Barbour Ralph Henry

On Your Mark! A Story of College Life and Athletics

Ralph Barbour

On Your Mark! A Story of College Life and Athletics

Содержание

On Your Mark! A Story of College Life and Athletics

CHAPTER I
THE WINNER OF THE MILE

"All out for the mile!"

Myer, clerk of the course, stuck his head inside the dressing-tent and bawled the command in a voice already made hoarse by his afternoon's duties. In response a dozen or so fellows gathered their blankets or dressing-gowns about them and tumbled out into the dusk of a mid-October evening. Because of the fact that on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons the athletic field was required for the football contests it was necessary to hold the Fall Handicap Meeting on one of the other days of the week. This year it was on Friday, October 17th, and because the Erskine College faculty does not permit athletic contests of any sort to begin before four o'clock on any day save Saturday, the mile run, the last event on the program, was not reached until almost six o'clock; and in the middle of October in the latitude of Centerport it is almost dark at that time.

It was cold, too. A steady north wind blew down the home-stretch and made the waiting contestants dance nimbly about on their spiked shoes and rub their bare legs. That wind had helped the sprinters, hurdlers, and jumpers very considerably, since it had blown against their backs on the straightaway and the runway, enabling them to equal the Erskine record in two cases and break it in a third. It was Stearns, '04, the track-team captain and crack sprinter who, starting from scratch, had performed the latter feat. Until to-day the Erskine record for the 220-yards dash had been twenty-two seconds flat; this afternoon, with the wind behind him all the way, Stearns had clipped a fifth of a second from the former time, to the delight of the shivering audience, who had cheered the announcement of the result loudly, glad to be able to warm themselves with enthusiasm on any pretext.

But if the north wind had been kind to the sprinters, the middle- and long-distance men had derived no benefit from it; for while it aided them on the home-stretch, it held them back on the opposite side of the field. The spectators had already begun to stream away toward college when Myer at length succeeded in getting the last of the milers placed upon their marks. The two-mile event had been tame, with Conroy, '04, jogging over the line a good twenty yards ahead of the second man, and there was no reason to expect anything more exciting in the mile. Rindgely and Hooker were both on scratch and surely capable of beating out any of the ambitious freshmen, who, with a leavening of other class men, were sprinkled around the turn as far as the 200 yards. To be sure, Rindgely and Hooker might fight it out, but it was more probable that they had already tossed a coin between themselves to see who was to have first prize and who second. So the audience, by this time pretty well chilled, went off in search of more comfortable places than Erskine Field; or at least most of them did; a handful joined the groups of officials along the track, and jumped and stamped about in an attempt to get the blood back into toes and fingers.

Clarke Mason was one of those electing to stay. Possibly the fact that he had had the forethought to stop in his room on his way to the field and don a comfortable white sweater may have had something to do with his decision. At least it is safe to say that the mere fact of his being managing editor of the Erskine Purple was not accountable, for the Purple had a small but assiduous corps of reporters in its employment, one of whom, looking very blue about the nose, Clarke spoke to on his way across to where Stearns, having got back into his street clothes, was talking to Kernahan, the trainer.

"Well, who's going to win this, Billy?" asked Clarke. (The track trainer was "Billy" to only a select few, and many a student, seeking to ingratiate himself with the little Irishman, had had his head almost snapped off for too familiar use of that first name.) Kernahan looked over the contestants and nodded to the men on scratch.

"One of them," he answered.

"Then you have no infant prodigies for this event in the freshman candidates?"

"I don't know of any. Two or three of them may turn out fast, but I guess they can't hurry Hooker or Rindgely much."

"Who's the chap you've got by himself over there on the turn?" asked Stearns.

"That's – I don't mind his name; he's a freshman from Hillton; he wanted more handicap, but I couldn't give it to him, not with those legs of his. He's built for a runner, anyhow."

"He surely is," answered Stearns, "as far as legs are concerned. But legs aren't everything. Hello! you haven't given that little black-haired sophomore much of a show; thirty yards won't help him much in the mile."

"Track, there!" cried a voice.

The three moved back on to the turf, Kernahan, who was timer, pulling out his watch. The dozen or so milers who had been summoned from the tent had had their ranks increased by several others. Hooker and Rindgely had the scratch to themselves, but the thirty yards held three men scarcely less speedy, and from that point onward around the turn as far as the middle of the back-stretch the others were scattered in little groups of twos and threes. Only the freshman with the long legs was alone. He had been given a handicap of 120 yards, and was jogging back and forth across the track with the bottom of his drab dressing-gown flapping around his slender ankles. Ahead of him in the gathering twilight six other runners, in two groups, were fidgeting about in the cold. Across the field floated the command to get ready. He tossed his wrap aside, revealing a lithe figure of little above medium height with long legs in which the muscles played prettily as he leaned forward with outstretched arm. At the report of the pistol he sprang away with long easy strides that seemed to eat up the distance. At the beginning of the home-stretch he had caught up the nearest bunch of runners, and at the mark he was speeding close behind the foremost men and taking the pace from the leader. It had cost him something to gain the position, and to the watchers about the finish it seemed that he was already spent.

"Your long-legged freshman's done for, I guess," said Clarke.

"Yes, he's too ambitious. Has a pretty stride, though, hasn't he, Billy?" Walter Stearns followed the freshman runner with his gaze while he began the turn. Kernahan too was watching him, and with something like interest. But all he said was:

"Stride's pretty good; feet drag a good deal, though."

"Who's that closing up?" asked Stearns. "Oh, it's the sophomore chap with the black hair. He's an idiot, that's what he is. Look! he's trying to pass Long-legs. There he goes! Long-legs has sense, anyhow. Sophomore's taken the lead, and look at the pace he's making! Long-legs is dropping back; none but a fool would try to keep up to that."

They were at the turn now, and the gathering darkness made it difficult to determine who was who. So the watchers gave their attention to the scratch-men and one or two stragglers who were bunched together half-way down the back-stretch. Rindgely and Hooker were close together, the latter putting his toes down squarely into the former's prints. Both were running easily and with the consciousness of plenty of power in reserve. When the turn was begun they had gained slightly on the others near them and were about 120 yards behind the first bunch. The black-haired sophomore was still setting the pace when he crossed the mark again. Behind him at short intervals sped four others, and last in the group came the freshman with the long legs. The half-hundred spectators that remained were clustered close to the track near the finish and, in spite of chattering teeth, were displaying some enthusiasm. A junior named Harris who was running third was encouraged lustily, but most of the applause was reserved for the two cracks, Rindgely and Hooker; they were well known and well liked; besides, they were pretty certain to win, and it is always satisfactory to back the victor.

"What's this, the third lap?" Clarke asked, thumping his bare hands together. "Well, I'm going back; better come along, Walt. You'll freeze here. If we're going to have this sort of weather in October, I'd like to know what's going to happen to us in December."

"Well, I guess I'll go along," Stearns said. "It surely is cold, and we know how this is going to end. There go Rindgely and Hooker now; watch 'em overhaul the bunch. If you see Ames, Billy, tell him I said he was to look me up to-night, will you?"

"All right," answered the trainer. "But you'd better see this out; there's something in the way of a finish coming pretty quick."

"Why, what's up?" asked the track-team captain, turning quickly to observe the runners.

"Well, I don't know for sure," answered Kernahan, cautiously, "but the scratch-men aren't going to get their mugs without a fight for them, I'm thinking."

"Who's in the running?" Stearns asked, eagerly. Once more the first men were coming down the home-stretch. But now the order was changed. The black-haired sophomore was not in sight, but in his place sped Hooker, an easy, confident smile on his face. On his heels was Rindgely. Then came the junior, Harris, and beside him, fighting for the pole, was a little plump senior. Behind this pair and about five yards distant was the long-legged freshman. His head was held well, but his breathing was loud and tortured. Stearns looked each man over searchingly. Then he turned to the trainer.

