BOBBY BLAKE AT ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL

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or Winning the Medal of Honor

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BOBBY BLAKE
at Rockledge School

By
FRANK A. WARNER

Author of
"BOBBY BLAKE AT BASS COVE"
"BOBBY BLAKE ON A CRUISE," Etc.

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BOBBY BLAKE AT ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL

CHAPTER I
"THE OVERLAND LIMITED"

A boy of about ten, with a freckled face and fiery red hair cropped close to his head, came doubtfully up the side porch steps of the Blake house in Clinton and peered through the screen door at Meena, the Swedish girl.

Meena was tall and rawboned, with very red elbows usually well displayed, and her straw-colored hair was bound in a tight "pug" on top of her long, narrow head. Meena had sharp blue eyes and she could see boys a great way off.

"Mis' Blake—she ban gone out," said Meena, before the red-haired boy could speak. "You vant somet'ing? No?"

"I—I was looking for Bobby," said the visitor, stammeringly. He and Mrs. Blake's Swedish girl were not on good terms.

"I guess he ban gone out, too," said Meena, who did not want to be "bothered mit boys."

The boy looked as though he thought she was a bad guesser! Somewhere inside the house he heard a muffled voice. It shouted:

"Whoo! whoo! whoo-whoo-who-o-o-o!"

The imitation of a steam whistle grew rapidly nearer. It seemed to be descending from the roof of the house—and descending very swiftly. Finally there came a decided bang—the landing of a pair of well-shod feet on the rug—and the voice rang out:

"All out! All out for last stop! All out!"

"*That's* Bobby," suggested the boy with the red hair, looking wistfully into Meena's kitchen.

"Vell!" ejaculated the girl. "You go in by the dining-room door, I guess. You not go to trapse through my clean kitchen. Vipe your feet, boy!"

The boy did as he was bade, and opened the dining-room door. A steady footstep was thumping overhead, rising into the upper regions of the three-story house.

The red-haired youngster knew his way about this house just as well as he knew his own. Only he tripped over a corner of the dining-room rug and bumped into two chairs in the darkened living-room before he reached the front hall.

This was wide and was lighted above by ground-glass oval windows on all three flights of stairs. The mahogany balustrade was in a single smooth spiral, broken by no ornament. It offered a tempting course from garret to ground floor to any venturesome small boy.

"All aboard!" shouted the voice overhead.

"The Overland Limited," said the red-haired boy, grinning, and squinting up the well.

"Ding-dong! ding-dong! All aboard for the Overland Limited! This way! No stop between Denver and Chicago! All aboard!"

There was a scramble above and then the exhaust of the locomotive was imitated in a thin, boyish treble:

"Sh-h! sh-h! sh-h! Choo! choo! choo! Ding-dong-ding! We're off—"

A figure a-straddle the broad banister-rail shot into view on the upper flight. The momentum carried the boy around the first curve and to the brink of the second pitch. Down that he sped like an arrow, and so around to the last slant of the balustrade.

"Next stop, Chi-ca-*go*!" yelled the boy on the rail. "All o-o-out! all out for Chicago!"

And then, bang! he landed upon the hall rug.

"How'd you know the board wasn't set against you, Bobby?" demanded the red-haired one. "You might have had a wreck."

"Hello, Fred Martin. If I'd looked around and seen your red head, I'd sure thought they'd flashed a danger signal on me—though the Overland Limited is supposed to have a clear track, you know."

Fred jumped on him for that and the two chums had a wrestling match on the hall rug. It was, however, a good-natured bout, and soon they sat side by side on the lower step of the first flight, panting, and grinned at each other.

Bobby's hair was black, and he wore it much longer than Fred. To tell the truth, Fred had the "Riley cut," as the boys called it, so that his hair would not attract so much attention.

Fred had all the temper that is supposed to go with red hair. Perhaps red-haired people only seem more quick tempered because everybody "picks on them" so! Bobby was quite as boisterous as his chum, but he was more cautious and had some control over his emotions. Nobody ever called Bobby Blake a coward, however.

He was a plump-cheeked, snub-nosed boy, with a wide, smiling mouth, dancing brown eyes, and an active, sturdy body. Like his chum, he was ten years old.

"Thought you had to work all this forenoon, cleaning the back yard?" said Bobby. "That's why I stayed home. 'Fraid some of the other fellows would want me to go off with them, and we agreed to go to Plunkit's Creek this afternoon, you know."

"You bet you!" agreed Fred. "I got a dandy can of worms. Found 'em under that pile of rubbish in the yard when I hauled it out."

"But you haven't cleared up all that old yard so soon?" determined Bobby, shaking his head.

Fred grinned again. "No," he said. "I caught Buster Shea. He's a good fellow, Buster is. I got him to do it for me, and paid him a cent, and my ten glass agates, and two big alleys, and a whole cage-trap full o' rats—five of them—we caught in our barn last night. He's goin' to take 'em home and see if he can tame 'em, like Poley Smith did."

"Huh!" snorted Bobby, "Poley's are *white* rats. You can't tame reg'lar rats."

"That wasn't for me to tell him," returned Fred, briskly. "Buster thinks he can. And, anyway, it was a good bargain without the rats. He'll clean the yard fine."

"Then let's get a lunch from Meena and I'll find my fish-tackle, and we'll

start at once," exclaimed Bobby, jumping up.

"Ain't you got to see your mother first?"

"She knows I'm going. She won't mind when I go, as long as I get back in time for supper. And then—she ain't so particular 'bout what I do just now," added Bobby, more slowly.

"Jolly! I wish my mother was like that," breathed Fred, with a sigh of longing.

"Huh! I ain't so sure I like it," confessed Bobby. "There's somethin' goin' on in this house, Fred."

"What do you mean?" demanded his chum, staring at him.

"Pa and mother are always talkin' together, and shutting the door so I can't come in. And they look troubled all the time—I see 'em, when they stare at me so. Something's up, and I don't know what it is."

"Mebbe your father's lost all his money and you'll have to go down and live in one of those shacks by the canal—like Buster Shea's folks," exclaimed the consoling Fred Martin.

"No. 'Tain't as bad as that, I guess. Mother's gone shopping for a lot of new clothes to-day—I heard her tell Pa so at breakfast. So it ain't money. It—it's just like it is before Christmas, don't you know, Fred? When folks are hiding things around so's you won't find 'em before Christmas morning, and joking about Santa Claus, and all that."

"Crickey! Presents?" exclaimed Fred. "'Tain't your birthday coming, Bob?"

"No. I had my birthday, you know, two months ago."

"What do you s'pose it can be, then?"

"I haven't a notion," declared Bobby, shaking his head. "But it's something about me. Something's going to happen me—I don't know what."

"Bully!" shouted Fred, suddenly smiting him on the shoulder. "Do you suppose they're going to let you go to Rockledge with me this fall?"

"Rockledge School? No such luck," groaned Bobby. "You see, mother won't hear of that. Your mother has a big family, Fred, and she can spare you—"

"Glad to get rid of me for a while, I guess," chuckled the red-haired boy.

"Well, my mother isn't. So I can't go to boarding school with you," sighed Bobby.

"Well," said the restless Fred, "let's get a move on us if we're going to Plunkit's."

"We must get some lunch," said Bobby, starting up once more. "Say! has Meena got the toothache again?"

"She didn't have her head tied up. But she's real cross," admitted Fred.

"She'll have the toothache if I ask for lunch, I know," grumbled Bobby. "She always does. She says boys give her the toothache."

Nevertheless, he led the way to the kitchen. There the tall, angular Swede cast an unfavorable light blue eye upon them.

"I ban jes' clean up mine kitchen," she complained.

"We just want a lunch to take fishing, Meena," said Master Bobby, hopefully.

"You don't vant loonch to fish mit," declared Meena. "You use vor-rms."

Fred giggled. He was always giggling at inopportune times. Meena glared at him with both light blue eyes and reached for the red flannel bandage she always kept warm back of the kitchen range.

"I ban got toothache," she said. "I can't vool mit boys," and she proceeded to tie the long bandage around her jaws and tied it so that the ends—like long ears—stood right up on top of her head.

"But you can give us just a little," begged Bobby. "We won't be back till supper time."

This seemed to offer some comfort to the hard-working girl, and she mumbled an agreement, while she shuffled into the pantry to get the lunch ready. She did not speak English very well at any time, and when her face was tied up, it was almost impossible to understand her.

Sometimes, if Meena became offended, she would insist upon waiting on table with this same red bandage about her jaws—even if the family had company to dinner! But in many ways she was invaluable to Mrs. Blake, so the good lady bore Meena's eccentricities.

By and by the Swedish girl appeared with a box of luncheon. The boys dared not peek into it while they were under her eye, but they thanked her and ran out of the house. Fred was giggling again.

"She looks just like a rabbit—all ears—with that thing tied around her head," he said.

"Whoever heard of a rabbit with red ears?" scoffed Bobby.

He was investigating the contents of the lunch box. There were nice ham sandwiches, minced eggs with mayonnaise, cookies, jumbles, a big piece of cheese, and two berry tarts.

"Oh, Meena's bark is always worse than her bite," sighed Bobby, with thanksgiving.

"And *this* bite is particularly nice, eh?" said Fred, grinning at his own pun.

"Guess we won't starve," said Bobby.

"Besides, there is a summer apple tree right down there by the creek—don't you know? If the apples are all yellow, you can't eat enough to hurt you. If they are half yellow it'll take a lot to hurt you. If they're right green and gnarly, about two means a hurry-up call for Dr. Truman," and Fred Martin spoke with strong

conviction, having had experience in the matter.

CHAPTER II
APPLES AND APPLETHWAITE PLUNKIT

Bobby found the little grape basket in which he kept his fishing-tackle on a beam in the woodshed. Clinton was an old fashioned town, and few people as yet owned automobiles. There were, therefore, not many garages, but plenty of rambling woodsheds and barns. When all the barns are done away with and there are nothing but garages left, boys will lose half their chance for fun!

The Blakes' shed, and the stable and barn adjoining, offered a splendid play-place in all sorts of weather for Bobby and his friends. There were a pair of horses and a cow in the stable, too. Michael Mulcahey was the coachman, and he liked boys just as much as Meena, the Swedish girl, disliked them. This fact was ever a bone of contention between the old coachman and Meena. Otherwise Michael and Meena might have gotten married and gone to housekeeping in the little cottage at the back of the Blake property, facing on the rear street.

"He ban *in*-courage them boys in their voolishness," accused Meena. "Me, I don't vant no boys aroundt. Michael, he vould haf the house overrun mit boys. So ve don't get married."

Just now Michael was not at the barn. He had driven Mrs. Blake to the neighboring city in the light carriage, on her shopping trip. Bobby and Fred trailed through the back gate and down the lane, leaving the gate open. Later Meena had to run out and chase the chickens out of the tomato patch. Then she tied the red bandage in a harder knot and prepared to show herself a martyr to her mistress when it came supper time.

Back of the Blake house the narrow street cut into a road that led right out into the country. There were plenty of houses lining this road at first, but gradually the distance between them became greater.

Likewise the dust in the road grew deeper. It was not a way attractive to automobiles, and it had not been oiled as were many of the Clinton streets.

"Let's take off our shoes and stockings and save our shoes," suggested Fred. "We'll go in swimmin' before we come back, so we'll be all clean."

"Let's," agreed Bobby, and they sat down at once and accomplished the act in a few moments. They stuffed their stockings into their shoes, tied the laces

together and slung them about their necks. The shoes knocked against their shoulder-blades as they trotted on, their bare feet scuffing up little clouds of dust.

"We raise a lot of dust—just like the Overland Limited," said Bobby, looking back. Bobby had once travelled west with his parents, and they had come back by way of Denver. He had never forgotten his long ride in that fast train.

"Go ahead!" declared Fred. "*I'm* the Empire State. You got to get up some speed to beat *me*."

A minute later two balloons of dust could have been seen hovering over the road to the creek—the boys were shrouded in them. They ran, scuffing, as hard as they could run, and kicked up an enormous cloud of dust.

They stopped at the stile leading into Plunkits' lower pasture. The boys from town never went near the farmhouse. Plunkits' was a big farm, and this end of it was not cultivated. If they went near the truck patches, somebody would be sure to chase them. There always had been a feud between the Clinton boys and the Plunkit family.

But there wasn't a swimming hole anywhere around the town—or a fishing stream—like the creek. The Plunkits really had no right to drive anybody away from the stream, for the farm bordered only one side of it. The city boys could go across and fish from the other side all they wanted to. That had been long since decided.

The best swimming hole was below the boundary of the Plunkit land, anyway, but this path across the pasture was a short-cut.

"If we see that Applethwaite Plunkit and his dog, what are we going to do?" asked Fred, as they trotted along the sidehill path, white with road dust from head to foot.

"Nothing. But if he sees us, that's another matter," chuckled Bobby.

"All right. You're the smart one. But what will we do?"

"Run, if he isn't too near," said Bobby, practically.

"And suppose he *is* too near?"

"Guess we'll have to run just the same," returned Bobby, thoughtfully. "He can lick either of us, Fred. And with the dog he can lick us both at once. That dog is real savage. He's made him so, Ap Plunkit has."

"I bet we could pitch on Ap and fix him," said the combative Fred.

"Now, you just keep out of trouble if you can, Fred Martin," advised Bobby, cautiously. "You know—if you get into a fight, you'll catch it when you get home. Your father will be sure to hear of it."

"Well! what am I going to do if they pitch on me?" demanded Fred.

"'Turn the other cheek,'" chuckled Bobby, "like Miss Rainey, our Sunday-school teacher, says."

"Huh! that's all right. A fellow's got two cheeks; but if you get a punch in

the nose, you can't turn your other nose—you haven't one! So now!" declared the very literal and pugnacious Fred.

Just then they came close enough to the creek to see the willows along the hank. At the corner of the Plunkit fence there stood a big apple tree—a "summer sweetnin'" as the country folk called it.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" ejaculated Fred Martin. "See those apples? And they're *yellow*!"

"Some of them are," admitted his chum.

"More'n half of them, I declare. Say! we're going to have a feast, Bob. Come on!"

Bobby grabbed him by the sleeve. "Hold on! don't go so fast, Fred," exclaimed the brown-eyed boy. "Those apples aren't ours."

"But they're going to be," returned Fred, grinning.

"Now, you don't mean that," said Bobby, seriously. "You know you mustn't climb that tree, or pick apples on *this* side of the fence. Here's where we crawl through. Now! lots of the limbs overhang this other side of the fence—and there's a lot of ripe apples on the ground."

"Pshaw! the Plunkits would never know," complained Fred. But he followed Bobby through the break in the pasture fence, just the same.

Bobby was just as much fun as any boy in Clinton; Fred knew *that*. Yet Bobby was forever "seeing consequences." He kept them both out of trouble very often by seeing ahead. Whereas Fred, left to himself, never would stop to think at all!

They had come two miles and a half. Where were there ever two boys who could walk as far as that without "walking up an appetite"?

"My goodness me, Fred!" exclaimed Bobby, as they came to the clear-water creek in which the pebbles and sand were plainly visible on the bottom. "My goodness me, Fred! aren't you dreadfully hungry?"

"I could eat the label off this tomato can—just like a goat!" declared Fred, shaking the can which held the fishworms before his chum's face and eyes.

"Then let's eat before we bait a hook," suggested Bobby. "I don't care if Meena *does* have the toothache. She makes de-lic-ious sandwiches."

"Scubbity-*yow*! I should say she did," agreed Fred, sitting down cross-legged on the grass under a spreading oak that here broke the hedge of willows bordering the stream.

The boys soon had their mouths full. It was not yet noon, but the sun was high in the heavens, and it twinkled down at them between the interlacing leaves and twigs of the oak. A little breeze played with the blades of grass. A thrush sang his heart out, swinging on a cane across the stream. A locust whirred like a policeman's rattle in a tall poplar a little way down the creek. In the distance a

crow cawed lazily as he winged his way across a field, early plowed for grain.

"This is a fine place," said Bobby. "I just love the country."

"This is the way it is at Rockledge," declared Fred, proudly.

"How do you know? You've never been there."

"But Sam Tillinghast, who comes to see us once in a while, went to Rockledge before he went to college. He says Rockledge is right up on a bluff overlooking Monatook Lake, and that a fellow can have more fun there than a box of monkeys!"

"I never had a box of monkeys," said Bobby, grinning, and with his mouth full.

"That's all right. I wish you were going," said Fred, wagging his head. "Don't you suppose that's what's the matter at your house—what your pa and your mother are thinking about?"

"No," said Bobby, wagging his head, sadly. "I guess it ain't nothing as good as going to boarding school. You see, they look so solemn when I catch them staring at me."

"Maybe you've done something and they are thinking of punishing you?" suggested Fred.

"No. I haven't done a thing. I really haven't! I'd thought of that, and I just went back over everything I've done this vacation, and I can't think of a thing," decided Bobby, reflectively.

"Well, if it's something bad, you'll find out soon enough what it is," said Fred, playing a regular Job's comforter.

"And if it is something *good*, I suppose they'll worry me to death—or pretty near—too, eh!"

"Mebbe if we could find a Gypsy woman she'd tell your fortune and you'd know," said Fred.

"Yah! I don't believe in such stuff," declared Bobby. "You remember that old woman that came around selling baskets last spring and wheedled that ten cents out of you? She only told you that you were going to cross water and have a great change on the other side."

"Well, she knew!" exclaimed Fred, earnestly. "Didn't I fall into the canal the very next day and have to swim across it; and you brought me a change of clothing from home? Huh! I guess that old woman hit it about right," declared the red-haired boy, with conviction.

Bobby chuckled a long time over this. It amused him a great deal. He and his chum had eaten up nearly the whole of Meena's luncheon—and she had not been niggardly with it, either.

"I'm going to have some of those apples," declared Fred. "Come on."

"All right," agreed Bobby, who had no compunctions about taking the ap-

ples on this side of the fence. He believed that the Plunkits had no claim upon the fruit that overhung somebody else's land! That is the usual belief of small boys in the country, whether it is legally correct, or not.

When the chums bit into the yellow apples on the ground they found that almost every one had been seized by a prior claimant. Fred bit right through a soft, white worm!

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the red-haired boy, and ran down to the creek's edge to rinse his mouth. "Isn't that awful?"

"Don't bite blindly," advised Bobby, chuckling. "You were too eager."

"I'm going to have a decent apple," declared Fred, coming back.

He jumped up, seized one of the lower branches of the apple tree, and scrambled up to a seat on a strong limb. Several tempting looking "summer sweetnin's" were within his reach. He seized one, looked it all over for blemishes and, finding none, set his teeth in it.

"How is it?" asked Bobby, biting carefully around a wormy apple.

"Fine," returned his chum, and tossed Bobby an apple he plucked.

At that very moment a voice hailed them from a distance, and a dog barked. "There's that Applethwaite Plunkit and his dog," gasped Bobby.

"Sure it is," said Fred, turning his gaze upon the lanky boy of twelve, or so, and the big black and brown dog that were running together across the pasture.

"Now we're in for it!" exclaimed Bobby, somewhat worried.

