown liberally over it. His trousers were ruined, and doubtless his under garments. There was half a crown at least to pay, and a visit to Harvey into the bargain.

"When there'll be a whacking," grinned Bert, always the cynic. "That'll be merely as a precaution. He'll lay it on hot so as to warm you and drive off the chill you'll be sure to have contracted."

Masters was not in sufficiently good frame of mind to trust himself to answer. But skate he meant to. So at the moment when Clive and his friends left the building, he was seeking new raiment in his dormitory, having already obtained fresh underclothing from the matron. Then, by dint of running, he caught up the little band who were bent on trespass, just before they reached the ring fence that surrounded the property of the Delarths.

"Just look round and make sure there's no one about," cautioned Clive, glancing over his shoulder. "Now, Hugh, you've been here before. You lead the way."

"Then over the fence. Into that copse at once, and then bang straight ahead. The only fellows we have to look out for are the keepers. Of course, they'll hate our going through their covers. But then, something's got to give way when there's skating. Over we go. Last man take a look round when he's joined us."

It took them perhaps half an hour to creep through the wood into which Hugh led them. Sometimes they imagined they heard voices, and when that was the case they cast themselves flat on the frozen ground and listened with bated breath. But there was nothing else to alarm them, and pushing on they arrived at length – after much exertion, for the cover was thick and brambles had a peculiar fascination for their persons – at the edge of the lake on which they proposed to skate.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" declared Hugh, his face flushing, his steaming breath a cloud all round him. "There's someone on the place already."

"Someone? A dozen people," Bert corrected him.

"And – I wouldn't like to swear to it, but I do believe that that's old Canning," said Masters, glowering on an individual who suddenly came into view from the misty distance and swept across the smooth sheet of ice towards them. "Just like him to set a fellow an impot so as to prevent his skating, and then, when that chap had taken no end of pains to get finished and –"

"Including half drowning himself with ink," grinned Bert, as a gentle reminder.

"And getting a half-crown fine marked up against him," laughed Clive, giggling at his friend's misadventure.

"And," proceeded Masters severely, ignoring the interruption, "and was working like a nigger, it's just like this cad Canning to turn up at the very spot and spoil fun entirely."

That was where the sight of this master affected the whole party. His imposition was merely a matter between himself and Masters. Of course, they were all awfully sorry for Masters, though his getting soaked with ink was a jolly old joke, whatever he thought of it – but Canning was a cad, all the same.

"What's he want to come along here trespassing on our property?" demanded Hugh hotly.

"But – it isn't ours, is it?" asked Bert dryly, whereat Susanne threatened him with violence.

"Of course it's not," the slouching Frenchman answered. "Not actually, you know. But we thought of the place first. We've the most right to it. What's Canning want hanging round the ice we've selected?"

"Cheek! Beastly impudence!" declared Clive grandly, while Masters still glowered on the unconscious master. For it was Mr. Canning without a doubt, a kill-joy on this occasion. For, having gained the lake after such great trouble, Clive and his friends dared not venture upon the ice they coveted.

"There's that cad Rawlings," suddenly whispered Bert, for Mr. Canning was close to them, and had sat down to smoke a cigarette.

"And the greasy Trendall. He's always sure to be somewhere within distance," growled Masters.

"And if that isn't Harvey, with Sturton near him, I'm not worth listening to," observed Clive, as if he were speaking of a certainty. "Yes, there's Harvey, hand in hand with Miss Withers."

"But – I don't understand," said Bert, smiling grimly when some few minutes had passed. "There are hundreds of our fellows. They're arriving every minute. Surely –"

Slowly it began to dawn upon the little band that perhaps all their secrecy and all their effort had been wasted.

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