"Last lap! Last lap!" was the cry.

"Say, Billy, you don't mean Harris?" shouted Stearns when he could make himself heard.

Kernahan shook his head.

"Then who?"

"Keep your eyes on Ware," said the trainer.

"Ware? Who the dickens is Ware?" asked Stearns. But the trainer was scattering the spectators from beside the finish, and so paid no heed. The stragglers were passing now and the crowd was speeding them along with announcements that the last lap had begun and with mildly ironical injunctions to "move up head" or "cut across the field." Then all eyes were turned to the back-stretch, where the five leaders, survivors of a field of some fifteen, were racing along, dim whitish forms in the evening twilight. Hooker was setting a hot pace now, and the gaps were lengthening. But as the last turn was reached the figures changed their positions; some one dropped back; some one else moved suddenly to the front. But it was all a blur and the identity of the runners could be only surmised.

"That's Rindgely taking the lead, I guess," said Stearns. "That means that Hooker's to sprint the last fifty yards or so and get first. But I'd like to know who Ware is. Do you know?"

Clarke shook his head.

"Search me," he answered. "Maybe it's the long-legged chap. He's still in the bunch, I think."

"Yes, but he was just about done up when the last lap was finished. Did you notice? He was gasping. Where's Billy?"

"Over there at the mark. He's holding a watch; if you speak to him now he'll jump down your throat. Here they come. Let's move over here where we can see."

"Well, whoever's in the lead is making a mighty painful pace for the finish of the mile," exclaimed the captain. "Seems to me he's 'way ahead, too!"

"It isn't Rindgely," said Clarke, decisively. "It must be – "

"Come on, Freshman!" cried a mighty voice at Clarke's elbow, and a big broad-shouldered youth crashed by, sending the editor of the Purple reeling on to the cinders, from where he was pulled back by Stearns. Clarke glared around in search of the cause of his ignominious performance, and saw him standing, a whole head above the crowd, a few paces away at the edge of the track. He seemed to be quite unconscious of Clarke's anger. Leaning out over the cinders, he was waving a big hand and bellowing in a voice that drowned all other cries:

"Come on, Freshman! Dig your spurs in! *Whoo-ee!*"

Clarke's anger gave way to excitement. Down the home-stretch came the runners, sprinting for the mark. Stearns was shouting unintelligible things at his side and apparently trying to climb his back in order to see the finish. The throng was yelling for Hooker, for Rindgely, for Harris.

And then, suddenly, comparative silence fell. Twenty yards away the runners became recognizable. The crowd stared in wonderment. Well in the lead and increasing that lead with every long, perfect stride came an unknown, a youth with pale cheeks disked with crimson, a youth of medium height with lithe body and long legs that were working like parts of machinery. Back of him ran Hooker; beyond, dim figures told of a struggle between Rindgely and the junior for third place. It was the stentorian voice of the big fellow at the edge of the track that broke the momentary silence of surprise.

"Pull up, Freshman, it's all yours!" it shouted.

Then confusion reigned. The little throng raced along the track toward the finish. Hooker's friends urged him to win, while others applauded the unknown. And in a second it was all over, mile race and fall meeting. A white-clad form sped across the finish six yards in the lead, tossed his arms in air, swerved to the left, and pitched blindly into the throng.

“What’s the matter with Seven?” shrieked a small youth at Stearns’s elbow. The track-team captain turned.

“Who was that fellow that won?” he demanded.

“Ware,” was the jubilant reply. “Ware, ’07!”

CHAPTER II
A VISITING CARD

When Allan Ware recovered enough to take an interest in things he found himself lying in the dressing-tent with some one – it afterward proved to be Harris – striving to draw a coat from under him. No one was paying any special attention to him, and the tent was filled with the hard breathing of the runners, who were now only intent upon getting into their clothes. Allan took a deep breath and obligingly rolled over so that Harris could have his coat. Then he sat up.

He had not fainted at the end of the race; it is very seldom that a runner loses consciousness, no matter how hard or prolonged the struggle has been. The collapse is produced by oppression of the chest, less frequently of the heart in particular, and the consequent difficulty of breathing is the most painful feature of it. Allan had been dimly aware from the moment he pitched into the throng until now of what had passed, but his interest in events had been slight; he knew that arms had reached out and saved him from falling and that some one – a very strong some one, evidently – had picked him up like a feather and carried him the short distance to the tent. Allan wondered, now that he could breathe again without exertion, who the fellow had been.

Every one was intent upon dressing and no one looked as though expecting thanks. Rindgely, still blowing like a porpoise, was balancing himself on one leg and trying to thrust the other into his trousers, while he explained to Hooker that the track was like mush and no one should be expected to run on it. Hooker, looking amused, grunted as he pulled his shirt over his head. Allan scrambled to his feet and began to dress. He couldn't help wondering what the others thought of his victory; it seemed rather important to him, but he had never won a race before, although he had taken part in a good many, and so it probably appeared more wonderful than it really was. The trainer stuck his head in at the door.

"Hurry up, now," he commanded. "Get up to the gym, and don't be afraid of the water when you get there."

This familiar formula met with the usual groans and hoots, and Kernahan grinned about the tent. Starting to withdraw his bullet-shaped head with its scant adornment of carroty hair, the trainer's eyes fell on Allan. He picked his way over the tangle of legs.

"Well, are you done up?" he asked. Allan shook his head.

"That's the boy, then!" continued Billy, heartily. "You'd better come out Monday and we'll see what you can do. Did you ever run much?"

"Some," answered Allan, "at school."

"Well, you see me Monday."

When the trainer had gone, Hooker called across:

"Say, Ware, you're done for now."

“How’s that?” asked Allan.

“Why, when Billy takes a fancy to you, he just merely works you to death. You weigh when you get over to gym and then weigh again, say, three weeks from now. You won’t know yourself.”

A laugh went up. Rindgely chimed in with:

“You’ll find your work different from winning a mile with a couple of hundred yards handicap.”

Allan had only had one hundred and twenty, but he didn’t think it worth while correcting Rindgely, who was evidently rather sore over his defeat. Harris unexpectedly took up for him.

“He didn’t have that much handicap, Larry; and if he had, it wouldn’t have made any difference to you, you old ice-wagon. What was the matter with you, anyhow?”

Rindgely entered into elaborate explanations, which concerned the state of the track, the injustice of the handicapping, and many other things, and Harris laughed them to scorn.

“Oh, you’re just lazy,” he jibed. “Your name’s Lazy Larry.”

A howl of delight went up, and Allan looked to see Rindgely become angry. But, after a moment of indecision, he added his chuckle to the general hilarity. Allan turned to Harris.

“I was rather done up after the run,” he said, “and some fellow must have lugged me over here. Did you happen to see who he was?”

“Yes; one of your class, a whopping big fellow named Burley. Know him, don’t you?”

Allan shook his head thoughtfully.

"Well, you will when you see him."

Harris picked up his togs and hurried off. Allan would have liked to walk back with him to the gym, but he thought the junior might think him "fresh" if he offered his company, and so he started back alone. It was almost dark now, and the lights in the college yard and in the village were twinkling brightly when he reached the corner of Poplar Street and turned down that elm-roofed thoroughfare toward his room. Poplar Street ends at Main Street in a little triangular grass-grown space known as College Park, and Allan's room was in the rambling corner house that faces the park and trails its length along Main Street. Allan thought his address sounded rather well: "1 College Park" had an aristocratic sound that pleased him. And since he had been unable to secure accommodations in one of the dormitories, he considered himself lucky to have found such comfortable quarters as Mrs. Purdy's house afforded.