CHAPTER III
FRED IN TROUBLE

Fred sat kicking his bare heels together and grinning over the fence at the Plunkit boy and his dog.

"Get down out of that tree—you!" exclaimed the Plunkit boy.

"Who says so?" demanded Fred.

"*I* do."

"Well, say it again," responded Master Fred, in a most tantalizing way. "I like to hear you."

Applethwaite Plunkit was not a nice looking boy at all. He had perfectly white hair, but he wasn't an albino, for albinoes have pink-rimmed eyes. His eyes were very strange looking, however, for they were not mates. One was one color,

and one was another.

There are many such afflicted people in the world; usually they have one gray eye and one brown one. But Ap Plunkit had one eye that was of a sickly brown color, while the other was of a sickly green. That means that the "whites" of his mismated eyes were yellowish in hue.

Perhaps, because of this misfortune, the other boys plagued him, and that had soured his temper. He was very angry with Fred.

"Get out of that tree, you red-headed monkey!" he shouted, "or I'll set my dog on you!"

"I won't do it, you white-headed donkey—and your dog can't get me; not unless he can climb a tree," added Fred, grinning again.

"I'll come over there and knock you out of it," threatened Ap.

"I'd like to see you do it," responded Fred, swinging his feet again.

"I'll show you!" cried Ap, and he started for the hole in the fence. "Come on, Rove!" he called to the dog.

The big dog followed his master. He was part Newfoundland and would have made a fine playmate for any boy, if he had not been trained to be ugly with all strangers. When he got through the fence and saw Bobby standing idly by, he growled at him.

"Look out, Bob!" shouted Fred. "He'll bite you."

"I'm not doing anything," said Bobby Blake. "And you had better not set your dog on me, Plunkit."

"You fellers are too fresh," said the farm boy. "My father says you're not to come around here—"

"Your father doesn't own this land, and your father doesn't own this creek," whipped in Fred, from the branch.

"You fellers came across our land to get here," declared Ap.

"How do you know *that*, Mr. Smartie?" asked Fred. He had just finished eating an apple. He threw the core at the dog and hit him on the nose. Rover growled and then jumped up and snapped at Master Fred's bare heels.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" shrieked the daring Fred, kicking up his heels excitedly. "Didn't get me that time, did you? I'm not *your* meat."

"You stop that, Ap," ordered Bobby. "Call off your dog."

He had not been altogether idle. There was a heavy club of hard wood lying nearby, and he seized it.

"He'd better get down out of that tree or Rove will eat him up," said Ap, boastfully.

"Those branches overhang this land. The apples don't belong to you any more than they do to us," said Bobby, and he thought he was quite right in saying so.

"Yah!" scoffed Ap. "He had to climb the tree-trunk to get there, and the tree's on *our* side of the fence."

"Didn't neither, Mr. Smartie!" cried Fred, in delight. "I jumped up and grabbed a limb, and pulled myself up. Have an apple?" and he aimed one of the hard, green ones at Ap.

"Don't you do that, Fred!" called up Bobby, in haste.

"Well, then, I'll give it to the dog," said Fred, throwing the apple to Rover.

"You come down out of that tree, and you stop pelting my dog!" commanded Applethwaite Plunkit.

"Yes—I—will!" responded Fred, biting into another apple.

"Well! I'll lick one of you, anyway!" exclaimed Ap, who had been slily stepping nearer.

And immediately he threw himself on Bobby. He caught the latter so unexpectedly that he couldn't have used the club had he wished to.

"Come on, Rove!" shrieked Ap. "Bite him, boy—bite him!"

"You stop that!" shouted the red-haired boy in the tree. "Bobby hasn't done a thing—"

The dog growled and ran around the two struggling boys. Perhaps he was looking for a chance to bite his master's antagonist. At least, it looked so.

Bobby Blake, although never a quarrelsome lad, was no mollycoddle. Attacked as he had been, he struggled manfully to escape the bigger boy. He dropped the club, but he tore off Ap's hat and flung it into the creek.

"Go for it, sir! After it!" he screamed, and Rover heard him and saw the hat. That was one of the dog's accomplishments. He was a Newfoundland, and retrieving articles from the water was right in his line.

He barked and bounded to the edge of the steep bank. He evidently considered that, after all, his master and Bobby were only playing, and this part of the play he approved of.

The instant Bobby heard the splash of the big dog into the water, he twisted in Ap's grasp, tripped him, and fell on top of the larger boy.

"Oh! oh! oh!" gasped Ap. "You're hurtin' me—you're killin' me! I can't breathe—"

"Scubbity-*yow*!" yelled Fred, giving voice to his favorite battle-cry, and he dropped from the apple tree, running to Bobby's help.

But Bobby got up and released the bawling farm-boy at once. "Come on, Fred," he said. "Let's get out o' here."

"Why, you got the best of him!" cried Fred, in disgust. "Let's duck him! Let's throw him in after his old dog."

"No you don't," declared Bobby, seizing Fred's hand. "We're going to get out while we have the chance. I only tripped him and got the dog out of the way

so you could escape."

"Huh!" exclaimed Fred. "I didn't get as many apples as I wanted."

"I don't care. You come on," said his chum.

"Whoever heard of the winning side giving way like this?" grumbled the red-haired boy. "Anyway," he added, picking up the club Bobby had lost, "if that dog comes after us, I'll hit him."

Bobby picked up the box containing the remainder of their luncheon, and led the way through the bushes. The dog had come ashore, and it and Ap Plunkit were quickly out of sight. Fred was still grumbling about leaving the foe to claim "the best of it."

"He'll pitch on us next time, just the same," he declared. "Why didn't you punch him when you had him down, Bob?"

"Aw, come on!" said his chum. "Always wanting to get into a fight. You keep that up when you get to Rockledge School, and you'll be in hot water all the time."

"Shucks!" grinned Fred. "I'd like to be in *cold* water right now. The swimming hole isn't far away. Let's."

"We can't go in but once—you know we can't," said Bobby.

"Why not?" demanded Fred, quickly.

"Because we promised our mothers we wouldn't go in but once a day this vacation."

"Huh! That ain't saying but what we can take off our clothes and put on our swimming trunks, and stay in all day long."

"That would be just as dishonest as going in two or three times, Fred," exclaimed Bobby. "And you wouldn't do it. Besides," he added, grinning; "you know you tried that *last* summer, and 'member what you got for it?"

"You bet you!" exclaimed the red-haired one. "I got sunburned something fierce! No. I won't do *that* again. That's the day we built the raft on Sanders' Pond, and oh, how I hurt! I guess I do remember, all right."

"No," said Bobby, after a minute. "We'll go fishing first, and then take a swim before we go home. That'll clean us up, and make us feel fresh. There's that old stump again, Fred. I believe there's a big trout lives under that stump. Don't you 'member! We've seen him jump."

"Ya-as," scoffed Fred. "But that old fellow won't jump for a worm. He's had too many square meals this summer, don't you know? It'll take a fancy fly, like those my Uncle Jim uses when he goes fishing, to coax Mr. Trout out of the creek."

"I'm going to try," said Bobby, who could be obstinate in his opinion.

"I'll be satisfied if I catch a shiner," declared Fred. "I'll try off that rock yonder. Come on! There's a couple of dandy fishpoles."

Like real country boys, Bobby and Fred cut poles each time they went fishing. No need to carry them back and forth to their homes in Clinton and it did not take five minutes to cut and rig these poles.

"What nice, fat worms," said Bobby, when Fred shook up the tomato can.

"That's what the robin said," chuckled Fred. "Know what my sister, Betty, said yesterday morning? You know it rained the night before and the robins were picking up worms on the lawn right early—before breakfast.

"Bet was at the window and one fat robin picked up a worm, swallowed it, and flew right up into a tree where he began to sing like sixty! Bet says:

"'Oh! that robin gives me the *squirms*; how can he sing that way when he's all full of those crawly things?'"

"Now hush!" ordered Bobby, the next moment. "I'm going to drop this nice fellow right down beside that stump and see if I can coax Mr. Trout up."

But Mr. Trout did not appear. Bobby, with exemplary patience, tried it again and again. He changed his bait and dropped a fresh worm into the brown, cloudy water where he believed the trout lay.

"You're not fishing," chuckled Fred, from his station on the rock, a few yards away. "You're just drowning worms."

"Huh!" returned Bobby. "I don't see any medals on *you.* You haven't caught anything."

"But I'm going to!" whispered Fred, swiftly, and holding his pole with sudden attention.

Then, with a nervous jerk, he flung up the pole. Hook and sinker came with it, and a tiny, wriggling, silver fish, about a finger long, shot into the air. But Fred had not been careful to select his stand, and he drove his line and fish up among the branches of a tree.

"Now you've done it—and likely scared my trout," exclaimed Bobby.

Fred, in his usual impulsive fashion, tried to jerk back his line. The hook and sinker were caught around a branch. The shiner dropped off the hook and rested in a crotch of the branch. No fish ever was transformed into a bird so quickly since fishing was begun!

And while Bobby laughed, and held his sides, Fred jerked at the entangled line again and again until, stepping too far back, and pulling too hard, the line chanced to give a foot or two, Master Fred fell backwards and—*flop!* into the deep

pool below the rock he went!

CHAPTER IV
AN EVENTFUL AFTERNOON

"On! oh! oh!—gurgle! gurgle! *blob*! Help! Give us a hand—"

Down Master Fred went again, and, his mouth being open, he swallowed more of the murky water of the creek than was good for him. He came up, coughing and blowing.

Bobby, although forced to laugh, extended the butt of his own fish pole and Fred seized it. In half a minute he was on the bank, panting and "blowing bubbles," as Bobby said.

"You can laugh—"

"I hope so," returned Bobby, turning to give his attention to his own hook and line. "Oh!"

Something was the matter down under that stump; the water was agitated. The taut line pulled in Bobby's hands.

"Oh! A bite!" cried he, picking up his pole. "Oh, Fred! I've hooked that old trout!"

Master Martin was too much taken up with his own affairs just then to pay much attention. Bobby, all of a tremble (for he had never caught a trout over a finger long), began to "play" the fish cautiously. It seemed to be sulking down in its hole under the old stump. Bobby pulled on the line gently.

Meanwhile Fred, getting his breath, began to remove his saturated garments.

"I guess," he grunted, "we might as well go in swimming right now. Gee! I'm wet. And these things will have to dry before I start home. Oh!"

Bobby's line "gave" suddenly. Bobby uttered a yell, for he thought the trout had jumped.

Whatever was on his hook shot to the surface of the brown pool. Bobby went over backward on the grass. The point of his pole stood straight up, and the hook was snapped out of the water.

There was a long, black, *squirmy* thing on the hook. As Bobby squealed, the eel flopped right down into his face!

"Aw! ouch! take him off!" shouted Bobby, and flung away his pole.

In a second the eel was so tangled in the fishline that one might have thought it and the line had been tied into a hard knot! Fred was rolling with laughter on the bank, his wet shirt half over his head.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" he shrieked. "Now you got it. You laughed at *me*, Bobby Blake. See how you get it yourself."

Bobby began to laugh, too. He could see that the joke was, after all, on him.

"And that's your big trout—ho, ho!" shouted Fred. "An old eel. Kill him with a club, Bobby. You'll never get him untangled if you don't."

"And he'll wiggle *then* till the sun goes down. Just like a snake," declared Bobby, repeating a boyish superstition held infallible by the boys of Clinton.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Fred, at last pulling the wet shirt off. "I'm aching for laughing. What a mess that line's in."

"And how about your own!" demanded Bobby, on a broad grin again, and pointing into the branches of the tree where Fred had flung his shiner.

"We're a pair of fine fishermen—I don't think!" admitted Fred, in some disgust.

He got off the remainder of his wet clothing, and slipped on his trunks.

"You might as well do the same, Bobby," he advised, while he laid his clothing over the low bushes back from the bank of the creek, where the sun could get at them nicely. "Look at your shirt. All slime from that old eel."

"I wish he'd keep still a minute," said Bobby, with some impatience. "*What* were eels ever made for?"

"They're good eating, some folks think. But I'd just as lief eat snakes."

"Some savages eat snakes," said Bobby, trying to keep one foot on the tail-end of the eel, and unwinding the fishline.

But the next moment the squirmy creature wound itself up in the line again into a harder knot than before.

"Looks just like the worm he swallowed," chuckled Fred. "There! he's got the hook out of his mouth. Fling him back, Bobby!"

Bobby did so, pitching eel and line into the water. There was a flop or two and the wriggling fish got free. Then Bobby hauled in his line and began to rebait the hook.

"I guess I'll try fishing somewhere else," he said. "I won't try here. If there ever *was* a trout under that stump, he's scared away."

"There never was a trout where an old eel made his nest," scoffed Fred, struggling with his own line.

"That eel didn't belong here," announced Bobby, with confidence. "What do you bet I don't catch a trout to-day?"

"Never mind. I've landed *one* fish," chuckled Fred.

"Fish! what's it doing roosting in that tree, then!" demanded Bobby, gig-

gling. "It's a bird."

Fred managed to untangle his own line, and in doing so he shook the shiner out of the branches.

"Catch it!" he shouted. "There it goes!"

"Plop!" the fish went right into the pool, and with a wiggle of its tail disappeared.

"We're a couple of healthy fishermen," scoffed Bobby. "We land them, and then lose them."

"Le's go farther down stream. We've made so much noise here that we couldn't catch anything but deaf fish—that's sure."

Bobby was quite agreed to this, and Fred in his bathing trunks, leaving his wet clothing to dry on the bushes, led the way along the creek bank. Bobby followed with the can of worms.

They found another quiet place and this time both took pains to cast their lines where no overhanging branches would interfere with the tips of their poles. The creek was well stocked with sunfish, yellow perch, shiners, and small brook trout. Once—"in a dog's age," Fred's Uncle Jim said—somebody landed a big trout out of one of the deeper holes in the stream.

The boys fished for an hour, and both landed perch and shiners.

"If we get enough of them we can have a fish supper," declared Fred.

"At home?"

"Sure. We can clean them—"

"Who'll cook them? Our Meena won't," declared Bobby, with confidence.

"And I don't suppose our girl will, either. Besides, we'd have to catch a bushel to give the crowd at our house a taste, even," for there were five young Martins at Fred's house, besides himself, ranging from the baby who could just toddle around, to Fred's fourteen year old sister, Mary. There was another girl older than Fred, who was the oldest boy.

"Just wish Michael Mulcahey would light a fire in his stove and pan them for us," said Bobby, wistfully. "'Member, he did once!"

"Yes. But we haven't caught enough yet."

"Hush!" murmured Bobby. "I got another bite."

In a minute he had landed a nice, big sunfish. He cut a birch twig then, with a hook on the end of it, and strung his three fish. Fred did the same for his two, and the fish were let down into the cool water, and were thus kept alive.

They moved farther down the creek after a bit, and tried another pool. The strings of fish grew steadily. It looked, really, as though they would have enough for supper—and it takes a right good number of such little fish to make a meal for two hungry boys.

Not that they wanted food again so soon. During the afternoon they ate

the rest of the lunch and some apples to stave off actual hunger!

"I bet you get sunburned again," said Bobby.

"No, I won't. I'm in the shade all the time."

"The wind will burn as well as the sun."

"But I'm not in and out of the water all the time, like I was that day at Sanders' Pond. Just the same," added Fred, "I'm going into the creek now. There's a dandy place for fish just across there."

"There's some stepping stones below. I'll go over with you," declared Bobby, winding up his line.

Fred was not afraid of splashing himself. He ran across the stones laid in the bed of the creek. Bobby came more cautiously, but he did not see the wide grin on Fred's face as he stood on the far side and watched his chum.

Bobby stepped on the rock in the middle of the stream. Just as it bore his full weight, and he had his right foot in the air, stepping to the next dry-topped rock, the one under him rolled!

The red-haired boy had felt that stone "joggle" when he came across but he had leaped lightly from it. Bobby was caught unaware.

He yelled, and tried to jump, but the stepping stone, under which the action of the water had excavated the sand, turned clear over. "Splash!" went Bobby into the water.

He stood upright, but he was in a pool over his knees, and the agitated water splashed higher. His knickerbockers were as wet as Fred's clothes had been when he waded out.

"Oh, oh, oh!" shouted Fred, writhing on the grass. "Aren't you clumsy? Now you'll have to take off *your* clothes to dry, Bobby."

"You might have told a fellow that rock was loose," grumbled Bobby.

"And you might have told *me* that I was stepping off into the old creek when I was jerking at my line," retorted Fred. "I got it worse than you did."

Bobby removed his trousers and wrung them out. Then he put them on again. "They'll dry as good on me, as off," he said. "Now, come on. Let's go up along and see if we can't get some more fish."

They whipped the creek for half a mile up stream, and were successful beyond their hopes. Both boys had a nice string of pan-fish when they came to the deep swimming hole, which was only a few yards below the corner of Plunkit's farm Sphere the apple tree stood.

The sun was then sliding down toward the western horizon. Bobby's trousers were pretty well dried. He put on his bathing trunks, and followed Fred into the pool.

Both boys were good swimmers. There was a fine rock to dive from and a soft, sandy bottom. No danger here, and for an hour the chums had a most

delightful time.

Then Bobby brought his own clothes across to the side of the creek where they had begun to fish. Fred brought the fishing-tackle and the two strings of fish. Then he trotted down the bank to get his own clothes and their shoes and stockings.

Bobby was half dressed when he heard his chum shouting. "Bobby! Bobby!" shrieked the red-haired boy.

Fearing that his chum was in trouble, Bobby started for the sound of Fred's voice, on a hard run.

"I'm coming, Fred! Hold on!" he shouted, as loudly as he could.

In a few moments he came out into the open place where Fred had carefully arranged his clothing on the low bushes. There wasn't a garment there, and Fred came out of the brush, his face very red and angry.

"What's the matter?" asked Bobby.

"Matter enough!" returned his chum. "Don't you *see*?"

"Not—not your clothes gone?" gasped Bobby.

"Yes they are. Every stitch. And your shoes, too. What do you think of *that*?"

"Why—why—Somebody's taken them?"

"Of course somebody has. And it's your fault," said Fred, very much provoked. "If you had helped me pitch in and lick that Ap Plunkit, he wouldn't have dared do this."

"Maybe—maybe he'd have licked us," stammered Bobby.

"He'll—he'll just have to lick me when I meet up with him next time, or else he'll take the biggest licking *he* ever took," threatened the wrathful Master Martin, wiping a couple of angry tears out of his eyes with a scratched knuckle.

CHAPTER V
THE TALE OF A SCARECROW

"My goodness! you can't go home that way," said Bobby Blake, faintly.

He did not laugh at all. The situation had suddenly become tragic instead of comic. Fred could not walk back to Clinton in his bathing-trunks—that is, not until after dark.

"I wish I had hold of that Ap Plunkit," repeated Fred Martin. "*He* did it," he

added.

"Oh, we don't know—"

"Of course we do. He sneaked along there after us and found my clothes, and ran away with them—every one. And your shoes and stockings, too!"

"No he didn't, either!" cried Bobby, suddenly, staring up into the tall tree over their heads.

"Eh?"

"There are the shoes and stockings—shoes, anyway," declared Bobby, pointing.

It was a chestnut tree above their heads. It promised a full crop of nuts in the fall, for the green burrs starred thickly the leafy branches.

Whoever had disturbed the chums' possessions had climbed to the very tip-top of the chestnut and hung the two pair of shoes far out on a small branch.

"That's Ap Plunkit's work—I know," declared Fred, with conviction. "He climbs trees like a monkey. You see how long his arms are. I've seen him go up a taller tree than this."

"Maybe he's taken your clothes up there, too," said Bobby, going to the trunk of the tree.

"The mean scamp!" exclaimed Fred. "How'll we get them, Bob? I—I can't climb that tree this way."

"Neither can I," admitted his friend. "But wait till I run and get my clothes on—"

"And you'd *better* run, too!" exclaimed Fred, suddenly, "or you won't find the rest of *your* clothes."

Thus advised, Bobby Blake set out at once for the spot where he had been dressing. There was no sign of Applethwaite Plunkit about—or of any other marauder. Just the same, when Bobby was dressed and went down the creek side again to Fred, he carried all their possessions with him.

That chestnut was a hard tree for Bobby to climb—especially barefooted. There were so many prickly burrs that had dropped into the crotches of the limbs, and, drying, had become quite stiff and sharp. He had to stop several times as he mounted upward to pick the thorns from his feet.

But he got the shoes and stockings, and, hanging them around his neck, came down as swiftly as he could. Both boys at once sat down and put on this part of their apparel. Fred was almost tempted to cry; but then, he was too angry to "boo-hoo" much.

"I'll catch that Ap Plunkit, and I'll do something to him yet," he declared. "I'll have him arrested for stealing my clothes, anyway."

"How can we prove he took them? We didn't see him," said Bobby, thoughtfully.

"Well!"

"I tell you what," Bobby said. "Let's go up to his house and tell his mother. We *know* he did this, even if we didn't see him. Of course, we got him mad first—"

"We didn't have to get him mad," declared Fred. "He's mad all the time."

"Well, we plagued him. He just was getting square."

"But such a mean trick to steal a fellow's clothes!"

"Maybe his folks will see it that way and make Applethwaite give them back."

"But I can't go up there to the house with only these old tights on!" said Fred.

"No," and Bobby couldn't help grinning a little. "You wear my jacket."

"And if I have lost my clothes," wailed Fred, "and have to go home this way, my father will give it to me good! Come on!"

"Let's each find a good club. That dog, you know," said Bobby.

"Sure. And if we meet up with Ap, I'll be likely to use it on him, too!" growled Fred, angrily.

Bobby decided that it was useless to try to pacify his chum at the moment. It seemed to relieve Fred to threaten the absent Ap Plunkit, and it did that individual no bodily harm!

So the boys found stout clubs and started up the bank of the creek. Fred was feeling so badly that he did not pick more of the "summer sweetnin's" when they came to the apple tree.

They crawled through the hole in the boundary fence of the Plunkit Farm and kept on up the creek-side. First they crossed the pasture, then they climbed a tight fence and entered a big cornfield. The corn was taller than their heads and there were acres and acres of it. It was planted right along the edge of the creek bank, and they had to walk between the rows.

"If old Plunkit sees us in his corn, he'll be mad," said Fred, at last.

"This is the nearest way to the house, and we've got to try and get your clothes," said Bobby, firmly.

After that, he took the lead. The nearer they approached the farmhouse, the more Fred lagged. But suddenly, in the midst of the long cornfield, Master Martin uttered a cry.

"Look there, Bob!"

"What's the matter with you? I thought it was the dog."

"No, sir! See yonder, will you?"

"Nothing but a scarecrow," said Bobby.

"Yes. But it has clothes on it. I'm going to take them. I'm not going up to that house without anything more on me than what I've got."

Bobby began to chuckle at that. It seemed too funny for anything to rob

a scarecrow. But Fred was pushing his way through the corn toward the absurd figure.

Suddenly Fred uttered another yell—this time his famous warwhoop:

"Scubbity-*yow*! I got him!"

"You got who?" demanded Bobby, hurrying after his chum.

"This is some o' that Ap Plunkit's doings—the mean thing! Look here!" and he snatched the cap off the scarecrow's head of straw.

"Why—that looks like *your* cap, Fred," gasped Bobby.

"And it *is*, too."

"That—that's just the stripe of your shirt!"

"And it is my shirt. And it's my pants, and all!" cried Fred. "I'll get square with Ap Plunkit yet—you see if I don't. There's the old ragged things this scarecrow wore, on the ground. And he's dressed it in *my* things. Oh, you wait till I catch him!"

Meanwhile Fred was hastily tearing off the garments that certainly were his own. They were all here. Bobby kept away from him, and laughed silently to himself. It was really too, too funny; but he did not want to make Fred angry with *him*.

"Now I guess we'd better not go to the farmhouse—had we?" demanded Bobby.

"Let's go home," grunted Fred, very sour. "It's almost sundown."

"All right," agreed his chum.

"He tore my shirt, too. And we might never have found these clothes. I'm going to get square," Fred kept muttering, as they struck right down between the corn rows toward the distant roadside fence.

Just as they climbed over the rails to leap into the road they were hailed by a voice that said:

"Hey there! what you doin' in that cornfield?"

There was the Plunkit hopeful—otherwise Applethwaite, the white-headed boy. He sat on the top rail near by and grinned at the two boys from town.

"There you are—you mean thing!" cried Fred Martin, and before Bobby could stop him, he rushed at the bigger fellow.

He was so quick—or Ap was so slow—that Fred seized the latter by the ankles before he could get down from his perch.

"Git away! I'll fix you!" shouted the farm boy.

He kicked out, lost his balance, and Fred let him go. Ap fell backward off the fence into the cornfield, and landed on his head and shoulders.

He set up a terrific howl, even before he scrambled to his feet. By his actions he did not seem to be so badly hurt. He searched around for a stone, found it, and threw it with all his force at Fred Martin. Fortunately he missed the town

boy.

Immediately Fred grabbed up a stone himself and poised it to fling at his enemy. Bobby threw himself upon his chum and seized his raised arm.

"Now you stop that, Fred!" he commanded.

"Why shouldn't I hit him? He flung one at me," declared the angry boy.

"I know. But he didn't hit you. And you might hit him and do him harm. Suppose you put his eye out—or something? Come on home, Fred—don't be a chump."

"Aw—well," growled Fred, and threw the stone away.

"You know you are always getting into a muss," urged Bobby, hurrying his chum along the road toward town. "What'll you do when you go to Rockledge—"

"You got to go with me, Bob," declared Fred, grinning.

"Oh! I wish they'd let me," murmured his friend.

But as far as he could see then, no circumstances could arise that would make such a wished for event possible.

CHAPTER VI

A FISH FRY AND A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

They got home at early supper time, fish and all. But one look into the kitchen assured Bobby that it was useless to expect Meena to pan their catch for them.

The "rabbit ears" stuck up on top of her head at a more uncompromising angle than ever. Mr. and Mrs. Blake had not returned from town. At a late hour Michael Mulcahey had come back with the carriage and announced that his mistress would stay in town for dinner with Mr. Blake and they were to be met at the 10:10 train.

Michael had just finished cleaning the carriage and now sat with his pipe beside the stable door. He was a long-lipped Irishman, with kindly, twinkling eyes, and "ould counthry" whiskers that met under his chin, giving his cleanly shaven, wind-bitten face the look of peering out through a frame of hair.

"'Tis a nice string of fish ye have, byes," he said.

"And I s'pose we got to give them to the cats," complained Fred. "They won't cook 'em at my house, and Meena's got the toothache."

Michael grinned broadly, puffing slowly at his pipe. "Clane the fish, byes. There's a pan jest inside the dure. Get water from the hydrant. Have ye shar-r-rp

knives?"

"Oh, yes, Michael!" cried Bobby.

"Scale thim fish, then. I'll start a fire in my stove. An' I've a pan. Belike Meena, the girl, will give ye a bit of fat salt por-r-rk and some bread. Tell her she naden't bother with supper. We'll make it ourselves—in what th' fancy folks calls 'ally-frisco'—though *why* so, I *dun*-no," added Michael.

He knocked the dottle out of his pipe and washed his hands. The boys, meanwhile, were cleaning the little fish rapidly, and whispering together. They were delighted with the coachman's suggestion. It was just what they had been hoping for. Fred even forgot his "grouch" against Applethwaite Plunkit.

Bobby ventured to the kitchen door. Meena was just untying the red bandage, but the moment she caught sight of him she hesitated. She may have felt another slight twinge of "face ache."

"Vat you vant?" she demanded.

Bobby told her what they were going to do. Michael had his own plates, and knives and forks. He had "bached it" a good many years before he came to work for Bobby's father. Meena saw a long, quiet evening ahead of her.

"Vell," she said, ungraciously enough, for it was not her way to acknowledge her blessings—not in public, at least. "Vell, I give you the pork and bread. But that Michael ban spoil you boys. I vouldn't efer marry him."

"What did she say?" asked the coachman when Bobby returned to the room over the harness closets in which Michael slept—and sometimes cooked.

"She says she won't marry you because you spoil us," declared Bobby, winking at Fred.

"Did she now?" quoth Michael. "So she has rayfused me again—though it wasn't just like a proposal *this* time. Still—we'll count it so's to make sure."

He gravely walked to a smooth plank in the partition behind the door, and picked up the stub of a pencil from a ledge. On this board was a long array of pencil marks—four straight, up and down marks, and a fifth "slantingdicular" across them. There were a great many of these marks.

Each of these straight, up and down, marks meant "No," and the slanting mark meant another "No"; so that Meena's refusals of the coachman's proposal for her hand were grouped in fives.

"The Good Book says Jacob sarved siven years for Rachael, and then another siven. He didn't have nawthin' on me—sorra a bit! When Meena's said 'No' a thousan' times, she'll forgit some day an' say 'Yis.'"

He went back to shaking the pan on the stove, in which the cubes of salt pork were sputtering. He mixed some flour and cornmeal in a plate, with salt and pepper. Wiping each of the little fish partly dry, he rolled them in the mixture, and then laid them methodically in rows upon a board. When the fat in the skillet

was piping hot, he dropped in the fish easily so as not to splash the hot fat about. Then with a fork he turned them as they browned.

As he forked them out of the hot fat, all brown and crispy, he laid them on a sheet of brown paper for a bit to drain off the fat. Then the boys' plates and his own were filled with the well fried fish.

"There's just a mess for us," said Michael, as they sat down. "For what we are about to rayceive make us tr-r-ruly grateful! Pass the bread, Master Bobby. 'Tis the appetite lends sauce to the male, so they say. Eat hearty!"

Bobby and Fred had plenty of the "sauce" the coachman spoke of. After the excitement and adventures of the afternoon they had much to tell Michael, too, and the supper was a merry one.

Fred had to go home at eight o'clock and an hour and a half later it was Bobby's bedtime. But the house seemed very still and lonely when he had gone to bed, and he lay a long time listening to the crickets and the katydids, and the other night-flying insects outside the screens.

He heard Michael drive out of the lane to go to the station and he was still awake when the carriage returned and his father and mother came into the house. They came quietly up stairs, whispering softly, but the door between Bobby's room and his mother's dressing-room was ajar and he could hear his parents talking in there. They thought him asleep, of course.

"But Bobby's got to be told, my dear. I have bought our tickets—as I told you," Mr. Blake said. "We can't wait any longer."

"Oh, dear me, John!" Bobby heard his mother say. "*Must* we leave him behind?"

"My dear! we have talked it all over so many times," Mr. Blake said, patiently. "It is a long voyage. Not so long to Para; but the transportation up the river, to Samratam, is uncertain. Brother Bill left the business in some confusion, I understand, and we may be obliged to remain some months. It would not be well to take Bobby. He must go to school. I am doubtful of the advisability of taking *you*, my dear—"

"You shall not go without me, John," interrupted Mrs. Blake, and Bobby knew she was crying softly. "I would rather that we lost all the money your brother left—"

"There, there!" said Bobby's father, comfortingly. "You're going, my dear. And we will leave Bobby in good hands."

"But *whose* hands?" cried his wife. "Meena can look after the house, and Michael we can trust with everything else. But neither of them are proper guardians for my boy, John."

"I know," agreed Mr. Blake, and Bobby, lying wide awake in his bed, knew just how troubled his father looked. He hopped out of bed and crept softly to

the door. He did not mean to be an eavesdropper, but he could not have helped hearing what his father and mother said.

"We have no relatives with whom to leave him," Mrs. Blake said. "And all our friends in Clinton have plenty of children of their own and wouldn't want to be bothered. Or else they are people who have *no* children and wouldn't know how to get along with Bobby."

"It's a puzzle," began her husband, and just then Bobby pushed open the door and appeared in the dressing-room.

"I heard you, Pa!" he cried. "I couldn't help it. I was awake and the door was open. I know just what you can do with me if I can't go with you to where Uncle Bill died."

"Bobby!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, putting out her arms to him. "My boy! I didn't want you to know—yet."

"He had to hear of the trip sometime," said Bobby's father.

"And I'm not going to make any trouble," said Bobby, swallowing rather hard, for there seemed to be a lump rising in his throat. He never liked to see his mother cry. "Why, I'm a big boy, you know, Mother. And I know just what you can do with me while you're gone."

"What's that, Bobs?" asked his father, cheerfully.

"Let me go to Rockledge School with Fred Martin—do, *do*! That'll be fun, and they'll look out for me there—you know they are *awfully* strict at schools like that. I can't get into any trouble."

"Not with Fred?" chuckled Mr. Blake.

"Well," said Bobby, seriously, "you know if I have to look out for Fred same as I always do, *I* won't have time to get into mischief. You told Mr. Martin so yourself, you know, Pa."

Mr. Blake laughed again and glanced at his wife. She had an arm around Bobby, but she had stopped crying and she looked over at her husband proudly. Bobby was such a sensible, thoughtful chap!

"I guess we'll have to take the school question into serious consideration, Bobs," he said. "Now kiss your mother and me goodnight, and go to sleep. These are late hours for small boys."

Bobby ran to bed as he was told, and this time he went to sleep almost as soon as he placed his head upon the pillow. But how he *did* dream! He and Fred Martin were walking all the way to Rockledge School, and they went barefooted with their shoes slung over their shoulders, Applethwaite Plunkit and his big dog popped out of almost every corner to obstruct their way. Bobby had just as exciting a time during his dreams that night as he and his chum had experienced during the afternoon previous!

Nothing was said at the late Sunday morning breakfast about his parents'

journey to South America. Bobby knew all about poor Uncle Bill. He could just remember him—a small, very brown, good-tempered man who had come north from his tropical station in the rubber country four years, or so, before.

Uncle Bill was Mr. Blake's only brother, and most of Bobby's father's income came from the rubber exporting business, too. Uncle Bill had lived for years in Brazil, but finally the climate had been too much for him and only a few months ago word had come of his death. He had been a bachelor. Mr. Blake had positively to go to Samratam to settle the company's affairs and Bobby's mother would not be separated from her husband for the long months which must necessarily be engaged in the journey.

Bobby felt that he *must* talk about the wonderful possibility that had risen on the horizon of his future, so, long before time for Sunday School, he ran over to the Martin house and yodled softly in the side lane for Fred.

Fred put his head out of a second-story window. "Hello!" he said, in a whisper. "That you, Bobby?"

"Yep. Come on down. I got the greatest thing to tell you."

"Wait till I get into this stiff shirt," growled Fred. "It's just like iron! I just *hate* Sunday clothes—don't you, Bobby?"

Bobby was too eager to tell his news to discuss the much mooted point. "Hurry up!" he threw back at Fred, and then sat down on the grassy bank to wait.

He knew that Fred would have to pass inspection before either his mother or his sister Mary, before he could start for Sunday School. He heard some little scolding behind the closed blinds of the Martin house, and grinned. Fred had evidently tried to get out before being fully presentable.

He finally came out, grumbling something about "all the girls being nuisances," but Bobby merely chuckled. He thought Mary Martin was pretty nice, himself—only, perhaps inclined to be a little "bossy," as is usually the case with elder sisters.

"Never mind, Fred," Bobby said, soothingly. "Let it go. I got something just wonderful to tell you."

"What is it?" demanded Fred, not much interested.

"I believe something's going to happen that you've just been *hoping* for," said Bobby, smiling.

"That Ap Plunkit's got the measles—or something?" exclaimed Fred, with a show of eagerness.

"Aw, no! It isn't anything to do with Ap Plunkit," returned Bobby, in disgust.

"What is it, then?"

So Bobby told him.

CHAPTER VII
FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

Two boys in Clinton did not go to Sunday School that day with minds much attuned to the occasion. Fred could scarcely restrain himself within the bounds of decent behavior as they walked from Merriweather Street, where both the Blakes and the Martins lived, to Trinity Square, where the spire of the church towered above the elms.

The thought that Bobby was going with him to Rockledge (Fred had jumped to that conclusion at once) put young Martin on the very pinnacle of delight.

"Of course, it would be great if your folks would take you to South America," admitted Fred, after some reflection. "For you could bring home a whole raft of marmosets, and green-and-gray parrots, and iguanas, and the like, for pets. And you'd see manatees, and tapirs, and jaguars and howling monkeys, and all the rest. But crickey! you wouldn't have the fun we'll have when we get to Rockledge School."

Fun seemed to be all that Fred Martin looked forward to when he got to boarding school. Lessons, discipline, and work of any kind, never entered his mind.

That evening Mr. and Mrs. Blake, with Bobby, went up the street to the Martin house, and the parents of the two chums talked together a long time on the front porch, while the children were sent into the back yard—that yard that Buster Shea had cleaned so nicely the day before, being partly paid in rats!

When the Blakes started home, it had been concluded that Bobby was to attend school with Fred, and that if Mr. and Mrs. Blake did not return from their long journey in season, Bobby was to be under the care of the Martins during vacation.

"Another young one won't make any difference here, Mrs. Blake," said easy-going Mrs. Martin. "Really, half the time I forget how many we have, and have to go around after they are all abed, and count noses. Bobby will make us no trouble, I am sure. And he always has a good influence over Fred—we've remarked that many times."

This naturally made Mrs. Blake very proud. Yet she took time to talk very

seriously to Bobby on several occasions during the next few days. She spoke so tenderly to him, and with such feeling, that the boy's heart swelled, and he could scarcely keep back the tears.

"We want to hear the best kind of reports from you, Bobby—not only school reports, but in the letters we may get from our friends here in Clinton. Your father and I have tried to teach you to be a manly, honorable boy. You are going where such virtues count for more than anything else.

"Be honest in everything; be kindly in your relations to the other boys; always remember that those weaker than yourself, either in body or in character, have a peculiar claim upon your forbearance. Father would not want you to be a mollycoddle but mother doesn't want you to be a bully.

"You will go to church and Sunday School up there at Rockledge just as you have here. Don't be afraid to show the other boys that you have been taught to pray. I shall have your father find out the hour when you all go to bed, and at that hour, while you are saying your prayers and thinking of your father and me so far away from you, I shall be praying for my boy, too!"

"Don't you cry, Mother," urged Bobby, squeezing back the tears himself. "I will do just as you tell me."