His room was large, with two windows in front reaching to the floor and four others arranged in couples along the side, and affording a clear view of the college yard, from McLean Hall to the library. The fact that former denizens had left comfortable window-seats at each side casement was a never-failing source of satisfaction to the new occupant of what the landlady called the "parlor study." In Allan's case, it was study and bedroom too. Next year Allan meant to room in the Yard, and for the present he was very well satisfied.

His occupancy of less than a month had not staled the pleasure derived from knowing himself sole owner of all the apartment's array of brand-new furniture, carpeting, and draperies. To-night, after he had lighted all four of the burners in the gilded chandelier above the table, he paused with the charred match in hand and looked about him with satisfaction.

The carpet was beautifully crimson, the draperies at the windows were equally resplendent, if more variegated in hue, the big study-table shone richly and reflected the light in its polished top, and the more familiar objects on the mantel and on the dark walls, accumulations of his school years, seemed to return his gaze with friendly interest. To-night, with the knowledge of his victory on the track adding new glamour to the scene, it seemed to Allan that his first year of college life was destined to be very happy and splendid.

He stayed only long enough to change collar and cuffs, and then, with a boy's cheerful disregard of economy, left the four lights flaring and hurried across Main Street to Brown Hall and dinner.

The afternoon's work had put a sharp edge on his appetite, and, having nodded to one or two acquaintances, he lost no time in addressing himself to the agreeable task of causing the total disappearance of a plate of soup. His preoccupation gives us an excellent opportunity to make a critical survey of him without laying ourselves open to the charge of impoliteness.

Allan Ware was eighteen years old, a straight, lithe lad, with rather rebellious brown hair and a face still showing the summer's tan. His features were not perfect by any means, but they were all good, and if you would not have thought of calling the face handsome, you would nevertheless have liked it on the instant. There was a clearness and steadiness about the brown eyes, a gentleness about the mouth, and a firmness about the chin which all combined to render the countenance attractive and singularly wholesome. It was a face with which one would never think of associating meanness. And yet to jump to the conclusion that Allan had never done a mean act would have been rash; he was only an average boy, and as human as any of them.

Allan had come up to Erskine from Hillton without heralding; he was not a star football player, a brilliant baseball man, nor a famous athlete; he had always run in the distances at the preparatory school principally because he liked running and not because he believed himself cut out for a record breaker. His afternoon's performance had been as much of a surprise to him as to any. At Hillton he had been rather popular among his set, but he had never attempted to become a leader. His classmates had gone to other colleges – many to Harvard and Yale, a few to Columbia and Princeton, only one to Erskine. Allan had chosen the latter college to please his mother; his own inclinations had been toward Yale, for Allan had lived all his life in New Haven, and was blue all through.

But Allan's grandfather had gone to Erskine – his name was one of those engraved on the twin tablets in the chapel transept, tablets sacred to the memories of those sons of Erskine who had given their lives in the struggle for the preservation of the Union – and Allan's father had gone there, too. Allan couldn't remember very much about his father – the latter had died when the boy was ten years old – but he sympathized with his mother's wish that he also should receive his education under the elms of Centerport.

His family was not any too well supplied with wealth, but his mother's tastes were simple and her wants few, and there had always been enough money forthcoming for the needs of his sister Dorothy, two years his junior, and for himself. If there had been any sacrifices at home, he had never known of them. At Hillton he had had about everything he wanted – his tastes were never extravagant – and the subject of money had never occupied his thoughts. At eighteen, if one is normal, there are heaps of things far more interesting than money. One of them is dinner.

Allan was much interested in dinner to-night. He even found it necessary to indulge in a couple of "extras," in order to satisfy a very healthy appetite. For these he signed with an impressive flourish. When the last spoonful of ice-cream had disappeared he pushed back his chair and went out. In the coat-room he found a dark-complexioned and heavily built youth in the act of drawing on a pair of overshoes.

"Couldn't find my boots," explained Hal Smiths, "so I put these over my slippers. Wait a minute and I'll go along."

They left the hall together and walked briskly toward Main Street. Allan and Hal Smiths had never been particularly intimate at Hillton, but as they were the only two fellows from that school in the freshman class, they had naturally enough felt drawn toward each other since they had reached Erskine. During the last week, however, Hal had been making friends fast, and as a consequence Allan had seen less of him. Hal had quite a reputation, gained during his last year at Hillton, as a full-back, and he was generally conceded to be certain of making the freshman football team, if not the varsity second. To-night Hal was full of football matters, and Allan let him talk on uninterruptedly until they had reached the corner. There:

"Come on down and play some pool," suggested Hal.

But Allan shook his head. He liked pool, but with a condition in mathematics to work off it behooved him to do some studying.

"I'll play some other night," he said. And then: "Say, Hal," he asked, "do you know a chap in our class named Burley?"

"Pete Burley? Yes; what about him?"

"Oh, nothing. What's he like?"

"Like an elephant," answered Hal, disgustedly. "A big brute of a chap from Texas or Montana or somewhere out that way." Hal's ideas of the West were rather vague. "Met him the other day; struck me as a big idiot. Well, see you to-morrow."

Hal swung off down Main Street and Allan turned toward his room, feeling quite virtuous for that he had resisted temptation in the shape of pool and was going home to toil. When he opened his door a sheet of paper torn from a blue-book fluttered to the floor. There was a pin in it and it had evidently been impaled on the door. Allan held it to the light and saw in big round, boyish characters the inscription:

“Pete Burley.”

CHAPTER III
ON THE CINDERS

On the following Monday, Allan set out after his three-o'clock recitation for Erskine Field. He stopped at his room long enough to leave his books and get his mail – the Sunday letter from home usually put in its appearance on Monday afternoon – and then went on out Poplar Street.

It was a fine, mild afternoon, with the sunlight sifting down through the branches of the giant elms which line the way, and a suggestion of Indian summer in the air. If he hadn't been so busy with his letter he could have found plenty to interest him on the walk to the field, but, as it was, he was deeply concerned with the news from home.

There was talk, his mother wrote, of closing down the Gold Beetle mine out in Colorado, from which distant enterprise the greater part of her income had long been derived in the shape of dividends on a large amount of stock; the gold-bearing ore had given out and the directors were to consider the course to pursue at a meeting in December. Meanwhile, his mother explained, the work had stopped, and so had the dividends, and she didn't like to consider what would happen if this source of income was shut off for all time. Allan tried to feel regretful over the matter, since his mother was clearly worried – more worried than she was willing to show, had he but known it – but the Gold Beetle was a long way off, it always had supplied them with money, and the idea that it was now to cease doing so seemed something quite preposterous. The Gold Beetle represented the family fortune, about all that remained after his father's affairs had been settled.

Allan found other news more to his liking: Dorothy was getting on nicely at her new boarding-school and had survived the initial period of tragic homesickness; one of Allan's friends at Hillton, now a Yale freshman, had called at the house a few days before; and Edith Cinnamon had presented the household with a litter of three lovely kittens. Edith Cinnamon was the cat, Allan's particular pet, and the news of the interesting event remained in his mind after the reprehensible conduct of the Gold Beetle mine had departed from it. Mines stand merely for money, but kittens are pets, and Allan loved pets. A wonderful idea struck him: why not have his mother send him one of the kittens? He resolved to confer with Mrs. Purdy on his return; surely she would have no objections to his obtaining a room-mate to share the "parlor study" with him!

When he had changed his clothes for a running costume in the locker house and reached the track he found fully half a score of fellows before him. There was Hooker jogging around the back-stretch; nearer at hand was Harris practising starts; in a group at the finish of the hurdles he saw Stearns, the track-team captain, Rindgely, several fellows whose faces he knew but whose names were unknown to him, and Billy Kernahan. He drew aside to let a file of runners by and then approached the group. Rindgely nodded to him slightly, not with any suggestion of unfriendliness, but rather in the manner of one who has never been properly introduced. Billy accompanied his salutation with a critical survey of the half-clothed figure confronting him.

"How are you feeling to-day?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks!" answered Allan.

"That's the boy! We'll try you at three-quarters of a mile after a while. You'd better get warmed up, and then try half a dozen starts."

While the trainer was speaking, Allan was aware of the fact that Walter Stearns was observing him with evident interest. When Billy ceased, Stearns said something to him in low tones, and the next moment Allan found himself being introduced to the track-team captain. Stearns was rather under than above medium height, with small features and alert eyes of a steel-gray shade that contrasted oddly with his black hair. Below his white trunks his legs were thin and muscular, and under the faded purple sweater his chest proved itself broad and deep. He spoke rapidly, as though his tongue had learned the secret of his legs and was given to dashes rather than to sustained efforts.

"Glad to know you, Ware," he said, as he shook hands. "Glad you're coming out to help us."

"I don't believe I'll be much help," answered Allan.

"Oh, yes; bound to. I saw you run in the handicaps. That was a mighty pretty race you made. By the way, do you know Mr.

Long? And this is Mr. Monroe. And Mr. Mason. Keep in with Mason. He's office-boy on the Purple and writes criticisms of the track team."

Allan shook hands with the three, while the group laughed at Stearns's fling at the managing editor of the college weekly. Long was a startlingly tall fellow, with a crooked nose and twinkling, yellowish eyes, and Monroe was short and thick-set, and looked ill-tempered. Mason, Allan recognized as one of a half-dozen men whom he had seen about college and as to whose identity he had been curious. Mason was the sort of fellow that attracts attention: tall, broad-shouldered, with shrewd, kindly eyes behind glasses and a firm mouth under a straight and sensitive nose. He looked very much the gentleman, and Allan was glad to make his acquaintance. He was in the dark as to what position Mason really occupied on the Purple, and so the point of Stearns's joke was lost on him. But he smiled, nevertheless, having learned that it is sometimes well to assume knowledge when one hasn't it.

"See you again," said Stearns. The others nodded with various degrees of friendliness and Allan took himself off. The track was in good condition to-day and held the spikes firmly. Allan jogged up and down the stretch a few times, trying his muscles, which on Saturday had felt a bit stiff after the mile run, and lifting his knees high. Then he started around the track. Half-way around he drew up behind Hooker.

"Hello!" said the latter. "Nice day, isn't it?"

Allan agreed that it was, and the two went on together to the turn. There Hooker turned up the straightaway.

“Going to try starts?” he asked. “Let’s go up to the end there.”

Allan couldn’t see the necessity for becoming proficient in the crouching start until Hooker explained as they returned from a brief dash, in which the younger lad had been left wofully far behind.

“Sometimes,” said Hooker, “you’ll want the pole at the start, and if you’re placed two or three places away from it, you won’t get it from a stand, you see. But if you use the crouch and get away quick, you have a pretty good show of getting ahead of the men who have the inside of you. Let’s try it again. You give the signal this time.”

After ten minutes of it, Allan picked up his sweater and followed Hooker down the track to report to Kernahan. The football men had taken possession of the gridiron by this time, Long and others were practising at the high jump, and altogether the field looked very busy.

“You and Ware try three laps,” said the trainer to Hooker. “Watch your form, now, and never mind about your time. I’ll attend to that for you. Take turn about at the pacing; you take the first lap, Hooker. Want to get into this, Larry?”

Rindgely nodded and peeled off his sweater. The others had to trot about for a minute or two while Rindgely stretched his muscles. Then the three got on to the mark, Billy gave the word, and they started off at an easy pace, Hooker in the lead, Allan next, and Rindgely in the rear. All three hugged the rim of the track and settled down into their pace. On the back-stretch they had to slow down once to avoid a group of football substitutes who were crossing the cinders, and once Rindgely was forced to leap over a ball that came bouncing out onto the track, and was much incensed about it. Hooker's pace was wonderfully steady, but Allan thought it rather slow. At the mark Billy told them to "hit it up a bit now," and Hooker slowed down, letting Allan into the lead.

Allan increased the pace considerably. This time there were no interruptions, and they neared the end of the second lap fresh and untired. Kernahan glanced up from his watch as they sped by.

"All right!" he shouted. "Get up there, Larry, and hold that pace."

Rindgely took the lead. As they commenced the turn Allan's gaze, wandering a second from the front, lighted upon a tall, wide-shouldered and somewhat uncouth figure at the edge of the track. Strange to say, the figure nodded its head at him and waved a hand, and as Allan went by there came a stentorian cry of encouragement that might have been heard half across the field:

"Chase 'em down, Freshman! Give 'em fits!"

Allan bit his lips angrily as he sped on. What business had that big chump yelling at him like that when he didn't even know him? Pretty fresh, that's what it was! Allan hadn't made the acquaintances of so many fellows but that he could remember them, and he was quite sure that he had never met the big chap who had yelled. But at the same time there had been something familiar about the fellow's voice – too familiar, thought Allan with a grudging smile – and he wondered who he might be and why he had singled him out for his unwelcome attentions. Then the incident passed for the time out of his mind, for the last turn was almost at hand and Rindgely was increasing the pace.

Allan began to feel it at the turn, and when they swung into the home-stretch and the pace, instead of settling down to a steady finish, grew faster and faster, he came to the unwelcome conclusion that he was not in the same class with the other two. Rindgely, in spite of all Allan could do, lengthened the space between them. Hooker, seeing that Allan was out of it, passed him fifty yards from the mark and strove to overhaul the leader. But Rindgely was never headed, and finished several yards in front of Hooker and at least thirty ahead of Allan. When they turned and jogged back to the trainer, the latter was slipping his watch into his pocket.

"What's the good of doing that, Larry?" he asked, disgustedly. "That wasn't a race."

"Oh, I just wanted to liven it up a bit," answered Rindgely, grinning. "What time did I make, Billy?"

"I didn't take you," answered the trainer, shortly. "That's enough for to-day."

Allan turned away with the others, but Billy called him back.

"What was the matter?" he asked. "Pace too hot for you?"

"I suppose so; I couldn't stand that spurt."

"Well, that was some of Larry's nonsense; he'd no business cutting up tricks.” He was silent a moment, looking across to where the second eleven was trying vainly to keep the varsity from pushing over her goal-line. Then, “Ever try the two miles?” he asked. Allan shook his head.

“I don’t believe I’d be any good at it,” he answered. “Not that I’m any good at the mile, either,” he added, somewhat discouraged at the outcome of the trial.

“What’s the best you ever did at the mile?”

“About four minutes forty-five seconds.”

“You did it inside of forty, Friday.”

“I did?” Allan looked his surprise. “Oh, but I ran a hundred and twenty yards short.”

“I allowed for that,” answered Billy, quietly. “Now, look here, Ware; you’ve got it in you all right, but you don’t make the most of yourself. You let your feet drag back badly, and you’ve been trying after too long a stride. You make that shorter by six inches and you’ll cut off another second after a while. And to-morrow I’ll show you what I mean about the stride. There’s plenty of time before the dual meet in the spring, and by then we’ll have you doing things right. The only thing is,” he added, thoughtfully, “whether you wouldn’t do better at the two miles. What do you think?”

“I really don’t know,” answered Allan, doubtfully, “but I’d like to try it.”

“Well, there’s lots of time. The indoor meet in Boston comes along in February; we’ll have you in shape for that, and you can go in for the mile and the two miles. Meanwhile, you'd better come out with the other men while the decent weather lasts."

"Do you think I can make the team?" Allan asked, hopefully.

"Easy; but they don't take new men on till after the trials in the spring."

"Oh!" said Allan, a trifle disappointed.