It was arranged that Mr. Blake should take the boys to school when the time came, but there was still a fortnight before the term opened at Rockledge. Bobby and Fred had more preparations to make than you would believe, and early on Monday morning Fred came over to the Blake house and the chums went down behind the garden to have a serious talk.

"Say! there's fifty boys in that school," Fred said. "There's another school right across Monatook Lake. They call it Belden School. There's all sorts of games between the two schools, you know, and we want to be in them, Bobby."

"What do you mean—games?" asked Bobby.

"Why, baseball, and football, and hockey on the ice in winter, and skating matches, and boating in the fall and spring—rowing, you know. Lots of games. And we want to be in them, don't we?"

"Sure," admitted his chum.

"It's going to cost money," said Fred, decidedly. "We'll have to get bats, and good horse-hide balls, and a catcher's mask and glove, and a pad, and all that. We want to get on one of the ball teams. You know I can catch, and you've got a dandy curve, Bobby, and a fade-away that beats anything I've ever seen."

"Yes. I'd like to play ball," admitted Bobby, rather timidly. "But will they let us—we being new boys?"

"We'll make them," said the scheming Fred. "If we show them we have the things I said—mitt, and bats, and all—they'll be glad to have us play, don't you see?"

"But we haven't them," suddenly said Bobby.

"No. But we must have them."

"Say! they'll cost a lot of money. You know I don't have but a dollar a month," said Bobby, "and I know Mother won't let me open my bank."

"Of course not. That's the way with mothers and fathers," said Fred, rather discontentedly. "They get us to start saving against the time we'll want money awfully bad for something. And then we have to buy shoes with it, or Christmas presents, or use it to pay for a busted window. *That's* what cleaned out my bank the last time—when I threw a ball through Miklejohn's plate-glass window on the Square."

"Well," said Bobby, getting away from *that* unpleasant subject, "I have most of my dollar left for this month, and Pa will give me another on the first day of September."

"I haven't but ten cents to my name," confessed Fred.

"Then how'll we get new bats, and the mask, and pad, and all?"

"That's what we want to find out," Fred said, grimly. "We'll have to think up some scheme for making money. I wish I'd cleaned our yard Saturday instead of hiring Buster Shea."

"*That* didn't cost you much," chuckled Bobby. "Only a cent—and you couldn't have sold the five rats for anything."

"Aw—well—"

"Let's start a lemonade stand," suggested Bobby.

"No. It's been done to death in Clinton this vacation," Fred declared, emphatically. "Besides, the sugar and lemons and ice cost so much. And you're always bound to drink so much yourself that there's no profit when the lemonade's gone."

Bobby acknowledged the justice of this with a silent nod.

"Got to be something new, Bobby," urged Fred, with much belief in his chum's powers of invention. "*You* think of something."

"Might have a show," said Bobby.

"Aw—now—Bobby! you know that's no good," declared Fred. "We'd have to let a lot of the other fellows into it. Can't run a circus—not even a one-ring one—without a lot of performers. And they'd want the money split up. We wouldn't make anything."

"A peep-show," said Bobby, still thoughtfully chewing a straw.

"Aw, shucks! that's worse. The kids will only pay pins, or rusty nails, to see *that* kind of a show."

"No. That's not just what I mean," Bobby said, thoughtfully. "Let's have a show that will only need us two to run it, Fred. Then we won't have to divide the money with anybody else. And let's have a show that grown up folks will want

to see."

"Great, Bobby! That's a swell idea—if we could do it."

"I believe we *can* do it."

"Tell a fellow," urged Fred, excitedly. "Grown folks have money. We could charge them a nickel—maybe a dime—"

"No. A penny show," said Bobby, still chewing the straw. "Of course, it's got to be worth a penny—and then, it'll have to be sort of a joke, too—"

"Whatever are you trying to get at, Bobby Blake?" demanded his chum in wonder.

"Listen here. Now—don't you tell—"

He pulled Fred down beside him and whispered into his ear. The red-haired boy looked puzzled at first. Then he caught the meaning of his chum's plan, and his eyes grew big and he began to grin. Suddenly he flung his cap into the air and seized Bobby round the neck to hug him.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" he yelled. "That's the greatest thing I've ever heard, Bob! And we can have it right down 'side of my father's store."

Mr. Martin kept a grocery store on Hurley Street, in a one-story building on one side of which was an open lot belonging to the store property. There was a side-door to the store-building opening upon this lot, but not far back from the street.

For the next two or three days Bobby and Fred were very busy indeed at this place and, with some little help, they managed to erect a structure that was made partly of old fence-boards and partly of canvas.

The half-tent, half-shack was about ten feet wide. It had a sloping canvas roof. It ran back from the sidewalk far enough to mask the side-door into Mr. Martin's store.

Mr. Martin was not in the secret of the nature of the boys' proposed "show," but he was a good natured man and made no objection to his son and Bobby utilizing his side door.

"You see, we must have an 'entrance' and an 'exit'," Bobby explained. "Folks can pass out through the store after seeing our show."

"Sure," chuckled Fred. "As long as we don't call it 'egress,' nobody will be scared that it's some strange and savage animal. All right. 'Exit' it is," and he proceeded to paint the sign, per Bobby's instructions.

And that was not the only sign to be painted. Fred was rather handy with a brush, and when all the sign-painting was done, Bobby pronounced the work fine.

In front of the tent, Bobby had built a little platform with a box, waist high, before it. Bobby was to be the lecturer, or "ballyhoo," and was, likewise, to sell the tickets. The other boys were eaten up with curiosity about the show, but neither

Bobby nor Fred would give them a chance to get a look inside the shelter after the roof was on.

There was a canvas wall in the front, with a very narrow entrance. Inside that was a canvas screen so that nobody peeking into the doorway could see much of what lay beyond. They had one kerosene lamp to light the interior.

They made several other arrangements for the opening of the show, and then there was nothing to do but wait for Saturday to arrive. On that day many people from out-of-town came into Clinton to market, and the Hurley Street stores were well patronized all day long. Bobby and Fred knew they would not lack a curious company outside the tent, whether they tolled many within or not.

CHAPTER VIII
THE PEEP-SHOW

Very early on Saturday morning Bobby and Fred went down to Hurley Street and hung the painted banners upon the front of the show tent. As to their beauty, there might have been some question, but Fred had painted the words clearly, and there could be no mistaking their meaning.

The sheets on which the signs were painted stretched across the width of the tent, and the upper line read:

FOUR MARVELS OF THE WORLD

Underneath this startling statement, in no less emphatic letters, appeared the following:

ON EXHIBITION:
The Strongest Man in the World
The Handsomest Woman in the World
The Prettiest Girl in the World
The Smartest Boy in the World

The surprising nature of these signs began to draw a crowd almost at once—even before breakfast. The early comers were mostly boys, and Bobby and Fred were not yet ready to admit the curious.

The chums kept perfectly serious faces and refused to answer any of the questions, or respond much to the raillery of their young friends.

"You know that ain't so, Bobby Blake!" exclaimed one boy. "You can't have all those people in that tent. And where'd you get them? Huh! 'Strongest man in the world.' Who's that? Sandow, or John L. Sullivan? Bet you jest got a picture of Samson throwin' down the pillars."

"That's what it is—just pictures!" agreed the other curious ones.

Fred grinned at them and was—wonderful to relate!—as silent as his chum. They had agreed to say nothing in response to the chaffing.

"And who was the handsomest woman in the world?" scoffed another boy, who was rather better informed than most of his mates. "Cleopatra, maybe! And she was blacker than our Phoebe who washes for my mother. All Egyptians are black."

"I'd just like to know who you think is the prettiest girl, Bobby Blake?" demanded one of the bigger girls who went to school with the chums, her nose tip tilted to show her scorn. "What do you know about pretty girls?"

"If you want to see her, you can do so by paying your penny by and by," said Bobby politely.

"Humph! I'd like to see myself!" snapped the young lady—and at once went home and secured a penny for that very purpose!

"I s'pose you've got a photograph of your own self in there for the smartest boy, Reddy Martin!" suggested one of the big fellows who dared give Fred this hated nickname.

"Well," drawled Fred, his eyes sparkling, "if it lay between you and me who was the smartest, I don't believe *you'd* get any medal."

The boys took turns breakfasting on crackers and cheese in Mr. Martin's store. Fred's father was greatly amused by the signs in front of the tent and he wanted a private view of the wonders. But he was politely refused.

"We can't begin the show till Bobby's made the lecture, Dad," declared Fred. "And we're not going to begin till there's a crowd on the street. We'll pass them right into the store here, and I bet you and the clerks will be too busy waiting on customers to see the show at all," and he chuckled.

In only a single matter did the boys have help in the arrangements for the show. Mr. Blake, without being in the secret of the show itself, had written the lecture which Bobby was to deliver outside the tent every time a crowd gathered.

Bobby put on a shabby drum-major's coat, with one epaulet, which had been found in the Martins' attic. On his head he perched an old silk hat belonging to his father, with the band stuffed out so that it would not slip down over his ears and hide his face entirely.

He beat upon a tin pan with a padded drum-stick, and thus brought together

the first crowd before the show-tent at about nine o'clock. His ridiculous figure and the noise of the drumming soon collected twenty or thirty grown people—mostly men at that hour—beside a crowd of boys, and a few timid girls who fringed the crowd.

Having called his audience together, Bobby, with a perfectly serious face, began his speech which he had learned by heart, and spoke as well as ever he recited "a piece" on Friday afternoons at school:

"Kind Friends:

"This wonderful exhibition has been arranged for the sole purpose of extracting money from your pockets and putting it into ours. We make this frank announcement at the start so that there may be no misunderstanding.

"This marvelous Museum is not a charitable institution nor is it for the benefit of any philanthropic cause.

"It is merely an effort and an invention to promote good humor; any person unable to appreciate a joke on himself, or herself, is respectfully requested not to patronize our stupendous and surprising entertainment.

"Where before, in any conglomeration of Wonders of the World, have four such marvelous creatures been placed simultaneously on exhibition?

"Now, kind friends, but one person is admitted to our entertainment at a time, and but one of these advertised marvels will be exhibited to each visitor. This is a positive rule that cannot be broken.

"The charge for our educational and startling exhibit is but a penny—a cent—the smallest coin of the realm. It will not make you, and it cannot break you.

"In addition, it is understood that the person paying his, or her, entrance fee to this Museum of Marvels, agrees to keep silent regarding what is shown within, for at least twenty-four hours. On that, and on no other terms, do we accept your penny.

"If one should not be satisfied that a penny's worth is given in exchange for the entrance fee, the same will be cheerfully refunded.

"Now, kind friends, one at a time," concluded Bobby, stepping down from the rostrum to the narrow entrance to the tent. "Form in line at the right, please. Have your pennies ready; we cannot make change. Doctor Truman is the first to enter the Hall of Marvels. Thank you, Doctor!" as the cheerful, chuckling physician, bag in hand, on his morning rounds to see his patients, pushed forward to the entrance of the tent.

There was a good deal of hanging back at first. Bobby had expected that. And Fred might have lost hope had he been outside where he could see the crowd that began to dwindle away when Bobby's funny speech was finished.

But in a moment the doctor's roar of laughter from within the tent brought

some of the suspicious ones back. The doctor appeared at the store door, his plump sides shaking with laughter, and wiping the joyous tears from his eyes.

"What is it, Doc?" asked an old farmer. "What's them 'tarnal boys doin' in that tent?"

"Pay your penny and go in and see," exclaimed Doctor Truman, hurrying away. "If a laugh like that isn't worth a cent, I don't know what is!"

Fred's whistle had announced the departure of the first visitor by way of the shop door, and Bobby urged up another:

"Don't crowd, kind friends. The performance will continue all day and this evening—or until everybody desiring to do so has seen one of these four Wonders of the World."

Jim Hatton, the harness maker, followed the doctor. He didn't laugh, but the curious ones heard him exclaim, a moment after his disappearance:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" which was Mr. Hatton's favorite expression, and he came out of the front door of Mr. Martin's shop, grinning broadly.

"What was it, Jim?" asked the same curious farmer.

"Can't tell ye, Jake. See it yourself—'nless you're afraid o' riskin' a penny to find out just how smart our boys here in Clinton be," and Mr. Hatton went off to his shop still grinning.

Somebody pushed forward the very girl who had sharpened her wit on Bobby before the exhibition opened. She had her penny clutched tightly in her hand.

"Don't you let go of that cent, Susie," advised Bobby, grinning at her, "if you think you'll want it again for anything. For you won't be pleased by what you see—maybe."

Susie tossed her head and went inside. In just a minute Fred blew his whistle and Susie, with flaming cheeks, appeared at the front door of the store.

"What was it, Susie?" demanded one of her friends.

"Which did you see—the strong man, or the handsome lady, or the pretty girl, or the smart boy?" cried another.

But Susie shut her lips tightly, glanced once at Bobby, who was letting the curious old farmer pass into the tent, and then she ran home. The curiosity of the boys and girls mounted higher and higher.

The old farmer popped out almost as quick as he popped in. He was chewing a straw vigorously, and his face was flushed. It was hard to tell for a moment whether he was mad, or not.

"Wal, Neighbor Jake, did yet git your money's wuth?" demanded another rural character.

The bewhiskered old fellow turned on the speaker, and gradually a grin spread over his face.

"Say, Sam!" he drawled. "You never had none too much schoolin'. Your edication was frightfully neglected. You pay that there boy a cent and go in there, and you'll l'arn more in a minute than you ever did before in a day! You take it from me."

Thus advised his neighbor pressed forward and was the next "victim." When he came out his face was red likewise, while Jake burst into a mighty roar of laughter and rocked himself to and fro on the horseblock in front of the store door.

Soon the second farmer joined in the laughter, and thereafter, for an hour, the two stood about and urged everybody from out of town whom they knew to enter the peep-show.

Occasionally Bobby mounted the platform, banged on the pan, and lifted up his voice in the speech Mr. Blake had written for him. It coaxed the people to stop before the show every time. And between whiles, Bobby kept repeating:

"It is only a cent—and your money back if you are not satisfied! If it is a joke, keep it to yourself and let the next one find it out. Come on! Have your pennies ready, please, kind friends. See one of the four greatest wonders of the world."

At first none of the ladies who were out shopping did more than stop and listen and wonder among themselves "what that Blake boy was up to now." But the girl who worked in Mr. Ballard's real estate office ran across the street to see what the crowd was about, and was tempted to enter the tent.

She came out giggling, and greatly delighted, and pretty soon the girls who worked in the offices and stores along Hurley Street, were attracted to the show. They all seemed to be highly delighted, when they came out through the store.

"I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Hiram Pepper, to a neighbor, as they passed the peep-show again. "I've a mind to see what that means."

"It's some foolishness," said her friend, who was a rather vinegary maiden lady named Miss Prissy Craven. "I wonder what that boy's mother can be thinking of!"

"Why, Mrs. John Blake is as nice a lady as there is in town," declared Mrs. Pepper. "And I must say for Bobby that he's never in any mischief. He's full of fun—like any boy. But there ain't a *smitch* of meanness in him."

"Humph!" exclaimed the other lady, sourly.

"Now, you wait. I'm going in," declared Mrs. Pepper, fumbling in her purse for a penny.

She marched up to Bobby, eyeing him rather sternly. To tell the truth, for the first time the young showman quailed.

"Maybe you'd—you'd better not go in, Mrs. Pepper," he mumbled.

"Why not? Ain't it fit for a lady to see?" demanded she, with increasing

sternness.

"Oh, yes!" and Bobby *had* to giggle at that. "But—but—Well, anyway, you mustn't tell, and you can have your money back if you don't like the show."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mrs. Pepper, "as though I was worried about the loss of a penny," and she went into the tent with her back very straight.

She came out shaking with laughter. The tears rolled down her face and she had to sit down on Mr. Martin's steps to get her breath. Miss Prissy Craven demanded, sharply: "What under the sun is the matter with you, Mis' Pepper? I never seen you behave so. What is it in that tent them boys have got? I sh'd think it was a giggle ball full o' tickle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled the amused Mrs. Pepper. "You go in yourself, Prissy, and see what you think of it. I can't tell you."

"I'm going!" announced the maiden lady, nodding her head. "But lemme tell you," she added to Bobby, "if it's anything I don't like, you'll hear about it when I come out."

Bobby looked across at Mrs. Pepper doubtfully, but he had to grin. The lady who was laughing nodded to him vigorously, and he let Miss Craven through.

In less than a minute she flounced through the store and demanded, in her high, rasping voice:

"What did you mean by trickin' me that-a-way, Mis' Pepper? I never was so disgusted in all my life. A perfec' swindle—"

"You can get back your penny if you didn't like it," suggested Bobby, trying hard not to laugh.

"Well, I—"

But Mrs. Pepper broke in upon the angry spinster's possible tirade: "Jest what did you see, Prissy?" she asked the angry one, with emphasis. Miss Craven's mouth remained open for fully half a minute, but no sound came forth. The blood mounted into her face, and then she shut her lips and started off hastily for her own home. *Evidently she did not want to tell*!

This incident excited the curiosity of the bystanders more than ever. So far every person seeing the show had "played fair" and had refused to say what he or she had seen on the inside of the tent.

Bobby had refused to let the smaller boys or girls into the show, telling them that late in the day they might see it for nothing. That had been agreed upon with Fred, for the proprietors of the entertainment were afraid that the little folk would be tempted to talk the matter over among themselves and thus spoil the fun—as well as reduce the receipts.

And the pennies came in faster than Bobby or Fred had dared hope. During the morning those people who had business on Hurley Street came to see the show, and to listen to Bobby as "bally-hoo," and by noon-time wind of the peep-

show had gone all over town.

Bobby's mother, and Fred's, too, heard of it from their husbands at luncheon, and they decided to see what their young hopefuls were about. Bobby was just a little bit scared when he saw his mother; he didn't know whether she would see the joke as his father had, earlier in the day—for Mr. Blake had come out of the tent roaring with laughter.

"It beats anything how those two youngsters have got the whole town guessing," he had said to Mr. Martin. "And they have hit on a positive human failing that shows more sober thought than I believed either of them capable of."

"Dare you let your mother in to see this show, Bobby Blake?" asked Mrs. Blake, seriously, when the boy's lecture—which he now rattled off glibly enough—was finished.

"There's no 'free list'," said Bobby, his eyes twinkling. "Pa told me to be sure not to let you in unless you paid. And I am sure, Mother, that you will see the handsomest woman in the world, if you want to, when you go inside."

"I declare! you have *me* puzzled, Bobby Blake," said easy going Mrs. Martin.

"Just a minute, please!" urged Bobby, detaining his chum's mother. "You'll have to take your turn. But one person is allowed to enter at a time. This way! this way, kind friends! The line forms on the right. Only a penny—a cent—the smallest coin of the realm. It won't make you and it can't break you!"

The two mothers joined each other afterward outside of Mr. Martin's store. They looked into each other's faces wonderingly.

"What do you think of those boys?" demanded Mrs. Martin. "What will they do next?"

"I—I don't know," admitted Mrs. Blake, with a sigh. "But I *do* fear that they will turn that school they are going to this fall topsy-turvy!"