"Don't let that bother you," advised the trainer. "You're as good as on it now. You make the most of the fall training, Ware, and keep fit during the winter. I'd go in for hockey or something. Ever play hockey?"

"Yes, but I can't skate well enough."

"Well, get plenty of outdoor exercise of some sort this winter; don't let the weather keep you indoors."

"All right, I'll remember." Allan's gaze wandered toward the locker building. Half-way across the field a big figure was ambling toward the gate, hands in pockets. Allan turned quickly to the trainer. "Do you know who that fellow is?" Kernahan's gaze followed his. After a moment:

"That's a freshman named Burley. Know him?"

"No; I just wondered who he was," Allan replied.

"And I don't want to know him," he muttered, irritably, as he trotted off to the locker house.

But Fate seldom consults our inclinations.

CHAPTER IV
HAL HAS AN IDEA

It seemed to Allan during the next few days that the bulky form of Peter Burley was bent upon haunting him. On Tuesday morning, in English, he was aware of Burley's presence a few rows behind him; when he looked around, it was to encounter the big fellow's smiling regard. There was really nothing offensive in that smile; it was merely one of intense friendliness, quite unconventional in its intensity, but it irritated Allan greatly. Why couldn't Burley let him alone? Just because he had kept him from falling and lugged him to the dressing-tent, he seemed to have an idea that Allan was his especial property. And then the cheek of scrawling his silly name on a fellow's door! And yelling like a three-ply idiot at the track!

Perhaps the fact that Burley, whoever and whatever he was, was markedly popular rather increased Allan's prejudice. Wherever Burley sat in class there was invariably a good deal of subdued noise and laughter, and when he left the hall it was always as the center of a small circle of fellows, above which Burley towered head and shoulders. Secretly, Allan envied Burley's success with his fellows, but in conversation with Smiths he dubbed Burley a mountebank. Hal was visibly impressed with the word and used it unflaggingly the rest of the year.

Wednesday, Burley was again on the field, but this time he made no remarks as Allan passed him on the track; merely smiled and nodded with his offensive familiarity and then turned his attention to the football practise. As usual, he was the center of a group, and after Allan had passed the turn he heard their laughter and wondered if Burley had selected him as a butt for his silly jokes. After that Allan saw him at least once a day until on the following Wednesday night, when the freshman election took place in Grace Hall, and Burley leaped into even greater, and to Allan more offensive, prominence.

There were two leading candidates for the presidency, and, contrary to the usual custom, the opposing forces had failed to arrange a compromise and a distribution of offices. The contest was prolonged and exciting. On the ninth ballot, Mordaunt, a St. Mathias fellow, won amidst the howls of the opposition. The rival candidate was elected secretary, but promptly and somewhat heatedly declined. New nominations were called for, and Burley was proposed simultaneously from two sides of the room. His name met with loud applause. Burley, sitting unconcernedly near the door, grinned his appreciation of the joke. Two other names were offered, and then the balloting began. On the first ballot, Peter Burley, of Blackwater, Col., was elected.

Burley tried to get on to his feet to refuse the honor, but owing to the fact that three companions held him down while the chairman rapped wildly for order, he failed to gain recognition. The next moment the election was made unanimous. Allan grunted his disapproval. Hal said it didn't much matter who was secretary; anybody could be that.

Hal accompanied Allan back to the latter's room and stayed until late, talking most of the time about his chances of making the varsity squad, what he was going to do if he didn't, and how he didn't give a rap anyway.

"Of course, I can make the freshman team all right, but what's that? They have only four outside games scheduled, and two of those don't amount to anything; just high schools. The only game they go away for is the one with Dexter. And this thing of working hard for a month to play the Robinson freshmen isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"Who will win?" asked Allan, suppressing a yawn.

"That's the trouble. It's more'n likely that Robinson will. We've got a lot of good men – fast backs and a mighty brainy little quarter – but we haven't got any support for our center. Cheesman's a wonder, but he can't do much with guards like Murray and Kirk beside him. Why, Kirk doesn't weigh a hundred and seventy, and Murray's only a hundred and eighty-something. Poor is going to issue another call for candidates; he's going to ask every man of a hundred and seventy-five or over to come out. Say!"

Hal sat up suddenly in the Morris chair and looked like a Great Discoverer.

"Say what?" murmured Allan, drowsily.

"What's the matter with that man Burley?"

“A good deal, I should say, if you ask me,” answered Allan.

“I mean for a guard,” said Smiths, impatiently.

“He probably never saw a football,” objected Allan. “They don’t play it out West, do they?”

“Don’t they, though! Look at Michigan and Wisconsin and – and the rest of them!”

“I refuse.”

“Why, Burley’s just the man! He must weigh two hundred if he weighs a pound!”

“Looks as though he might weigh a ton. But if he doesn’t know the game – ”

“How do you know he doesn’t?”

“I don’t. But if he did know it, wouldn’t he have been out before this?”

Smiths was silenced for a moment.

“Well, even if he doesn’t know it, he can be taught, I guess. And we’ve got a whole lot of science now; what we need is beef.”

“Burley looks more like an ass than a cow,” said Allan, disagreeably. Smiths stared.

“Say, what’s he done to you, anyway? You seem to be beastly sore on him.”

“I’ve told you what he’s done.”

“Oh, that! Besides, he lugged you off the track; that’s nothing to get mad about, is it?”

“I suppose not; I’m not mad about that – or anything else. He just – just makes me tired.”

"Well, I'll bet he's our man." Smiths jumped up and seized his cap. "I'll run over and tell Poor."

"What, at this time of night?"

"Pshaw! it's only eleven-thirty. He'll be glad to know about it."

"He'll probably pitch you down-stairs, and serve you right."

"Not much he won't. Good night."

"Good night," answered Allan. "I've got some surgeon's plaster, if you need it."

Hal Smiths slammed the door and took the front porch in one leap. Then the gate crashed. Allan listened intently.

"That's funny!" he muttered. "He must have missed the lamp-post!"

He took up a book, found a pencil, and opened the table-drawer in search of a pad. As he did so, his eyes fell on a folded sheet of lined paper. He read the penciled words on it – "Peter Burley" – and, refolding it after a moment of indecision, tucked it back in a corner of the drawer, frowning deeply the while.

Allan didn't see Hal the next day; neither was the objectionable Burley visible on the field in the afternoon when Allan ran his first practise over the mile. Kernahan didn't hold the watch on him, the distance was unfamiliar to him, and he lost all idea of his time after the fourth lap, and ended pretty well tuckered out.

"All right," said the trainer, when it was over. "You ran it a bit too fast at the start. But you'll get onto it after a while."

On Friday Allan saw Hal only for an instant and had no chance to question him as to the result of his midnight visit to the freshman football captain. Consequently, it was not until Saturday that he learned of Burley's appearance on the field as a candidate for admission into the freshman team. There was no track work that afternoon, since the Erskine varsity played State University. Allan went out to the field alone and watched the game from the season-ticket holders' stand, and cheered quite madly when the Erskine quarter-back, availing himself for the first time of the new rules, seemed to pass the ball to a trio of plunging backs, and after an instant of delay set off almost alone around State's left end with the pigskin cuddled in his arm, and flew down the field for over seventy yards to a touch-down.

That settled the score for the first half, and the teams trotted off with honors even. There was a good deal of dissatisfaction expressed in Allan's neighborhood over the playing of the home team, and much gloomy prophecy was indulged in in regard to the outcome of the final and most important game of the season – that with Erskine's old-time rival, Robinson University.

About the middle of the intermission, Allan heard his name called, and looked down to see a small, sandy-haired fellow waving a note-book at him. Allan waved back, and the owner of the note-book – the latter his never-absent badge of office – climbed up the seats and was duly pummeled and laid hold of on his way. Tommy Sweet was a Hillton fellow, and considering that he had been a class ahead of Allan at that school, the two had been quite friendly there until Sweet had gone up to Erskine. So far Allan had not seen much of him, for Tommy was "on the

Purple," as he liked to put it, and was an extremely busy youth. Tommy's friends declared he would find something to do if he was strapped in bed.

The key-note of Tommy was eagerness. His wide-open blue eyes were always staring about the world in search for something to engage his attention, and his ridiculously small mouth was forever pursed into something between a grin and an exclamation-point. His hair was just the color of tow, and the freckles which covered every available portion of his face were several shades darker, but harmonized perfectly. He was tireless in the search for news for the Purple, and when it came to activity would have made the proverbial ant or beaver look like a sluggard. Tommy thought sleep a criminal waste of time, and even begrudged the moments spent in eating.

Tommy was only perfectly happy when doing four things at once; less than four left him dull and dissatisfied. Clarke Mason once said: "I'll bet some day Tommy will commit second-degree murder so they'll give him hard labor for life." For the rest he was a cheerful, likable fellow, aggressively honest and painfully conscientious.

"What did you think of that run of Cutler's?" he asked, breathlessly, as he sank onto the seat at Allan's side. "Peach, wasn't it? It'll show up great in the diagram I'm making; see!" He opened his note-book and exhibited a puzzling maze of lines and dots, figures and letters. "That's the first half. Everything's there – runs, kicks, plunges, penalties, the whole show."

“What’s it for?” asked Allan. “Anything to do with geometry?”

“Why, no; it’s – Oh, quit your kidding! It’s to go with my report of the game. It shows how the gains were made and who made ’em. And I’ve introduced something new in diagrams, too. See these figures along the edge here – 4:17, 4:22, and so on?”

“Well, I see something there, I think,” answered Allan, cautiously.

“Those signify the time each play was made,” said Tommy, triumphantly. “That’s never been done before, you know.”

“I see. But it must keep you pretty busy. Do you have to write the game up, too?”

“Oh, yes.” Tommy showed three or four pages of awful-looking scrawls from a fountain-pen. “That’s done in a sort of shorthand, and I write it out full length at the office. Say, where did you tell me your room was? I meant to put it down, but forgot it. Purdy’s? Oh, yes; I know where that is. I want to come around some evening, if I can ever find the time. How are you getting on? Anything I can do for you? Any fellows you’d like to meet? No? Well, let me know if I can do anything for you. Very glad to, you know. That was quite a race you made the other day. Billy seems to have taken a fancy to you, doesn’t he? He’s all right, Allan; you shine up to him and – Hello! there’s a fellow I want to see. Come and see me, will you? Twenty-two Sesson, you know. So long, old chap!”

Tommy hurried pell-mell down the stand, shaking off detaining hands, and disappeared into the throng. Allan took a long breath; he felt as though a small hurricane had been playing with him. The teams came onto the field again and the second half began. It proved uninteresting, and only the superior weight of the Erskine eleven won them the game finally by the close margin of a safety. Allan followed the throng out of the enclosure and across toward the locker house and the gate. But half-way there the crowd divided, and Allan presently found himself looking on at the practise of the freshman teams. The first team had the ball on the second's five-yard line and was trying very hard to put it over to an accompaniment of command and entreaty from the coaches.

"Third down and two to go!" some one shouted. A shrill voice called a jumble of figures and a tandem slid forward at a tangent, and for an instant confusion reigned. Then suddenly a roar of laughter went up, the line of watchers broke forward, and Allan found himself directly in the path of what at first glance looked like an avalanche of canvas and leather. Springing back, he escaped being borne along by the group of struggling players, in the center of which, rising like a city sky-scraper out of a huddle of shanties, stood forth, calm and determined, the countenance of Peter Burley.

In his arms, struggling but helpless, was the first eleven's left half-back, and to his back and legs and, in short, to every portion of his anatomy, hung the enemy, for all the world like bees on a nest in swarming time. Behind them the second eleven pushed and shoved, and relentlessly the whole mass moved down the field. And somewhere, drowned by the laughter of the spectators and the despairing shrieks of “Down! Down!” from the abducted half-back, sounded feebly the referee’s whistle.

One by one the impeditive players dropped away, and Burley’s triumphant advance toward the enemy’s goal was stopped by the referee and two coaches. Burley set down the half-back, in whose arms the pigskin was still clutched, but did not release his grasp until his obligations were hurriedly but clearly explained to him. Then he patted the half-back on the shoulder in a paternal manner and retraced his steps to the enthusiastic applause of the convulsed throng. The second team hugged as much of him as they could encompass and he smiled cheerfully, but was evidently still somewhat perplexed. The ball went to the second on her eight yards and the game continued, Burley, at right guard, looming head and shoulders above his companions.

Allan watched the game for a few moments longer, and then continued his journey. Somehow the calm, inscrutable manner in which the big freshman had strode down the field in unquestioning obedience to what he had supposed to be his duty appealed to Allan. It had been awfully funny, and Allan smiled as he recalled it. But the incident had held for him something more than humor, just what he hardly knew; but whatever it was, and even though he would have found it difficult to give a name to it, it completely changed his feeling toward Burley. By the time he had reached Mrs. Purdy’s front gate, he was wondering whether Burley still desired his acquaintance.

CHAPTER V
"MR. PETER BURLEY, BLACKWATER, COL."

Hal Smiths dropped in after dinner that evening and Allan brought the conversation around to the subject of Burley, whose performance during practise had been the chief topic at the dinner-table.

"Why, Poor was awfully pleased at my suggestion," said Hal, "after I found him. It was after twelve then, and I'd chased half over college looking for him. He said he wasn't very good at persuasion and thought Burley would require lots of it; so he asked me to see him. Poor's a pretty good little chap, so I went. Burley was awfully decent. Said he had never played and had never even seen the game until he came here; said he hadn't been able to find out what it was all about, but that if we wanted him to try it, why, of course, he would. Said he thought it looked like pretty good fun, and got me to sort of explain it a bit. One thing he wanted to know," laughed Hal, "was whether you could hit a man if he didn't have the ball."

"Well, he played it for all it was worth this afternoon," said Allan, smiling. "You heard about it, didn't you?"

"No; what was it? I sat on the side line all afternoon, and waited to get a whack at State University. What did Burley do?"

So Allan told him, and Hal laughed until the tears came.

"Oh, he's a genius, he is!" he said.

After a minute of chuckling, he went on:

"Look here, Allan, I think you'd rather like him if you got to know him. He's – he's rather a decent sort, after all. I didn't take to him at first, of course, but – and I don't say now that he's the sort of chap you'd want to ask home and introduce to your people; he's kind of free and easy, and you couldn't be sure he wouldn't drink the catsup out of the bottle or slap your governor on the back – but he's – well, there's something about him you can't help liking," he ended, with an apologetic tone.

"Maybe I would," answered Allan, pleasantly. Hal looked surprised.

"He's given up the class secretaryship, you know," he announced.

"Why?"

"I don't know for sure, but Poor says he told him it was because he didn't think he'd be here much after the holidays."

"Where's he going?" asked Allan.

"Don't know. Funny idea, to come to college for half a year. Maybe – "

There were footsteps on the porch, the front portal opened with a crash, and an imperative knock sounded on the room door. Allan jumped to his feet. Could it be fire? he wondered, shooting a bewildered glance at Hal. He hurried to the door just as the hammering began again, more violently than before. Hal raised himself uneasily from the Morris chair, prepared for the worst. Allan called, "*Come in!*" and the door was flung open.

Entered Tommy Sweet!

"You thundering idiot!" bawled Hal. "I thought it was at least the Dean! You can make more – Hello, Burley! Glad to see you."

"This is Mr. Burley, Allan," Tommy was saying. "Brought him around 'cause I wanted you to know each other. Mr. Ware – Mr. Burley."