CHAPTER IX
OFF FOR ROCKLEDGE

Trade at the peep-show was brisk until mid-afternoon. Bobby and Fred had been able to get only a bite of luncheon from the store "in their fists," and had compared notes but seldom.

Bobby's trouser-pockets were borne down with the weight of pennies. In refusing to make change it soon became very hard along Hurley Street to obtain

pennies at all. All the copper money in the town was fast coming the way of the proprietors of the peep-show.

Neither Bobby nor Fred realized this fact—nor what it meant to them—until after the First National and the Old Farmers' Banks had closed their doors for the day. The storekeepers then began running around to borrow copper money, and it was some time before anybody knew what made the scarcity of pennies in the storekeepers' tills!

Meanwhile the financial adventure of Bobby Blake and Fred Martin was prospering.

Bobby suddenly saw the long-armed, white-headed Applethwaite Plunkit standing in the crowd eying him while he delivered his talk. The crowd before the rostrum laughed as usual, and those who had been in to see the show urged their friends to venture likewise.

The white-headed farm boy from Plunkit's Creek was pushing forward to enter the show. Bobby had hoped he would not venture, but when Ap approached, Bobby made up his mind quickly.

"You can't go in, Applethwaite," he said, decidedly. "We don't want you."

"Why not!"

"Never mind why not," said Bobby, firmly, looking straight into the flushed face of the boy who had treated him and Fred so meanly just a week before. "But you can't go in."

"Ain't my cent just as good as anybody else's?"

"Not here it isn't," declared Bobby, who knew very well that if the white head appeared in the tent where the red head was, there would be an explosion! Besides, he did not trust Ap. He believed Ap would do all he could to break up the show after he had seen it.

Ap began to bluster and threaten, but there were too many grown folk around for him to dare attack Bobby. "You jes' wait," he whispered. "I'll fix you some time."

Bobby did not know what Applethwaite might try to do, and when he saw him a little later with a group of boys who were pretty rough looking, he was worried. These boys stood across the street from the show and Bobby was afraid they were waiting for some slack time, when there were no grown folk about, to "rush" the tent.

He called Fred out and told him what he feared and Fred went through and told the biggest clerk in his father's store. The clerks were interested in the two young showmen, for they had been into the tent and were delighted with what they had seen.

The big fellow promised, therefore, to come running and bring the other clerks to help, if the boys whistled for assistance. This plan quieted Bobby's fears,

and he gave his mind to the lecture, and to coaxing the audience into the show, one by one.

Suddenly the young lecturer saw Mr. Priestly in the crowd. He flushed up pretty red when he saw him, for Mr. Priestly was the minister at the church the boys attended, and Bobby thought he was about the finest man in town.

The clergyman was a young man who had made a name for himself in University athletics, and he had the biggest Boys' Club in town. Bobby and Fred were particular friends of the young minister, and for a moment Bobby wondered if Mr. Priestly would approve of the peep-show.

The gentleman's ruddy, smoothly shaven face was a-smile as he listened to Bobby's speech, and his blue eyes twinkled. He was the first to reach the tent entrance when Bobby stepped down from the platform.

"Which wonder am *I* to see, Bobby?" he asked, as he presented his penny to the youthful showman.

"We—we favor the clergy, Mr. Priestly," said Bobby, hesitatingly, yet with an answering smile. "*You* shall see two wonders." Then he called in to his partner: "Hey, Fred!"

"Hullo!" returned the red-haired one, coming to the entrance.

"Here's Mr. Priestly," said Bobby, in a low voice. "I want you to show *him* the strongest man in the world, and the very best man in Clinton!"

"Oh-ho!" cried Mr. Priestly. "*That's* the way of it, eh?" and he pinched Bobby's cheek as he went into the tent. "I believe I can guess your joke, boys."

"Never mind! nobody else has guessed it," chuckled Fred, going before him. "Stand right there, Mr. Priestly."

The oil lamp was in a bracket screwed to a post in the back of the tent. Just where its light shone best was a narrow red curtain. Fred became preternaturally solemn as he stepped forward and laid his hand upon the cords that manipulated the curtain.

"We will show you, Mr. Priestly," he said, "the Strongest Man in the World—and as Bobby says, the very *best* man in Clinton!"

He pulled aside the curtain and Mr. Priestly saw his own reflection in a long mirror that had been borrowed from the Martin attic.

"Well, well!" exclaimed the minister, nodding. "And is this all your show?"

"Anybody who is not satisfied with what he *sees*," returned Fred, chuckling, "can have the entrance fee refunded."

At that the clergyman burst into a great laugh. "You boys! you boys! You certainly have them *there*. One must be dissatisfied with himself to ask for the return of his penny. I—I am not altogether sure that this doesn't smack of a swindle; but it certainly *is* smart. You should show your own face in the glass, Fred, when the younger victims come in to see the Smartest Boy in the World."

"No, sir," grinned Fred. "Every fellow that comes in is better satisfied to see his own reflection, I reckon."

The clergyman went out, laughing. That the joke had kept up all day was the wonder of it. The audience became smaller as supper time drew near.

Then came Mr. Harrod, who kept the variety and ice cream store down the street. "Say," he said to Bobby. "You boys must have cornered all the pennies in town. I've got to have some. I'll give you a dollar bill for ninety cents, Bobby Blake."

"All right, sir," cried Bobby. "Is a dollar's worth all you want? I'll send them down to your store in a few moments."

"Send two dollars' worth," returned Mr. Harrod, hurrying away.

"Hi, Betty Martin!" shouted Bobby to Fred's "next oldest sister," who was on the fringe of the crowd. "Come here and count pennies—do, please!"

"Hi Betty Martin" stuck out her tongue promptly and did not stir. "Call me by my proper name, Mister Smartie!" she said, sharply.

"Oh, me, oh, my! I beg your pardon," laughed Bobby. "Miss Elizabeth Martin, will you please count some of these pennies and roll them into papers—right there on the box, please?"

"All right," said Betty, who did not like to be called after any Mother Goose character.

She was a bright girl and she counted the pennies correctly into piles of thirty, rolled them up that way, carried six of the rolls down to the variety store, and brought back a two dollar bill.

Then Mr. Martin needed copper money, and Betty counted a dollars' worth out for him—at the rate of exchange established by Mr. Harrod.

"Wow, Bobby!" murmured Fred, at the door of the tent. "We get them coming and going, don't we? Ten cents on the dollar, too! We're getting rich."

But the peep-show had had its run. Not many could be coaxed in after supper, and the boys were tired, too. They had not eaten a proper meal all day, and Mr. Martin advised them to shut up shop.

They took down the signs, put out the lamp, and went into the back room of the grocery to count the receipts. The amount was far beyond their expectations, and naturally Bobby and Fred were delighted.

"It takes you to think up the bright ideas, chum," said Fred, admiringly.

But Bobby looked thoughtful. "I wonder if Mr. Priestly thought it was just right?" he murmured. "I suppose we *did* fool them all," and he sighed.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Fred. "They didn't have to be fooled if they didn't want to. And even Prissy Craven didn't come back for her penny, did she?"

Only a few days more before they would start for Rockledge School. The chums bought the bats and mask and other things they craved. They packed their

trunks two or three times over. They carried the books they liked best, and many treasures for which their troubled mothers could see no reason whatsoever.

"Now, this can of pins and nails, Bobby," urged Mrs. Blake, helplessly. "What *possible* good can they be? I do not see how I am to get your clothing into the trunk."

"Aw—Mother!" gasped Bobby. "Don't throw them away. A fellow never can tell when he'll want a pin—or a nail—or a button—or something. Never mind putting in so many stockings. Leave the can—do, Mother!"

All the Clinton boys who had been the chums' particular associates at school were greatly interested in what they termed Bobby's and Fred's "luck." They all had to be told, over and over again, of the expected wonders of Rockledge School.

"And I bet you and Fred turn things upside down there," said "Scat" Monroe, with an envious sigh.

"I bet we don't!" responded Bobby, quickly. "Dr. Raymond is awfully strict, they say. We'll have to walk a chalk line."

"Well, if Fred Martin ever walks a chalk-line," scoffed another of the fellows, "it'll be a mighty crooked one!"

However, the night before the boys were to start for Rockledge, the good natured groceryman gave his son a long talk, and Fred went to bed feeling pretty solemn. For the first time, he began to realize that he was not going away to boarding school merely for the fun there was to be got out of it!

"You haven't made much of a mark for yourself in the Clinton Public School, Frederick," said Mr. Martin, sternly; "but I do not believe that is because you are either a dunce, or stubborn. You have been frittering away your opportunities.

"I am tired of seeing your name at the foot of your class roster—or near it. Inattention is your failing. You are going where they make boys attend. And if you do not work, and keep up with your mates, you will be sent home. Do you understand that?

"And if you are sent home, you shall be sent to another school where you'll have very little fun at all for the rest of your life. I mean the School of Hard Experience!

"You shall be set to work in my store half of each day, like a poor man's son, and go to the public school the other half day, and your name will be on the truant officer's list."

"And I guess he meant it," said Fred to Bobby the next morning. "Father doesn't often scold, but he was mad at me for being so low in my classes last term."

The boys started for the railroad station with Mr. Blake, gayly enough,

however. When Bobby had parted from his mother, he had to swallow a big lump in his throat, and he hugged her around the neck *hard* for a minute. But he had forced back the tears by the time they got to the Martins' house.

There the other children were all out on the front porch to bid their brother and Bobby good-by. "Hi Betty Martin" threw an old shoe after them.

"For luck," she said. "That's what they do when folks get married."

"But Bobby and I aren't getting married," complained Fred, rubbing his right ear where the shoe had landed. "And, anyway, no girl's got a right to shut her eyes tight and throw an old boot like *that.* How'd you know you wouldn't do some damage?"

"That's the luck of it," chuckled Bobby. "It's lucky she didn't hurt you worse."

CHAPTER X
NEW SURROUNDINGS

The boys were so eagerly looking ahead that they scarcely gave a backward glance at Clinton, as the train rolled away. Mr. Blake had his paper and a whole seat to himself. Bobby and Fred occupied a seat ahead of him, and laughed and chattered as they pleased.

"This is only Friday," said Fred, "and classes don't begin at Rockledge until Monday. We'll have two whole days to get acquainted in. Do you s'pose there will be some of the boys at the Rockledge station to meet us?"

"And a brass band, too, maybe—eh?" chuckled Bobby. "I guess nobody but the principal of the school knows we're coming, Fred. We'll be new boys, and the bigger fellows will boss us around at first."

"Huh! they can't boss *me* if I don't want to be bossed," declared the pugnacious Fred.

"Don't you begin to talk that way," advised his chum. "We'll have to be pretty small potatoes at first."

"I don't see why," grumbled Fred.

"You'll find out. My father went to a boarding school when he was a boy, and he told me," Bobby explained.

They did not have to wait until reaching Rockledge to learn something about the temper of the boys with whom they would be associated. At Cambwell

several students got aboard and came into their car. They were all older than Bobby and Fred, and they were very noisy and self-assertive.

They sang, and joked together in the seats up front. Finally they spied the two boys from Clinton sitting in the middle of the car.

"Hullo!" exclaimed a tall, thin, yellow-haired boy who seemed to be a leader in the fun. "There's a couple of kids who look as though they'd just left home and mamma. Bet they're going with us."

One of the other boys said something in a low tone, and then he and the yellow-haired one got up and came down the aisle.

"Say!" said the second boy, who was short and stocky and squinted his eyes up in a funny way when he talked. "Goin' to school, sonnies?"

"Yes, we are," said Fred, sharply.

"Rockledge or Belden?"

"Rockledge, if you please," said Bobby, politely.

"Huh!" said the tall boy, grinning. "I don't know whether it pleases us any to have you go to Rockledge. But it's lucky you're not bound for Belden."

"Why?" asked Fred.

"We'd have to chuck your hats out of the window. We don't allow any Belden boys to ride in this train with their hats on."

"And do the Belden boys throw the Rockledge boys' hats out of the window?" asked Bobby, innocently enough.

"If they're able. But they ain't. You sure you are going to Rockledge?"

"You can wait till we get off the train and then find out whether we tell the truth, or not," said Fred, rather crossly.

"Say, young fellow! we don't like fresh fish at Rockledge," warned the yellow-haired boy. "If you're going there, you want to walk Turkey."

Bobby pinched Fred warningly, and both the chums remained silent.

"I never did like the looks of red hair, anyway—did you, Bill?" suggested the squinting chap, grinning.

"No. We'll have to dye it for him," said the yellow-haired boy. "What color do you prefer instead of red?" he asked Fred Martin.

"Well, I wouldn't like it to be straw-colored," responded Fred, promptly, and with a meaning glance at his interrogator's hair. "Any other will suit me better."

The yellow-haired boy flushed and his pale eyes sparkled. Fred stared back at him quite boldly, for the ten year old was no coward, whatever else he might be.

"Fresh fish—just as I told you," muttered the other strange boy, scowling and squinting at the same time. He was a very ugly boy when he did this. "Both of them."

"Well!" began Bill, and then stopped.

The train had halted at another station the moment before. Somebody entered the front door of the car, and at once the group of boys going to Rockledge School set up a shout.

"Hi, Barry!"

"See who's come in with the tide! Hey, Captain!"

"Hullo, Barry Gray!"

"Captain! Captain! How-de-do!"

Even the yellow-haired boy and his comrade turned to look. Bobby and Fred saw a handsome, brown haired fellow coming down the aisle. He was fourteen or older. He carried a light overcoat over his arm and he was very well dressed.

He tossed his coat and bag into one of the racks, and began shaking hands. Everybody seemed glad to see him. As he quickly glanced down the aisle his look seemed to quell Bill and the squinting boy.

"He's going to butt in, of course," growled the first named.

"Sure. Feels his oats—"

The fellow with the squint said no more. The handsome fellow, whose name seemed to be Barry Gray, came down the aisle almost at once.

"Hullo, Bill Bronson," he said, with some sharpness. "Up to your usual tricks?"

"It isn't any business of yours, Barry, what Jack and I do," growled the yellow-haired boy.

"I'll make it my business, then," said Barry Gray, laughing. Then he turned directly to Bobby and Fred.

"You kids going to Rockledge this term?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Bobby, quickly.

Barry Gray was not as tall as Bill Bronson, and perhaps not as old, but he evidently was not afraid of either of the bullies.

"Where are you from?"

"Clinton, sir," pronounced Bobby, again taking the lead.

"What's your name—and your chum's?" asked Barry.

"My name is Bob Blake, and this is Fred Martin," said Bobby.

"Glad to know you," said the older boy, shaking hands with both of them, and even Fred began to forgive him for calling them "kids."

"Ever been to school before?" asked Barry.

"Not to boarding school," Fred said.

"Come on up and I'll introduce you to the other fellows. Don't mind Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks, here," added Barry Gray, grinning at the two retiring bullies. "If they bother you much, come to me. I'm captain of the school this year, and Dr. Raymond expects me to keep all of the fellows straight. Being a

captain is like being a monitor. You understand!"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Bobby.

"And you needn't 'sir' me so much," said the kindly captain. "Come on, now—"

Bobby turned to ask permission of his father. Barry at once saw that Mr. Blake was with the chums from Clinton.

"Who's this, Bob? Your father, or Fred's?"

"This is my father," said Bobby, politely.

The frank school captain stepped forward and offered his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Blake," he said. "You trust the boys with me. I'll see that they get in right with the other fellows, and that they're not put upon too much."

"I'm sure of it," said Mr. Blake, smiling. "I shall feel better about leaving Bobby and Fred at Rockledge, knowing that you will have an eye on them."

"Oh, you can be easy about them," said Captain Gray who, despite his natural conceit, seemed a very nice fellow. "Of course, they'll have to take a few hard knocks, and the boys will 'run' them some. But they sha'n't be hurt."

"Huh!" muttered Fred. "I guess we can take care of ourselves."

Barry looked down at him and grinned. "Yes, I see you own red hair," he observed, and Mr. Blake laughed outright.

Fred followed his chum and Barry Gray up the aisle with rather a lagging step. He felt his own importance considerably, and he did not see why he should be as respectful as Bobby was to the captain of Rockledge School.

In a very few minutes Master Martin felt better. The other boys were a lot more friendly than Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks, who the chums learned later, were two of the most troublesome boys at the school. Not many of the others liked the bullies.

There were some fellows quite as young as Bobby and Fred, but none of them were "greenies," like the chums from Clinton.

"Sure you'll have to be hazed!" explained a fat, genial boy, named Perry Wise—called "Pee Wee" because of his initials and his size. "Every fellow has to, that comes to the school. But Barrymore Gray won't let them go too far. He's a nice fellow, he is."

"I think he is fine," said Bobby, enthusiastically.

"He's pretty fresh, I guess," grumbled Fred.

"We don't call the captain of the school fresh," said Pee Wee. "He has a right to boss us. The Doctor lets him. Next to the teachers, Barry's got more to say about things in the school than anybody else."

This did not please Master Martin much. He wanted to be of some importance himself, and he had never been used to giving in to other boys, unless it was to Bobby Blake.

However, there was so much to hear, and so many new people to get acquainted with that Fred had little time to worry about Barry Gray. The chums found the time passing so quickly that they were surprised when the train slowed down and the brakeman shouted, "All out for Rockledge!"

There was no crowd of boys and no band. Rockledge was a busy town, with oak-shaded streets, great bowlders thrusting their heads out of the vacant lots, and much blasting going on where new cellars were being excavated.

There was an electric car line through the middle of High Street, which turned off at the shore of the lake (they learned this afterward) and went as far as Belden.

Bobby and Fred, with Mr. Blake, took a car on this line and crossed the railroad, finally bringing up within sight of the grounds of Rockledge School.

It was not a large school, and there were only four buildings, including the gate-keeper's cottage where all of the outside servants slept. It had once been a fine private estate, and Dr. Raymond had made of it a most attractive and homelike institution.

The doctor and his family, and his chief assistant, lived in a handsome house connected with the main building of the school by a long, roofed portico. This last building was of brick and sandstone, and held classrooms, dining-rooms, the kitchen department in one end of the basement, and a fine gymnasium in the other.

In the upper stories were a hall, two large dormitories in each of which were beds for twenty boys, and five small dormitories for two boys each. The ten highest scholars occupied these small rooms, and from them was chosen the captain of the school each June.

The junior teachers slept in this big building, too.

There were beautiful lawns, fine shrubs, winding, shaded walks, and a large campus on which were a baseball diamond, a football field, and courts for tennis, basket-ball, and other games.

These facts Bobby and Fred gradually absorbed. At first they were too round-eyed to appreciate much but the fact that the place seemed large, and that there positively was an immense number of boys! Fifty boys seemed to have swelled to a hundred and fifty—and they all stared at the newcomers.

Mr. Blake went immediately to the doctor's study, taking Bobby and Fred with him. Dr. Raymond was a tall, big-boned man, wearing very loose garments and a collar a full size too large. The big doctor had bushy side-whiskers, and his chin and lip were very closely shaved. He had white, big teeth, and he showed them all when he smiled.

His eyes were kindly, and wrinkles appeared around them when he smiled, in a most engaging fashion. When he shook hands with Bobby and Fred, some

magnetic feeling passed from the big man to the boys, so that the latter decided on the instant that they liked Dr. Raymond!

"Manly little fellows—both," said the doctor, to Mr. Blake, as the two gentlemen walked toward the big windows at the end of the room, leaving Bobby and Fred marooned, like two castaway sailors, on a desert isle of rug near the door.

The doctor's study was enormously long, with a high ceiling, and lined with books, save where a fireplace broke into the bookshelves on one side. There was a very large flat-topped desk, too, several deep chairs, and a number of smaller tables at which the older boys sometimes did their lessons.

"You'll find them just as full of fun and mischief as a couple of chestnuts are of meat," said Mr. Blake, with a chuckle. "But I don't think there is a mean trait in either of them. My boy has had, we think, rather a good influence over Freddie Martin. The latter's red hair is apt to get him into trouble."

"I understand," said the doctor, nodding and smiling. "I try to leave the boys much to themselves in the matter of deportment. The bigger boys are supposed to set the standard of morals, and I am glad to say that I have never yet had occasion to be sorry for beginning that way.

"We run Rockledge School on honor, sir. Every year—in June—we present to the boy who earns it, a gold medal stating that for the past year he has shown himself to be worthy of distinction above his fellows in a strictly honorable way.

"This medal is not given for scholarship—yet none but a fairly studious boy may earn it. It is not given for deportment strictly—though no boy who is not gentlemanly and of manly bearing and action, can win it. The medal is not given for mere popularity, for a boy may sometimes be popular with his fellows, without having many of the fundamental virtues of character which we hope to see in our boys.

"The boy who won it last year, and is gone from us now, stood ninth in his class only, and was not much of an athlete—which latter tells mightily among the boys themselves, you know. Yet my teachers and myself, as well as the school, were practically unanimous in the selection of Tommy Wardwell as the recipient of the Medal of Honor."

The gentlemen talked some few minutes longer. Then Mr. Blake came to bid Bobby and Fred good-by. He shook hands gravely with his own son and then took Fred's hand.

"You've got some trouble, some fun, and a lot of work before you, Master Fred," he said. "I expect your father and mother will be anxiously waiting for good reports about you."

Then he looked at Bobby again. That youngster was having great difficulty in "holding in." His father was going away—and going to a far country. Thou-

sands of miles would separate them before they would meet again.

"You got anything to say to me, Bobs?" asked 'Mr. Blake, briskly.

"Ye—yes, sir!" gasped Bobby. "I—I got to kiss you before you go, Pa!" and he flung his arms around Mr. Blake's neck and for a minute was a baby again.

He knew that Fred would think such a show of emotion beneath him, and he saw the doctor looking at him curiously. Just the same, Bobby Blake was glad—oh, how glad!—many and many a time thereafter that he had bade his father good-by in just this way.

CHAPTER XI
GETTING ACQUAINTED

Pee Wee was the boy who first "took up" the chums from Clinton. The fat boy sat on the steps of the doctor's house, idly whistling and twiddling his fingers when Bobby and Fred came out. Perry Wise never stood when he could sit, and never walked when he could stand, and never ran when walking would get him to his goal just as well. He was the picture of peace just now.

"Hello, fellows!" he said.

"Hello!" returned Bobby.

"Is the Old Doc goin' to let you stay?" grinned the fat boy.

"Huh! why shouldn't he?" demanded Fred, quick to take offense.

"Cause you're so terrible green," chuckled Pee Wee. "They let the sheep loose sometimes to crop the lawn, and they might eat you."

"Aw—you're too smart," said the abashed Fred.

Bobby only laughed. He was glad to have his mind taken up by something beside the fact of his father's going away.

"Say!" said Pee Wee, cordially. "Don't you want to look over the place?"

"We'd be very glad to," admitted Bobby.

Pee Wee made no effort to rise at first. He merely bawled after another boy who was some distance away:

"Hey, Purdy! Don't you want to beau the greenhorns around?"

Fred Martin doubled his fist again and scowled at the placid fat boy, but Bobby warned him by a shake of the head. The boy addressed, who was smaller than Pee Wee, but who was well out of his reach, turned and made a face at the fat boy, saying:

"Do your own work, Fatty. Don't try to put it off on me."

Pee Wee was quite unmoved by this rough retort. He looked around and hailed another lad:

"Jimmy Ailshine! come on and show the newsies all the lions, will you?"

"For why?" demanded the boy addressed.

"Aw—well—I have a stone bruise," explained Pee Wee, hesitatingly.

"You must have it from sitting so much, then," declared Jimmy, with a loud laugh. "You better take them around yourself, or the captain will be after you."

"You needn't show us about if it is very, very painful," suggested Bobby, beginning to understand the fat boy now.

"Guess we can find our way around alone," grunted Fred.

"Aw well! we won't row about it," said Pee Wee, getting up slowly. "But that stone bruise—"

However, the trouble in question seemed, later, to be of a shifting nature, for first Pee Wee favored his right foot and then his left.

It must be confessed that Perry Wise was a very lazy boy, but he was a good natured one, and when once the exploration party was started, he played the part of show-master very well indeed.

They went through the school rooms and up to the dormitories first. In the second dormitory, where the smaller boys slept, in a pair of twin beds in one corner, Bobby and Fred were billeted.

"And no pillow fights, or other ructions, after 'lights out,' unless you ask the captain first," warned Pee Wee.

"Seems to me this captain has a lot to say around here," growled Fred.

"You bet he has. And what he says he means. And it's not healthy for anybody to do a thing when he says '*don't*.'"

"Why not?" queried Master Fred.

Pee Wee grinned. "You try it if you like," he said. "Then you'll find out. Dr. Raymond says experience is the surest, if not the best, teacher."

The dormitory was a big, light room, cheerfully furnished, with a locker beside each bed for the boy's clothes and personal possessions, and a chair at the head of the bed.

That wall-space over the heads of the beds was considered the private possession of each couple, for the flaunting of banners, photographs, strings of birds-eggs, shells, pine-cone frames, and a hundred other objects of virtu dear to boyish hearts.

"You see, we can hang up a lot of stuff, too, when our trunks come," whispered Fred to Bobby, pointing to the blank spaces over their beds, lettered only with the names: "Blake" and "Martin."

"You can see clear across the lake from the window here," drawled Pee Wee,

lolling on a sill.

The chums came to see. Lake Monatook was spread before them—a beautiful, oval sheet of water, with steep, wooded banks in the east, and sloping yellow beaches of sand at the other end.

Where the Rockledge School stood, a steep sandstone cliff dropped right down to a narrow beach, more than fifty feet below. A strong, two-railed fence guarded the brink of this cliff the entire width of the school premises, save where the stairs led down to the boat-house.

In the middle of the lake were several small islands, likewise wooded. The lake was quite ten miles long, and half as wide in its broadest part.

Across from Rockledge School was the village of Belden. On a high bluff over there the new boys saw several red brick buildings among the trees.

"That's Belden School," explained Pee Wee. "We have to beat them at football this fall. We did them up at baseball in the spring. They're a mean set of fellows anyway," added the fat boy. "Once they came across here and stole all our boats. We'll have to get square with them for that, some time."

"Come on," said Fred, who had begun to enjoy pushing the fat boy, now—knowing that he had been set the task of showing them around—and was determined to keep their guide up to the mark. "We don't want to stay here till bedtime, do we?"

"Aw-right," returned Pee Wee, with a groan. "That's my bed next to yours, Blake. Mouser Pryde is chummed on me this year. We call him Mouser because he brought two white mice with him to school when he first came.

"Shiner and Harry Moore have the beds on your other side. Shiner's the chap you saw down stairs—Jimmy Ailshine. He's a good fellow, but awfully lazy," remarked the fat boy, with a sigh.

"What do you call yourself?" demanded Fred, rather impolitely.

"Oh, *me*? I'm not well—honest. And that stone bruise—"

It was then he began to favor the other foot, and Bobby giggled. Pee Wee looked at him solemnly. "What are you laughing at?" he asked.

Bobby pointed out that the stone bruise seemed to have shifted.

"Aw, well! it hurts so bad I feel it in both feet," returned the fat boy, grinning. "Come on."

They went down to the gymnasium. It was a dandy! Bobby and Fred saw that it was a whole lot better than the one Mr. Priestly had for his Boys' Club in the Church House at home.

Then they inspected the outside courts, the ball field, and the cinder track—which was an oval, on the very verge of the cliff.

They met boys everywhere, and Pee Wee told them the names of some of them, while a few of about their own age stopped to speak to Bobby and Fred.

Jack Jinks and the yellow-haired youth, Bill Bronson, came up to the trio of smaller boys as they stood by the railing that defended the cliff's brink.

"So you're showing the greenies around, are you, Fatty?" proposed Jack. "Shown them the stake where the Old Doctor ties up fresh kids and gives them nine and thirty lashes if they as much as whisper in class?"

"Yes," said Pee Wee, nodding. "And I showed them the straps there where *you* were tied up last term, Jinksey."

"Aw—smart, aren't you?" snarled the squint-eyed boy, while Bill Bronson grinned.

"This red-headed chap's going to be a favorite—I can see that," said Bill, rolling the cap on Fred's head with one hand, but pressing hard enough to hurt.

"Let go of me!" cried Fred, hotly, jerking away.

"Don't you get too presumptuous, sonny," advised the yellow-haired youth. "There's lots of chance for you to get into trouble here."

"If I get into trouble with *you*," snapped Fred, "it won't all be on one side."

"Keep still, Fred!" said Bobby. "Let's come on away," and he tugged at his chum's sleeve.

"That's a pretty fresh kid, too," said Jack, eyeing Bobby with disfavor.

But the trio of younger boys withdrew. "Those fellows," said Pee Wee, "are always picking on fellows they think they can lick. If you don't toady to them, they'll treat you awfully mean!"

"I won't toady to anybody—not even to that captain," declared Fred.

"What! Barry Gray?" cried Pee Wee, in surprise.

"Yes. I don't like him—much," confessed the belligerent Fred.

"You'll be dreadfully lonesome, then," chuckled the fat boy. "For 'most every fellow in the school likes Barry. He's captain of the baseball team, and center in the football team. He can do anything, Barry can. And the Old Doctor thinks he is about right. He was next choice after Tommy Wardwell last year for the Medal of Honor, and he'll likely get it this year."

"What's the Medal of Honor?" asked Fred, curiously.

Pee Wee grinned. "It's something that no red-headed boy ever won," he declared, mysteriously.

CHAPTER XII
IN THE DORMITORY

By supper time Bobby and Fred knew ten boys to speak to—without counting Jack Jinks, Bill Bronson, and the school captain, Barrymore Gray. The latter they did not see at all again until they beheld him sitting at the doctor's right hand at the head of the "upper table," as they soon learned to call the one around which the head scholars and the assistant master sat with Dr. Raymond. The junior teachers sat at the heads of the other tables and kept order.

Rockledge was divided into the Upper School and the Lower School. Bobby and Fred would of course be in the Lower, but just how they would be placed in classes they would not know until the real business of the school opened on Monday.

The supper was plentiful, but plain. Bobby missed Meena's sweet cakes and hot tea-biscuit, and Fred whispered that there was hayseed in the strawberry jam, so he knew it was not "home made."

Pee Wee sat across the table from them and ate steadily, showing beyond peradventure that his plumpness arose from a very natural cause!

Until eight o'clock the boys were allowed to frolic outside as they wished, no tasks being set them as yet. Bobby noticed that one of the junior teachers was always within sight, while Captain Barry Gray, and some of the older fellows, were grouped on the main steps of the dormitory building, swapping vacation experiences.

Bobby noticed that Barry was always very well dressed—indeed, richly dressed, beside many of the boys—so he made up his mind that the school captain must come from a wealthy home.

Bill Bronson jingled money in his pockets and wore a handsome gold watch and a diamond pin in his tie. Most of the smaller boys, however, were no better dressed than Bobby and Fred.

Taken altogether, the boys who appeared at the supper table were a bright and interesting looking crowd. Bobby was sure he was going to be happy here, and Fred was already on terms of intimacy with half a dozen of the chaps about their own age.

The boys from Clinton chanced to be the only new ones to enter Rockledge this semester. There was usually a long waiting list, but Mr. Martin's influence had gained Bobby the chance to attend with Fred, because the two boys were chums.

Before they left the supper table the doctor arose and walked down the line of smaller tables and shook hands with each boy, called him by name, and welcomed him again to the school.

To some he said a word of warning, but all in a cheerful way that took the sting out of the admonition. He evidently knew the failings of each boy, and had studied their characters carefully.

When he came to Bobby and Fred he placed a hand on each boy's shoulder and said, so that all the school could hear:

"Our two new friends. I hope all of you will welcome them kindly. Make them feel at home."

This was before the evening run outside. Bobby and Fred were taken into a noisy game of "relievo," and the great clock in the tower chiming eight was all that brought the fun to a close.

The students filed into the library and general study-room on the first floor of the main building. For an hour every night the boys were allowed to read or play quiet games here. It was a cheerful, bright room, with rugs on the floor, and pretty hangings, and comfortable chairs. Although one of the teachers was always present, there was a feeling of freedom among the boys, and they could talk or read, as they pleased—just so they were not noisy.

When nine struck in the tower, they filed upstairs to bed. There was plenty of time to undress and prepare for bed before the half hour struck. Bobby and Fred found that the older boys in the small rooms were allowed to remain up a half hour longer than those occupying the big dormitories.

Captain Gray came in and advised the small boys to lay their clothing carefully on their chairs as they removed the garments.

"Part of the fire drill, you know," he said, cheerfully. "Coat and vest over the back of the chair. Pants folded nicely and laid across the back, too. Here, Pee Wee! None of that! Shake out your stockings and hang them on the chair-round. Shoes each side of the chair as you take them off—right and left. That's it."

He walked up and down between the rows of beds. He told Bobby and Fred just how to distribute the remainder of their garments so that they would be easily at hand if there came an alarm.

"Of course, there's no danger, and there are plenty of fire escapes and all that," said the big boy, cheerfully. "But the Old Doctor insists upon our being ready for any emergency. Some night you'll be waked up by the fire bell and find drill is called. Want to be ready for it."

Then he glanced again at Fred's chair. "Hi, Ginger!" he said. "Put your boots straight. Your left one's on your right side, and vice versa."

There was a good deal of fun at Fred's expense when Barry had gone. "Hi, Ginger!" resounded from all parts of the room; Fred Martin had won a distinctive nickname on the spot, and he didn't like it much.

"I knew I shouldn't like that big fellow," he confessed to Bobby. "And I'll lick some of these kids yet, if they keep on calling me Ginger."

"No, you won't," declared Bobby. "You know you won't. They all have nicknames, too. Yours is no worse than 'Pee Wee,' or 'Shiner,' or 'Buck,' or 'Skeets.' They'll stick me with one yet."

"But 'Ginger'—"

"Aw, stop your kicking," advised his chum. "It won't get you anywhere."

There was still a buzz of voices as the twenty boys finished getting ready for bed. The door opened and Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks, from their room across the hall, looked in.

"Sleep with an eye open, you kids," Bill ordered, in a shrill whisper. "Something doing by and by."

"Oh, what, Bill?" cried Purdy, near the door.

"Somebody's got to ride the goat," chuckled the squint-eyed boy, looking over his chum's shoulder.

At that several of the others looked at Bobby and Fred, and chuckled. The two Clinton boys did not hear this by-play. Bill and his chum looked over at the newcomers with wide grins.

Just at this moment Bobby was completely ready for bed and he dropped upon his knees before his chair at the head of the bed and proceeded to say his prayers as he always did at home. Fred, after a moment's hesitation, followed suit.

Instantly a hush fell upon the room. The boys who had been gabbling together stopped because they saw the facial expression of those boys grouped at the doorway. Everybody turned to look at the corner occupied by the chums from Clinton.

The silence was but for a moment. Then Bill laughed and took one long stride to the nearest bed. He snatched up a pillow and sent it with unerring aim and considerable force at the back of Bobby's head.

The pillow reached its mark, and Bobby jumped. But he did not rise until his prayer was completed. A second pillow came his way, while Jack and some of the other spectators laughed immoderately.

Fred Martin jumped up with an angry exclamation. Perhaps he did not finish his prayer at all. He grabbed one of the pillows which had struck his chum and made for Bill Bronson at the other end of the room.

"You big bully!" he exclaimed, all the rage which he had bottled up that day boiling over in an instant, "You big bully! Can't you leave a peaceable fellow alone?"

He slammed the yellow-haired youth over the head, and struck him so hard that the pillow-case burst and the feathers began to fly. Bill uttered a roar of rage, and tried to seize him.

"Don't, Fred! Stop! Stop!" called Bobby, from the other end of the room.

Fred Martin had gone too far to stop now. He expected to take a thrashing for his boldness, but meanwhile he was filling Bronson's eyes and mouth with feathers.

Jack Jinks put out his foot and tripped the smaller boy up. Fred fell with Bill on top of him. The bigger boy began to use his fists.

"No fair! Let him up, Bill!" cried two or three.

"Shut up!" ordered Jack, putting his back against the closed door. "You kids that holler will get all that's coming to you."

Bobby came running up the room to help his chum, and at just that instant the door knob was turned and the door was burst in, sending Jack sliding half way across the room.

"Cheese it!" squealed Pee Wee, jumping into bed with his trousers on.

But it was only Barry Gray who appeared.

"Hello! Can't keep quiet the first night, eh?" demanded the captain. "What you doing in here, Jack?"

Then he saw Bill Bronson on top of the struggling Fred. Bill had got in one savage punch and there was blood flowing from Fred's nose upon the burst pillow.

Captain Gray seized Bill by the back of his collar and with both hands jerked him to his feet. Bill squealed like a rat, thinking the Old Doctor himself had come to Fred's rescue.

"Ow! Ow! Ouch!" he squealed. "Aw—*you*! Let me alone, Barry Gray. This isn't any of your business."

"All right. I'll pass it up to the teachers if you say so," snapped the captain.

"Aw—well—"

"Hold on!" commanded Barry, stepping in front of Jack who was sneaking out of the room "*You're* in this, too."

"No, I'm not," said Jack.

"You were holding the door," said Barry. "Stop here till we hear what's the trouble."

Half a dozen shrill voices tried to tell him at once. But Barry pointed at Fred. "*You* tell," he said.

"I hit him with the pillow," growled Fred, ungraciously enough.

Barry glanced down the room toward Fred's bed. "It isn't your pillow," he said. "Did he shuck the pillow at you first?"

"No," said Fred, determined not to "snitch."

But Howell Purdy didn't feel that way about it. He said to the captain:

"Bill Bronson began it. He fired a couple of pillows at Bobby Blake when Bobby was saying his prayers. Then Fred went for him."

Barry looked from Fred's flushed and bloody face to Bobby's pale one. He said nothing for a moment to either of them, but turned on Bill Bronson.

"You know the rules. You had no business in this dormitory—neither you nor Jack."

"I suppose you'll tell on us," snarled Bill. "Of course! I knew what a tattletale you'd be just as soon as the Old Doc appointed you captain last June. He did it so that he'd be sure to have somebody to run to him with every little thing."