Allan felt his hand enveloped in something large and warm and vise-like. He felt his fingers crushed together, thought he could hear the bones breaking – and still managed to smile painfully, but politely, the while. Then Burley had dropped his hand and was saying:

"I've wanted to know you ever since I saw you win that running race the other day. Came around here and left a card on you, but I guess you didn't find it."

Allan murmured his appreciation, but remained silent as to the "card."

"I told Sweet here that you'd win that race. Offered to bet him anything he liked. He wouldn't bet, though." Peter Burley took the chair proffered by Hal and carefully lowered himself into it.

"They told me you carried me over to the tent," said Allan. "Much obliged, I'm sure."

"Welcome," answered the other, heartily. "You didn't weigh anything to mention."

"Not as heavy as the freshman team, eh?" asked Tommy.

Burley looked apologetically around the circle.

"I suppose every one's heard of that fool thing?" he asked.

"Just about every one, I guess," laughed Tommy.

"That comes of trying to do something you don't know how to do. This fellow Smiths here came around to my shack the other day and said the class wanted me to play football because I weigh some. Well, ginger! I didn't know anything about the thing, and I told him so. But he would have it that I must play. And look what happens! I make a measly show of myself right out there on the range in front of the whole outfit!"

"No harm done," said Hal. "You did what you tried to."

"No, I didn't. There was a little cuss there in a Derby hat wouldn't let me. I was going to take that half-backed fellow down to the other end and throw him over the line. That's what I was going to do. They didn't tell me I had to slap him on the chest and butt him with my head."

"But, you see," explained Allan, "he called 'Down' just when you began to lug him off."

"That's what they said. I was supposed to let go of him when he said that, but I just thought he was throwing up the sponge and wanted me to let him down. If I'd known he could have spoiled it by yelling 'Down,' I'd have held his mouth shut."

This summoned laughter, and Burley glanced around at the others in wide surprise. Allan felt surprise, too. Was Burley really quite so unsophisticated as he seemed, he wondered, or – His glance met Burley's. The big fellow's right eyelid dropped slowly in a portentous wink. Allan smiled. His question was answered. While the others entered into an explanation and discussion of the rules and ethics of football, Allan studied the Westerner.

Peter Burley looked to be, and was, twenty years of age. In form he was remarkably large; he was an inch over six feet tall, and weighed 203 pounds. Nowhere about him was there evidence of unnecessary fat, but he was deep of chest and wide of shoulder and hips. His hands and feet were large, and the latter were encased in enormously heavy shoes.

When it came to features, Burley was undeniably good-looking in a certain breezy, unconventional way. (Allan soon found that Burley's breeziness and absence of convention were not confined to his looks.) Burley's hair was brown, of no particular shade, and his eyes matched his hair. His nose was big and straight and his mouth well shaped. His cheeks were deeply tanned, but showed little color beneath. His usual expression was one of careless, whimsical good nature, but there was an earnest and kindly gleam in the brown eyes that lent character to the face. He talked with a drawl, and pronounced many words in a way quite novel to Allan. But – and this Allan discovered later – when occasion required, he was capable of delivering his remarks in a sharp, incisive way that made the words sound like rifle-shots. At the present moment he was talking with almost exaggerated deliberateness.

"Sweet says you and he went to a preparatory school together," he said, turning to Allan. "I wish my old man had sent me to one of those things. What was your school like?”

Allan told him of Hillton, and Tommy and Hal chimed in from time to time and helped him along. It was a large subject and one they liked, and half an hour passed before they had finished. Burley listened with evident interest, and only interrupted occasionally to ask a question.

“How’d you happen to come to Erskine?” asked Tommy, when the subject had been exhausted. Burley took one big knee into his hands and considered the question for a moment in silence.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he said at last. “You see, I had a go at the university over in Boulder; that’s near Denver,” he explained, parenthetically. “But we didn’t get on very well together, the faculty and me, and I was always turning up at the ranch. Well, the old man got tired of seeing me around so much; said he’d paid for my keep at the university, and I’d ought to stay there and get even with the game. But, ginger! the corral wasn’t big enough. Every time I’d try to be good, something would come along and happen, and – first thing I knew, I’d be roaming at large again. So the old man said he guessed what I needed was to get far enough away from home so I wouldn’t back-trail so often; said there wasn’t much doing when I went to college Monday morning and showed up for feed Thursday night. First he tried taking my railroad pass away; but when I couldn’t scare up the money, I rode home on a freight. I got to know the train crews on the D. & R. G. pretty well long toward spring. When vacation came, we all agreed to call it off – the faculty and the old man and me. So I went up to Rico and fooled around a mine there all summer. When – ”

“What was the name of the mine?” asked Allan, eagerly.

“This one was the Indian Girl. There’s lots of ’em thereabouts. The old man – ”

“Say, is the ‘old man’ your father?” asked Tommy.

“Yes; why?”

“Nothing, only I should think he’d lick you if he heard you calling him that.”

“Oh, he doesn’t mind. Besides, he isn’t really old; only about forty. He calls me Kid, too,” he added, smiling broadly. “Well, in the summer he wanted to know where I’d rather go to college – Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Pennsylvania; he said he didn’t care so long as it was far enough away to keep me from diggin’ out for home every week and presenting myself with vacations not down on the calendar. Well, there was a fellow up at the mine named Thompson; he was superintendent. I was helping him – or thought I was – and so we got to be pretty good friends. He was a nice little fellow, about as high as a sage-bush, and as plucky as a bulldog. Well, he went to college here about ten years ago, and he used to tell me a good deal about the place. So, when the old man said, ‘Which is it?’ I told him Erskine. He said he’d never heard tell of it, but so long as it was about two thousand miles from Blackwater he guessed it would do. And that’s how. Now you talk.”

“That’s the first time I ever heard of choosing a college because it was a long way from home,” laughed Hal. “I’d like to meet that father of yours.”

“Better go back with me Christmas,” said Burley. Hal stared at him doubtfully, undecided whether to laugh or not. “Of course,” continued Burley, carelessly, “we haven’t got much out there. It’s pretty much all alfalfa and sage-bush around Blackwater. But the hills aren’t far, and there’s good hunting up toward Routt. You fellows all better come; the old man would be pleased to have you.”

Hal stared wide-eyed.

“Aren’t you fooling?” he gasped.

“Fooling?” Burley echoed. “Why, no, I ain’t fooling. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing; but of course we couldn’t do it, you know; at least, I’m plumb sure I couldn’t.” Hal looked doubtfully at the others.

“Nor I,” said Allan. “I only wish I could.”

“Same here,” said Tommy, wistfully. “I’d give a heap to have the chance.”

“Sorry,” answered Burley. “Perhaps in the summer, or some other time, when you haven’t got anything better. I suppose your folks want you at home Christmas?”

“Y-yes,” replied Hal, “but it isn’t altogether that; there’s the expense, you see.”

“Oh, it wouldn’t cost you anything much,” said Burley. “It’s all on me. You’d better say you’ll come.”

Hal's eyes opened wider than before.

"You mean you'd pay our fares – all our fares – out to Colorado and back?" he asked.

"Sure. We'd only have about a week out there, but we could do a lot of damage in a week."

Hal was silent from amazement. Allan stammered his thanks. Tommy merely sat and stared at Burley, as though fascinated. The latter translated silence into assent.

"Well, we'll call it fixed, eh?" he asked, heartily.

"Thunder, no!" exploded Hal. "We couldn't do that, Burley. We're awfully much obliged, but, of course, if we went out there to visit you, we'd pay our own way. And I don't believe any of us could do that – this Christmas, at least."

"Oh, be good!" said Burley. "Now, look here; I'd let you do that much for me."

"But we couldn't," said Allan.

"Well, you would if you could, of course; wouldn't you, now?"