"Maybe," returned Barry, flushing. "But he doesn't call it a little thing for two boys to fight in a dormitory."

"Yah!" snarled Bill.

"Give me a fair chance and I'll fight him anywhere!" declared the belligerent Fred, sopping the blood with a handkerchief that Bobby had brought him.

"You are one plucky kid," said Barry, quickly. "But if there has got to be a fight, it must be between two fellows more evenly matched. I leave it to the room: Is a fight fair between Bronson and Martin!"

"No!" cried the boys in chorus.

"But Bill Bronson started the fight, so he ought to be accommodated," Captain Gray said. "Isn't that right?"

Some of the boys giggled. Fred muttered: "Let me fight him. I'm not afraid."

"If Bill doesn't want me to go to the Doctor with this, he'll have to abide by my decision, won't he?" proceeded Barry, his eyes twinkling.

"Sure!" cried the crowd, led by Pee Wee, now delighted by what they saw was coming.

"Aw, you're too fresh," grumbled the bully.

"That's not the question," said Barry. "Do you agree?"

"To what?"

"To have me set the punishment for this infraction of the rules, instead of putting it up to the Old Doctor?"

"Well!"

"You, too, Jack?" demanded Barry of the squinting fellow.

"Yes," muttered the latter.

"All right. Then I announce that as Bill wants to fight, he shall be accommodated. Jack is a good match for him. Isn't that so, boys?"

There was a storm of giggling. The two bullies looked at each other and grinned. The idea of them fighting each other was preposterous—or, so it seemed.

"And for fear," said the captain, his eyes twinkling, "that they won't play fair, if they are matched in a regular fight, we'll make it a 'poguey fight' tomorrow morning at nine—in the gym. Now, you two fellows run to your rooms—and show up at nine in the gym, or I'll come after you."

He drove the bullies out of the room before him, and then went himself. There was a subdued whispering and giggling all over the dormitory.

"What's a 'poguey fight'?" demanded Bobby, of Pee Wee, in some alarm.

The fat boy was rocking himself to and fro on the bed in huge delight, and could scarcely answer for laughing.

"You wait and see," he finally chuckled, "It's more fun than the Kilkenny cats!"

CHAPTER XIII
THE POGUEY FIGHT

Fred staunched his bleeding nose at the basin in the corner, and then exchanged pillows with Howell Purdy. Fred slept on the burst one.

"I'll get into trouble anyway over this," Fred growled in Bobby's ear. "I wish I could have hit that mean bully just once with something hard."

Bobby hadn't the heart to scold. Fred had attacked a much bigger boy than himself just because that bully had flung a pillow at Fred's chum. That was the impulsive way of Fred Martin. Bobby knew that his chum was going to have a hard row to hoe here at Rockledge, unless he learned to control his temper.

Bobby Blake had some difficulty in getting to sleep that night—and that was not usually the case with him. The plan of Bill and Jack to haze the two newcomers to Rockledge had evidently been stopped. The dormitory was not disturbed until morning, save that once in the night Pee Wee had a nightmare and groaned and fought, until the next fellow to him punched him and woke him up.

"Wow!" said the fat boy, "I thought I was up in a balloon and they wanted to put me out instead of dropping sandbags."

"Don't eat so much at supper; then you won't dream such stuff," growled Mouser Pryde, punching his pillow and settling down again.

The rising bell at half past six got everybody but Pee Wee out of bed. Mouser pulled off the bed clothes, but that did not start the fat boy, and finally, when the others were half dressed, Mouser tiptoed over from the basins with a glass of water, and let the drops trickle down, one by one, upon Perry's fat neck.

"Ow! ow! ouch!" bawled Pee Wee. "Something's sprung a leak. Let me up before I drown!"

He struck the floor before he was half awake and landed in his bare feet upon a set of "jacks" that Shiner had conveniently dropped on the rug.

"Ow! what are these things? Wow! I'll bet I can't walk at all now."

"They hurt worse than the stone bruise, eh?" asked Bobby, grinning.

"These fellows are always playing jokes on me," grumbled Pee Wee. "And

I never do a living thing to hurt them."

The fat boy *was* a tempting subject for a joke, and he probably was the butt more often than anybody else.

While they were dressing, Fred almost got in a fight with Shiner because the latter called him "Ginger." Bobby took his chum aside.

"Now, Fred, that name's bound to stick," he said. "What's the use of getting mad at it? They all like you; no use in making enemies. Take it laughingly."

"That's because of Smartie Gray," grumbled Fred. "*He* called me 'Ginger' first."

"That isn't as bad as 'Bricktop'," suggested Bobby, smiling. "You ought to be glad it's no worse. I expect they'll find a nickname for me pretty soon, that will be a corker!"

At seven the bell rang again and they all marched down to breakfast. Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks scowled at Bobby and Fred on the stairs, but the captain was near and they did not say a word to the chums.

Before the boys separated, the first master, Mr. Leith, said:

"Young gentlemen: Doctor Raymond will see you all in the hall at eleven. Nobody is to be out of bounds this morning. Be prompt at eleven, remember. You are excused."

Bobby thought Mr. Leith a very grim and serious gentleman indeed.

As the smaller boys scurried out of the hall to the porch, they found a steady stream of boys going down the basement steps to the gymnasium. Howell Purdy and Shiner were set, one on either side of the doorway, where they whispered to those who passed:

"Poguey fight in the gym at nine. Don't forget the poguey fight."

"What *is* that, Shiner?" asked Bobby.

"You don't want to miss it," grinned Shiner. "You and your chum are at the bottom of it."

"But we're not going to fight," declared Bobby.

"No. But Bill and Jack are. No fear!"

Bobby and Fred did not go down into the basement at once. There was still an hour before the time set by Captain Gray, the evening before, for the mysterious "poguey fight." Nobody whom the chums asked would tell them any particulars.

"I expect I'll get into trouble over bloodying that pillow," said Fred. "What shall I tell them if they ask me?"

"Say your nose bled," returned Bobby. "If they ask you *how* it came to bleed, that's another question."

"Well, that's the question I'm afraid of."

"Wouldn't you tell on that Bill Bronson?"

"No. The other boys would say I snitched. I hate him, but I won't snitch on him," declared Fred.

"Maybe nobody will ask you. And Barry Gray will take your side."

"I don't want him to take my side," growled Fred. "He's a big fellow, too, and expects to be toadied to."

"You're making a mistake about him, I think," said Bobby, mildly. He knew it was no use to argue the matter with his chum.

They walked out across the campus to the railing that bordered the edge of the bluff. They were standing there looking across the beautiful lake, and talking, when there was a sudden scrimmage over on one of the tennis courts.

"Hello! a fight!" exclaimed Fred, with lively interest.

"Pshaw!" said Bobby, with some disgust. "You're always looking for a fight!"

"I'm not either! What do you call that?" denied and demanded Fred in the same breath.

"It's the captain," said Bobby, slowly. "And some of the big fellows—I know! they're dragging Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks away to the gym. There's going to be something doing—"

Just then Pee Wee appeared at the corner of the main building and yodled for the Clinton boys, beckoning them across the campus with excited gestures.

"Come o-o-on!" bawled the fat boy.

Fred grabbed Bobby's hand and started running. The chums were at the gym steps almost as quickly as the big fellows and their captives.

"You let me alone, Barry Gray!" yelled Bill, as he was shoved down the steps. "I'll fix you for this."

"Thanks, Billy Bronson. I can do my own fixing. You agreed to this, and you'll go through with it," Barry said, firmly.

"*I* didn't do a thing," Jack was urging.

"Ah! but you're going to," chuckled Barry, who seemed to have answers ready for both objectors.

The bullies were dragged below. The smaller boys followed. Every boy in the school was waiting in the gymnasium, and no teacher—not even the athletic instructor—was present.

Some of the boys had been at work on the bars, or the ladder, or otherwise using the gymnastic paraphernalia. They all gathered around in interest to see what the big boys were going to do with the bullies.

Bill Bronson and his chum kicked and struggled for a time. But there were enough to help Barry, so that their struggles were useless. The bullies' shoes were quickly removed, despite their kicking. Then a sort of harness made of straps was buckled around both boys under their arms. There was a steel ring

sewed into the crosspiece of each harness at the back.

Somebody produced eight objects that looked like huge boxing-gloves—only they were made of cotton cloth stuffed with cotton-batting. One of these clumsy things was strapped on each foot, and another on each hand. The victims of the joke were now unable to hurt any of their captors when they struck out at them, and the crowd was greatly amused as well as excited.

"Come on, now!" panted Barry. "Boost them up here. Throw the rope over a couple of rungs of the ladder, Max. That's it."

The rope in question was a strong manilla, about four feet long. At each end was a snap, such as is spliced upon the ends of hitch-ropes.

Two boys lifted each of the embarrassed prisoners, and held them under the ladder. The snaps were fastened in the rings back of their shoulders.

There they hung, kicking and sprawling. At first Barry Gray and Max Bender, one of the other big boys, held the victims.

"Here you are now," said Captain Gray, sternly. "You wanted to fight a fellow much smaller than yourself last night, Bill; and you agreed to take on a fellow nearer your size. Here's Jack willing to accommodate you. Now, go to it, you chaps, and may the best man win!"

He and Max both stepped back, dragging their prisoners with them, and then they let the two helpless ones swing together.

Their heads bumped. Bill let out a roar and tried to kick Max with one of his muffled feet. In doing so his other foot caught Jack above the knee.

"Look out what you're doing—you chump!" exclaimed Jack. "Keep still, can't you?"

"Keep still yourself," growled Bill, as his gyrating friend collided with him again with some force. He tried to push Jack away. At once the latter put out his mittened hand and punched Bill between the eyes.

"Look out what you're doing!" yelled Bill, striking madly at his opponent.

In a moment they were at it! The poguey fight was on. The two erstwhile chums swung over the rungs of the horizontally laid ladder, like the famous Kilkenny cats, punched and kicked and batted at each other in a most ridiculous manner.

They couldn't hurt each other very much, save when they bumped heads, and that was not often. But they grew madder every moment.

The spectators were delighted, and the harder the combatants tried to strike each other, the more ridiculous the whole thing appeared.

Why it was called "poguey" nobody seemed to know, but Bobby discovered that it had long been practiced at Rockledge School, and that usually the two victims accepted the situation philosophically and did not really get mad.

The two bullies, however, had never learned to control their tempers. Be-

sides, both considered that the other was somewhat to blame for their predicament.

The battle continued, fast and furious. Bill Bronson's face was blazing. Jack Jinks' was very ugly indeed to look at. If they could have torn the gloves off their hands they would have done so and struck each other with their bare fists.

Suddenly Jack drew up his knee as they swung together, and he caught Bill right in the belt. It was a solid blow and the victim uttered a cry of anger and pain. Captain Gray stepped forward and stopped the two from swinging together again.

"Foul blow," he said, decidedly. "You know the penalty well enough, Jack. When you're let down, Bill's got the right to punch you with his bare fist—if he likes."

"And if he does, I'll hand him all he's looking for," declared the squint-eyed youth, glaring at the boy who had been his chief friend.

"Do it, and you'll get what's coming to you!" threatened Bill, just as angrily.

Barry winked at Max Bender. "Let's take them down. I guess they won't be half so thick hereafter—and then maybe some of the little fellows will have a better time."

CHAPTER XIV
THE HONOR MEDAL

Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks were released from their harnesses, and the "pillows" were taken off their feet and hands, they went to opposite ends of the gymnasium and had nothing to say to each other.

Barry did not mention the foul blow and its punishment, and none of the smaller boys dared speak of it. It was certain, however, that the intimacy of the only two boys in the school inclined to bully the smaller ones had taken a decided set back.

The fun of the "poguey fight" was not to end so quickly, however. Some of the bigger boys caught Pee Wee and Mouser Pryde, and fastened them into the harness and put the mufflers on their feet and hands.

The fat boy and his chum made no decided remonstrance, and when they were swung up, they made an earnest endeavor to give the fellows all the fun they were looking for. Their gyrations certainly were amusing, and Bobby and

Fred laughed as loudly as any of the other boys.

But when the fat boy and Mouser were let down, and Max and Barry grabbed the chums from Clinton, for a moment, Fred was inclined to cut up rough.

"Aw, be a sport, Fred!" said Bobby, earnestly. "If Pee Wee can stand it, *we* can."

So Fred thought better of "getting mad" and for a while the two friends swung in the air and punched and kicked at each other to the delight of the other boys. Bobby was very careful not to anger the red-haired lad, and they came through the poguey fight with smiling faces. It was borne in upon Bobby's mind more and more that Fred Martin was going to have difficulty in keeping out of trouble in this new environment.

At eleven o'clock the whole school filed up to the hall on the second floor. None of the teachers were present and there was some little confusion and noise at first.

Barry stepped forward and held up a hand for silence. "You fellows better take a tumble to yourselves," he said calmly. "You want to show the Doctor that you don't have to be watched all the time. You all know—at least, all of you but Bobby Blake and Fred Martin, and they are not making the noise—that *this* isn't the place for skylarking.

"We had our fun downstairs. I hear the Doctor coming now. Let's give him a Rockledge cheer when he comes in and then—silence!"

The door opened as he ceased speaking and the tall, heavy-set principal with his quiet smile and pleasant eyes peering through the thick lenses of his glasses, appeared.

Captain Gray raised his hand again. The roomful of boys sprang to their feet. Bobby noted that many of them placed their left hands upon the little blue and white enameled button that they wore on the lapels of their coats, as they shouted in unison:

"One, two, three—*boom*!
Boom—Z-z-z—ah!
Rockledge! Rockledge!
Sword and star!
Who's on top?
We sure are—
Rock-ledge!"

Bobby and Fred had both noticed the blue and white buttons with the star and

sword upon them, but they did not know what they meant. Now Bobby guessed that there was some society, or inner circle at Rockledge School that they, as newcomers, knew nothing about.

All the boys did not belong to it. Pee Wee did not wear a button, nor did many of the fellows from their dormitory. Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks did not possess the badge, either.

Meanwhile, Doctor Raymond, smiling and bowing, approached the rostrum. Bobby—his mind always on the alert—noted the little blue and white spot against the dead black of the doctor's coat.

"Well, boys! I am extremely obliged to you, I am sure," said the Doctor, bowing again. "I am just as sensitive to compliments as the next person. I hope you will always be as glad to see me as you appear to be at this moment.

"Now, I shall not detain you for long. You know my little lectures have usually the saving grace of brevity. We have come together once more to face a year of study. Let us face it like real men! Star and sword, my boys! The star we are aiming for, and the Sword of Determination will hew our way to the goal.

"There! I will give you no homilies. There are but two new boys with us this year—Robert Blake and Frederick Martin. Give them a warm welcome. They only do not understand about our Medal of Honor."

He suddenly opened his large hand and displayed in its palm a five-pointed gold star, at least two inches across, and with a beautiful blue-velvet background.

"Here it is—all ready for the engraving. At the close of the school year, this medal will be presented to the one among you who has won it by studiousness, good conduct, manliness and general popularity.

"It is not always the boy who sets out to win the medal who really *does* win it. You, who are older, know *that.* We teachers try not to influence the opinion of the school in the choice of the recipient of the Honor Medal.

"The winner must stand well in his classes, or he cannot have the faculty vote. His deportment must be good, or we teachers cannot vote for him. But you boys yourselves must—after all—choose the winner.

"There are fifty of you in Rockledge School. You have each, individually, a better chance to understand your neighbors' characters than anybody else. You are quick to find out if there is something *fine* in a lad's temper. You will soon learn the one who restrains himself under provocation, who bears insult, perhaps, with confidence in his own uprightness; who keeps straight on his way without turning aside because of any temptation.

"*That* is the sort of a lad who will win this Medal of Honor," concluded the Doctor, very seriously. "Any boy—even the youngest—may secure it. It does not have to go to the boy at the top of his class, nor to the oldest boy in the school. You little chaps stand just as good a chance for it as Captain Gray," and he rested

his hand upon Barry Gray's shoulder for an instant as though there was some secret understanding between him and the captain of the school.

"Now, I have talked enough. School will begin in earnest on Monday. Remember, bounds are as usual. You little fellows, see Barrymore, or some of the masters, if you are not sure of a thing. And remember that my office door is never locked."

He went out quickly at the door behind the platform. Somehow, the boys felt rather serious, and there was no shouting or fooling as they filed out and down the stairs to the open air.

"Say! that was a handsome gold medal he showed us," said Fred, with enthusiasm, to Bobby.

"Wasn't it?" returned his chum, with sparkling eyes.

"I'd like to get that myself," admitted the red-haired one.

"Didn't I tell you, you'd have no chance at *that*, Ginger?" chuckled Pee Wee's voice behind them.

"I see it," admitted Fred, without getting angry. "But it would be fine to win it, just the same."

So Bobby thought. He remembered what his mother had said to him on one occasion, and wondered if it were possible for *him* to win the gold medal and present it to her when she returned from that far journey which she and his father were soon to take.

"She certainly would be proud of me then," thought Bobby Blake. "I guess she'd think after *that*, it would be safe to leave me alone anywhere—yes, sir! And I certainly would like to own such a medal."

This set his mind to thinking upon the fact that at daybreak the very next morning the ship on which his parents had bought their stateroom would sail from New York. They were already on the train which would bear them to the coast.

After they sailed it would be a long time before he could even expect a picture post-card from them—a month, at least. And *then*, they would be thousands of miles away!

He slipped away from Fred and Pee Wee and went into one of the schoolrooms. There was a big globe there, and he timidly turned this around and around until he found the pink splotch of color which marked Brazil.

There was the gaping mouth of the Amazon, with the big island dividing it, and the river on the south side, against which was the black dot marking the city of Para—where his parents would land.

He thought of all he had ever heard or been taught about the Amazon—"that Mighty River." He knew how the current of the vast stream met the ocean tides and fought with them for supremacy. He knew how the river overflowed

its banks in the rainy seasons and covered vast areas of forest and plain.

The trader's station, to which his parents were bound, was a thousand miles up the Amazon, and then five hundred miles more up another river. Why—why, if he fell ill, or anything—

He never realized until this moment just what it would mean to have his mother and father so far away. It had been great fun to come to Rockledge to school. He liked it here. He hoped he would learn, and advance, and win his way with both the boys and the teachers.

But to have a mother and father so many, many miles away—especially to have a mother going away from one just as fast as steam could take her—

Bobby Blake put his arm on the big globe, and laid his face against his jacket-sleeve. His shoulders shook.

CHAPTER XV
GETTING INTO STEP

The routine of the school did not really begin, as Dr. Raymond had said, until Monday morning. Yet by that time Bobby Blake and Fred Martin felt as though they were really old members of the Rockledge Fifty.

They had learned many of the stock stories of school—legends of great fights with the boys of Belden School, or of mighty games at football or baseball or some other sport, in which victory had perched upon the banners of Rockledge.

The loyalty of boarding school boys is second only to family feeling or patriotic love for one's country. Bobby and Fred and the other boys of Dormitory Two were just at that age when the mind and heart are both most impressionable.

The new boys learned the school yell, or cheer, which they had first heard given in eulogy of Dr. Raymond. They thought it the finest yell they had ever heard.