"Why – er – I suppose we would," Allan faltered.

"Well, there you are!" said Burley, triumphantly. "That settles it."

It took the others some time to prove to him that it didn't settle it, and Burley listened with polite, but disapproving, attention. When the argument was concluded, he shook his head sorrowfully.

"You're a lot of Indians!" he said. "You're not doing the square thing by me, and I'm going to pull my freight." He drew himself out of the chair and rescued his big felt hat from beneath it. There was a general pushing back of chairs. “You and Mr. Ware must come around to my tepee some night soon,” Burley told Hal, “and we’ll have another pow-wow. Seems like I’d done all the chinning to-night.” He shook hands with Allan, who strove to bear the pain with fortitude and only grimaced once, and said in quite a matter-of-fact way, “I guess you and I are going to be partners. Good night.”

Allan muttered that he hoped so, and after the three visitors had taken their departures he examined his hand under the light to see if bruises or dislocations were visible.

“I wonder,” he asked himself, with a rueful smile, “if he shakes hands very often with his partners?”

CHAPTER VI
"RIGHT GUARD BACK!"

November started in with an Indian summer, but by the middle of the month the spell had broken, and a week of hard, driving rain succeeded the bright weather. Until then Allan had spent almost every afternoon on the cinder-track, running the half mile at good speed, doing the mile and a half inside his time, occasionally practising sprinting, and, once a week, jogging around until he had left nine laps behind him and had covered a quarter of a mile over his distance.

For by this time Kernahan had decided that the two-mile event was what he was cut out for, but promised him, nevertheless, that at the indoor athletic meeting, in February, he should be allowed to try both the mile and the two miles. The trainer's instruction had already bettered Allan's form; his stride had lost in length and gained in speed and grace until it became a subject for admiring comment among the fellows.

The Purple, in an article on Fall Work of the Track Team Candidates, hailed "Ware '07" as "a most promising runner, and one who has improved rapidly in form since the Fall Handicaps until at present he easily leads the distance men in that feature. It is Mr. Kernahan's intention," concluded the Purple, "to develop Ware as a two-miler, since this year, as in several years past, there is a dearth of first-class material for this distance."

But the rains put an end to the track work, as they put an end to all outdoor activities save football, and training was practically dropped by the candidates. On three occasions, when the clouds temporarily ceased emptying themselves onto a sodden earth, the middle and long distance candidates were sent on cross-country jogs and straggled home at dusk, very wet and muddy, and much out of temper. A week before Thanksgiving the sky became less gloomy and a sharp frost froze the earth till it rang like metal underfoot.

It was on one such day, a Saturday, that the Robinson freshman football team came to town and, headed by a brass band, marched out to the field to do battle with the Erskine youngsters. The varsity team had journeyed from home to play Artmouth, and consequently the freshman contest drew the entire college and town, and enthusiasm reigned supreme in spite of the fact that a Robinson victory was acknowledged to be a foregone conclusion.

Allan and Tommy Sweet watched the game from the side lines; Tommy, with note-book in hand, darting hither and thither from one point of vantage to another, and Allan vainly striving to keep up with him. The latter had gained admission beyond the ropes by posing as Tommy's assistant; the assistance rendered consisted principally of listening to Tommy's breathless comment on the game.

"Oh, rotten!" Tommy would snarl. "Two yards more!.. Oh;

perfectly rotten!.. See that pass? See it? What? Eh, what?.. Now, watch this! Watch – What'd I say? Good work, Seven!.. Now, that's playing!.. Third down and one to – What's that? Lost it? Lost nothing! Why, look where the ball is! How can they have lost – Hey! how's that for off-side? Just watch that Robinson left end; look! See that?.. Three yards right through the center! What was Burley doing?.. Well, here goes for a touch-down. There's no help now!.. Another yard!.. Two more!.. Did they make it? Did they?.. *Hi-i-i! Our ball!*"

It was a very pretty game, after all, and when the first half ended with the score only 5 to 0, in the visitors' favor, Erskine's hope revived, and during the intermission there was much talk of tying the score, while some few extremely optimistic watchers hinted at an Erskine victory. Considering the fact that the purple-clad team was twelve pounds lighter than its opponent, this was a good deal to expect, and Tommy, a fair example of conservative opinion, declared that the best he looked for was to have the second half end with the score as it then stood. But a good many guesses went wrong that afternoon.

Erskine had played on the defensive during the first half, and when, after receiving Robinson's kick-off, she punted the ball without trying to run it back, it seemed that she was continuing her former tactics. The punt was a good one and was caught on Robinson's thirty-yard line. The Brown accepted the challenge and returned the kick. It went to Erskine's forty-five yards. Again Poor punted, and the ball sailed down to the Brown's fifteen yards, where it was gathered into a half-back's arms. Erskine had gained largely in the two exchanges of punts, and her supporters cheered loudly, while Robinson, realizing discretion to be the better part of valor, refrained from further kicking and ran the ball back ten yards before she was downed.

And then, as in the first period of play, she began to advance the pigskin by fierce plunges at the Erskine line. But now there was a perceptible difference in results, a difference recognized by the spectators after the first two attacks. Robinson wasn't making much headway. Twice she barely made her distance; the third time she failed by six inches and, amidst cheering plainly heard on the campus, Erskine took the ball on her opponent's twenty-five yards. The first plunge netted a bare yard, yet it carried the ball out of the checker-board, and a line-man dropped back. Tommy set up a shout.

"It's Burley! They're going to play him back of the line!"

There was no doubt about it's being Burley. He loomed far above the rest of the backs, and even when, his hands on the full-back's hips, he doubled himself up for the charge, he was still the biggest object on the field. The stands danced with delight.

So far there had been no hint of the big right guard taking part in the tandem attacks; in fact, his presence on the team was doubtful until the last moment, for Burley's development as a football player had been discouragingly slow, in spite of his weight and strength and cheerful willingness. Even yet he possessed only a partial understanding of the game. He did what he was told to do, and did it as hard as he knew how; that constituted the extent of his science. The stands composed themselves, and breathless suspense reigned. Poor's shrill pipe was heard reeling off the signals, and then —

Then the advance began.

Robinson had played hard every moment of the first thirty-five minutes, and she had played on the offensive. Erskine had played hard too, but her playing had been defensive. To attack is more tiring than to repel attack, and now what difference there was in condition was in Erskine's favor. Her defensive tactics were suddenly abandoned, and from that moment to the final whistle she forced the fighting every instant of the time.

Peter Burley was, to use Tommy's broken, breathless words, "simply great." He knew little or nothing about line-plunging. He didn't do any of the things coaches instruct backs to do. He merely waded into and through the opponents, without bothering his head with the niceties of play. If the hole was there, well and good; he went through it and emerged on the other side with half the Robinson team clinging to him. If the hole wasn't there, well and good again; he went through just the same, only he didn't go so far. But there was always a good gain – sometimes a yard, sometimes two, sometimes three or four.

When the whistle blew, Burley climbed to his feet and ambled back to his position, unruffled and unheeding of the bruises that fell to his share. Nine plunges brought the ball to Robinson's five yards. There the Brown line held for an instant. The first down netted a bare yard, the second brought scarcely as much. The cheering, which had been continuous from the first attack, died down, and a great silence fell. Tommy was nibbling the corner off his note-book, and Allan, kneeling beside him, was nervously biting his lip. Poor drew Burley and the backs aside for a whispered consultation. Then the players took their positions again, and —

Presto! Erskine had scored!

Without signals, the tandem had plunged onto the Robinson left tackle, Burley's leather head-guard had been seen for an instant tossing high above a struggling mass, and then had disappeared, and chaos had reigned until the referee's whistle commanded a cessation of hostilities. When the piled-up mass was removed, Burley was found serenely hugging the ball to his chest a yard over the line.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.