They were told about the Sword and Star, too. It was indeed an honor to wear the little blue and white button. One had to be at least one year at Rockledge, to stand at a certain mark in recitations, and to have a pretty clean record in deportment, to gain entrance into the Order of the Sword and Star.

It was true that such chaps as Pee Wee, and the Mouser, as well as Shiner and Howell Purdy, were rather skeptical about the value of membership in the school secret society. Dr. Raymond was a member and that "looked bad" to those

boys who were out for fun. And "f-u-n" spelled—in their minds—"mischief," and vice versa!

Those first few weeks of the new school year, however, passed without any very wild outbreak upon the part of either the merely mischievous, like Pee Wee and his mates, or by the really disturbing element (which was small) headed by Billy Bronson and Jack Jinks.

Those two worthies had, after a time, joined forces again; but they were not as good friends and co-workers as they had been before the poguey fight.

Bobby and Fred really gave most of their attention to studies. The school at Clinton had been graded so differently from this preparatory institution, that the chums had to work hard to pick up in some studies, while they were well advanced beyond their mates in others.

Fred was inspired by Bobby's example to win good marks for himself. Even the stern master, Mr. Leith, who looked over the work of the smaller boys fortnightly, commented favorably upon what the chums had accomplished.

In play hours the Lower School kept together for the most part. Here was where Fred Martin's plans were proven smart. The baseball outfit that he and Bobby had purchased with their peep-show money was welcomed with great approval by the boys of Number Two Dormitory.

Bobby and Fred won their places on the Second Nine at once. They played the First Dormitory Nine on Saturday of the first week of school, and won. Bobby's "fade-away," as Fred had prophesied, puzzled the other nine's battery splendidly.

The next Saturday the victorious nine played against a team of town boys and again won. Captain Gray then began to take notice of the victorious nine. He coached them a little and then they challenged a nine belonging to the Belden School across the lake.

It was after the first of October when this match occurred, and the Rockledge boys went across in their own boats. Although visiting a hostile camp, the boys of Rockledge were very nicely received by the older Belden boys. Naturally, the home team had the crowd with them, but Bobby held the enemy down to ten hits and only six runs, and the Rockledge nine won by two runs.

Although their hosts remained polite to the visitors, Bobby and Fred saw very plainly that the rivalry between the two schools was deep-seated. They heard Captain Gray and Max Bender talking to some of the big fellows of Belden, and both sides were boasting of what the rival football teams would do to each other on Thanksgiving Day.

On that day the Belden crowd would come over to Rockledge, and from this time on, there was little more baseball played by the Rockledge boys. They were deeply interested in football.

In this game Bobby and Fred did not shine so brightly, but they went into hard training with the second junior team and under Captain Gray, who coached the smaller boys as well as the first team, learned a whole lot about football.

Meanwhile, not a word had come to Bobby from his parents after they had sailed from New York. He heard from Clinton every week, for Michael Mulcahey painfully indited a scrawly letter to him, enclosing sometimes a note from Meena. Michael, having crossed from Ireland in a sailing ship years before, was considered by Bobby a marvel of sea-lore. One time he wrote:

"DERE BOBBY:—

"It ain't nawthin alarmin that we don't here yet from Mistur Blake an his good lady an so I tell Meena whos got the face ache most of the time now and is just as good compny as a mad cat. She's rayfused to marry me agin, an I do be thinkin thats struck in an worries her face a lot. Howsomever 'tis about your feyther and mother Id write to cheer you up a bit. I well remember the long passage we made from the Ould Sod when I kem to this counthry. Twas head winds we had, an its like head winds that has held the big ship back thats takin Mistur Blake an his good lady to these Brazils. An tis a mortal far ways they do be goin. Mistur Martin says the offices in New York hav had no wareless telegraf despatches (what iver they be) from the ship since she was off Hattie Ross—an whoever she is I dunnaw. But if she's like most females, she's cranky, an that accounts for the delay.

"Be good an ye'll be happy, aven if ye don't have so much fun, from your friend and well wisher, rayspectfully,

"MICHAEL MULCAHEY."

This letter—and similar epistles—cheered Bobby some, and Mr. Martin wrote him a jolly little note, enclosed in a longer letter to Fred. But Bobby could not help feeling worried about the silence of his parents, especially at night.

When he knelt to say his prayers (and most of the other boys in Dormitory Two did likewise), he remembered what his mother had said about her praying for him at the same time every evening, and sometimes he had to squeeze his eyes shut tight to keep back the tears.

That the time on board the great steamship going south to the Tropics, and the time in New England was vastly different, did not enter Bobby's mind. It just seemed to him as though his mother was very near him indeed as he knelt before

his chair.

For a sturdy, busy boy, however, there was not much time for worriment. Every day there was something new; one could not be lonesome at Rockledge.

The boys went from their beds to breakfast, from their meals to work in the schoolroom, from their lessons to play—a continual round of activities.

The athletic instruction interested the chums from Clinton immensely, and until the real cool weather set in, the boys of the school enjoyed swimming in the lake every day.

Dr. Raymond hoped that, before long, he would be able to build a gymnasium with a swimming pool in a special building by itself. This was something to look forward to, however.

All aquatic sports did not stop when the frost came. There were plenty of boats belonging to the school—from light, flat-bottomed skiffs which the little fellows could not possibly tip over, to a fine eight-oared shell manned by the bigger boys. In this they raced the Belden School every June before Commencement.

Wednesday and Saturday afternoons were holidays, but without special permission the boys of the Lower School could not go out of bounds. On Saturdays the bigger boys went to town if they so desired, or took long tramps through the woods, or rowed to the upper end of the lake.

If the smaller fellows wanted to go out of bounds, usually a teacher went with them. There was a picnic of the Lower School on one of the islands in the lake, however, that Bobby and Fred were not likely to forget for a long time.

Pee Wee and Mouser got it up. They first got permission to take a cold dinner on Saturday and row to the island. There was a farmer whose land joined the school property on the east. From him they obtained several dozen ears of late greencorn—nubbins, but sweet as sugar—and some new potatoes.

They were excused from lessons that day at eleven—all but Pee Wee himself. He had been lazy, as usual, and was behind in his work. It looked, for a time, as though the picnic had to be delayed.

But urged on by the others, Bobby faced Mr. Carrin, who had Pee Wee's class in history, and begged the fat boy off.

"*Do* let him do the extra work to-night, sir, after supper," begged Bobby. "We were going to have such a nice time, and Pee—I mean Perry—got the picnic up, and—"

"It is a pity that Perry cannot spend a little of his mind and effort on his lessons," said Mr. Carrin, with a smile.

"Yes, sir. I know, sir," said Bobby, eagerly, "but he doesn't seem to be able to think of two things at once."

"I guess that is right," chuckled Mr. Carrin, who was a much more pleasant gentleman than Mr. Leith. "Tell him he may go, but I shall expect a perfect

recitation on Monday morning, first thing."

"Huh!" growled Pee Wee, who had overheard some of this. "I'm glad enough to get off, Bobby Blake. But you needn't have told him I was weak-minded."

Bobby grinned at him. "What do you care if you *are* a little bit crazy? And I didn't tell him anything new. He was on to it."

The crowd rowed off in three boats. There were seventeen of them. They went to the upper island, which was the biggest, in an hour and a half, and as soon as they landed they set to work to build a fire and make the picnic dinner.

Of course, they were too hungry to wait until the potatoes were baked, but as soon as the light wood had burned down to ashes and coals, they thrust the potatoes under the bed of the fire to bake slowly.

Meanwhile they ate the sandwiches and cake they had brought from school, and each boy cut a stick, on the end of which he stuck an ear of corn. These ears they roasted in the flames.

Of course, they were scorched a little, but they had butter and pepper and salt with which to dress the corn and it *did* taste mighty nice!

"And there's pretty near a bushel of the potatoes," said Fred, happily. "After the fire dies down again, we can rake them out and eat them. There's a big dab of butter left and plenty of salt and pepper. Crickey! I could eat a peck of them myself."

"We ought to have brought more potatoes and corn along," suggested Pee Wee, licking his fingers, "and hidden the stuff here somewhere. Then we could come another day and have a bake like this."

"Say! the corn wouldn't be much good," Bobby said.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" yelled Fred, suddenly. "I have it."

"Gee! you must have it bad," responded Mouser. "What kind of a battlecry *is* that?"

"Say!" went on Fred, without paying the least attention to Mouser's question, "I've got the dandy idea."

"Let's have it?" proposed Bobby.

"Let's build a shack, or a cabin, or something, up there in the thick trees. Nobody would ever see it from the lake. Then we can bring things over to furnish it—on the sly, you know—"

"Why on the sly?" demanded his chum.

"Aw—well—if the other fellows knew it, they'd come and bust it up, wouldn't they?"

"Not our fellows," declared Shiner.

"But you bet the kids from Belden would," urged Pee Wee.

"We could keep still about it, I s'pose," admitted Bobby.

"Well, then!" returned Fred. "Now, we'd fit it up, and store stuff in it for winter—nuts, and popcorn, and 'taters, and turnips—"

"You can't bake turnips," objected Howell Purdy.

"Well! they're good raw, aren't they?" demanded the eager Fred.

"It's a great old scheme," declared Jimmy Ailshine, otherwise "Shiner." "Let's get at it at once. Skeets Brody has his ax. Come on!"

And the excited boys trooped away from the beach and left the potatoes under the coals of the campfire to finish cooking.

CHAPTER XVI
HOT POTATOES

Bobby and Fred had already become leaders to a degree, with the boys of their own age at Rockledge School. This suggestion of the red-haired one about building a hut was accepted with enthusiasm by the fifteen others in the present crowd.

They trooped up into the thick grove that crowned the summit of the rocky island. Bobby and Fred had been on many camping expeditions at home, along the banks of Plunkit Creek. They wasted no time in discussing *how* they should build a shelter with the materials at hand.

"Leave it to us, and we'll go ahead and show you how to make a nice shack," promised Bobby, when the others began to gabble as to how it should be done.

"Good idea!" cried Pee Wee. "Let's elect Bobby Blake, captain.

"And Fred Martin, lieutenant," said Shiner. "They both know what to do and we don't."

This was agreed to without a word of objection from any of the fifteen. Bobby took charge at once.

"Here are four trees," he announced, pointing to four that stood almost in a square, some twelve feet apart, and with nothing but saplings in the square made by them. "These will be our posts. First we want to clean out all the small trees and brush inside these big trees, and for some feet around the outside—so we can work."

"Wish we had more axes," said Fred.

"We all have knives. Those with knives can cut off the smaller brush. Skeets is really our only woodsman. Come on, Skeets, and let's find four good trees for the cross-timbers."

They were all soon very busy. Bobby did little but show the others what to do and make measurements with a piece of fishline. Fred gave his attention to cutting spruce boughs for walls and roof.

Skeets cut the four trees needed, they were measured and notched at the ends and then lifted into place—each end in a crotch of the low branching trees Bobby had selected for the corner posts of the hut.

The roof would not be exactly flat, for one crotch was somewhat higher than the others, but the four timbers lay firm, being lashed together with black-birch withes.

Soon the other boys began to bring the spruce boughs; but first Bobby laid several good sized saplings across the string-pieces, to strengthen the roof.

They worked so hard and with such enthusiasm that they really forgot the potatoes under the bonfire. In two hours a heavy roofing of boughs lay upon the poles, and the boys could all stand up under it and be sheltered.

Suddenly Fred exclaimed: "Crickey! Let's see if those potatoes are done. I'm as hungry as a hound right now."

This set them all on a run. It does not take much to put an edge on a boy's appetite. Just the suggestion of the potatoes was enough.

"First at the fire!" yelled Howell Purdy, as he hurried down through the grove, and over the rocks.

"Bet you I make it first!" declared Shiner, vigorously following the leader.

It was a stampede. With whoops and shouts the seventeen scrambled down the descent to the shore.

Suddenly they halted. Shiner and Howell, who had been wrestling to put each other behind, looked, too. There was a crowd of boys around their campfire on the shore.

"Who are they?" demanded Bobby, in amazement.

"Say! they're raking out our potatoes!" gasped Fred Martin.

"They're Beldenites!" declared Pee Wee, panting, and on the high ground behind. "There's their boats. And there's half as many more of them as there are of *us*."

"I don't care if they're two to one!" cried Fred in anger. "Those are our potatoes."

"Suppose they beat us and take away our boats?" demanded Howell Purdy, falling back. "You know—those Belden fellows can fight."

"Well! can't *we*?" demanded Fred Martin, panting and doubling his fists. "What are we—babies?"

"We won't fight—yet," put in Bobby, calmly. "Perhaps they don't realize that that is our fire and our potatoes."

"What'll we do?" asked Pee Wee, by no means anxious to advance.

"Come on," said Bobby; feeling dreadfully shaken inside, but too proud to show it. "Let's talk to them."

"Better get some clubs and *go* for them," growled Fred.

"No. They haven't clubs," declared Bobby. "Let's not start any fight."

He and Shiner and Mouser proceeded along the beach. They saw the Belden fellows scrambling for the hot potatoes, and shouting and skylarking.

"That's Larry Cronk—that fellow with the curly hair. Don't you remember, Bobby? He pitched for their club when we went over to beat them that day."

"I remember. And that's their first baseman—Ben Allen." Then Bobby raised his voice so the Belden crowd could hear him: "I say! that's our fire and those are our potatoes. We were just coming down to get them."

"Is that so?" sneered Larry Cronk, standing up and laughing at the Rockledge boys. "Well, you came too late—do you see?"

"I'll throw a rock at him!" growled the belligerent Fred.

"Keep still!" commanded Bobby. Then to the Beldenites he said: "That's not fair—or honest. Those are our potatoes—"

Larry swung back his arm, and poised one of the potatoes. The next moment he flung it with all his force at Bobby. The latter just escaped it by dodging.

"Mean thing!" yelled Fred, and he picked up a stone on the instant (there were plenty of pebbles on the beach) and flung it at the Belden's captain.

"That's right! let's drive them off!" cried Pee Wee, from the rear.

Fred's stone was flung true and Larry Cronk received it in the shoulder. He yelled and dodged, and at once the Belden boys let go a flight of *hot potatoes*!

The potatoes burst wherever they struck—and not a few of them landed upon the boys who had hoped to feast upon the tubers. This was adding insult to injury, and the Rockledge boys were greatly enraged.

"They're spoiling all our 'taters!" cried Pee Wee—almost wailing, in fact. "There! there's another busted."

He had turned just in time to get the potato in the back instead of in the chest. Mouser and Howell were jumping about and rubbing their cheeks. The hot potatoes burned as well as stung, and although they were mealy enough to fly all about when they burst—like miniature bombs—when flung by a vigorous arm, they hurt more than a little.

The Rockledge crowd broke before the flight of hot potatoes, and seemed about to run back to the woods. But Bobby and Fred could not stand *that*.

"Hold on, fellows!" yelled Fred. "We can lick those chaps—I know we can! Get some stones! They can't hurt more than hot potatoes."

Bobby did not delay in joining in the return fusillade of stones. Some of the pebbles landed heavily. Although outnumbering the Rockledge boys by considerable, the Belden crowd began to retreat toward its boats.

"Come on! push them!" yelled Fred, running ahead.

The others, thus encouraged, ran after him. They reached their own boats and felt safe, then. The Beldens could not get their craft away from them.

At the fire there were a lot of the potatoes scattered about and trampled into the sand. Pee Wee began yelling:

"Use the stones! use the stones! Don't fling those potatoes—we want them!"

This brought about some laughter, and the Rockledge boys did not throw their missiles so viciously thereafter. The Beldens had gotten enough, anyway. Two of them were nursing bad bruises on their heads, and were crying. Bobby was glad the battle was so soon over, for he was afraid somebody would be seriously hurt.

The Belden youngsters scrambled into their boats and pushed off from the island, while the Rockledge boys collected all the potatoes they could find, that had not burst, and enjoyed their delayed feast with the sauce of having won it by force of arms.

They did not finish the hut on the island that day, but agreed to come back to complete it the next half holiday—if they could gain permission.

CHAPTER XVII
LOST AT SEA

And then there came an unhappy time indeed for Bobby Blake. In the back of his mind, for weeks, had been the uncertainty about his father and mother. Now that uncertainty suddenly developed into a great and lingering horror—a horror from which not even the elasticity of youth could easily rebound.

One morning Dr. Raymond sent a note into Mr. Carrin's school. Had not Bobby been so busy at his work, he would have seen the pale faced teacher grow still more pallid, and look at him.

Mr. Carrin arose and walked up and down the room. The boys soon discovered that he was not watching them. Occasionally he stole a glance at Bobby, but he noticed no other boy.

Then, without saying another word, he went out, and in a minute came back with Barry Gray. Barry looked startled himself, and very serious. He stood in the doorway and said:

"Blake! Doctor Raymond wants you in his office. You are to come with me."

Bobby got up quickly, and with a suddenly beating heart. He believed he must have done something to bring down upon his head the wrath of the good Doctor. He could not imagine what it was, but he was frightened.

You see, Bobby had gotten it into his head that possibly he *might* have a chance at the Medal of Honor. He was trying to be an exemplary scholar for that reason—and because he knew it would delight his absent father and mother, if he gained such an honor.

Now, this sudden and unexpected call shocked him. Fred grabbed his hand secretly as he passed his seat and squeezed it. Bobby knew that his chum, thoughtless as Fred usually was, appreciated his present feelings.

When he reached the door, his own face was aflame. He knew all the boys of the Lower School were looking at him. Mr. Carrin, too, seemed to be staring at Bobby in a strange way.

Barry put his arm across the smaller boy's shoulder just as soon as the classroom door closed behind them.

"Buck up, old man!" he said, with a funny choke in his voice. "Things are never so hard as they seem at first. And there's such a lot of uncertainty about such reports—"

"What reports, sir?" asked Bobby, breathlessly.

"Didn't Carrin tell you a *thing*?" gasped Barry, stopping short.

"No! What have I done? What's Doctor Raymond going to do with me?"

"Why, you poor little kid!" ejaculated the big boy, grabbing Bobby tightly again. "You mustn't be afraid of the Old Doc. He wouldn't hurt a fly. And you're not in bad with him—don't think it!"

"But what is the matter, then?" demanded Bobby.

"It's your folks, Bob," blurted out Barry. "There's uncertain news about them—"

"They're not sick—not *dead*?" cried Bobby, shaking all over.

"No, no! Of course not," returned Barry, heartily. "Nothing as bad as that."

"What is it, then?"

"Why, it's only a shipwreck, or something like that. Of course they've been rescued; folks always are, you know. And they'll have lots of adventures to write you about."

Bobby was speechless. His pretty, delicate mother *shipwrecked*! Of course, his father would save her, but she might get wet and catch cold; that was the first thought that took form in his mind.

"News has come about the big ship they sailed away on," Barry Gray went on, cheerfully. "Another ship has found part of the deckworks of your father's

steamship, all scorched and burned. There must have been a fire at sea."

"Well, don't you s'pose they could put the fire out with so much water around?" asked Bobby, seriously.

"That's right!" exclaimed Barry. "But perhaps the machinery was hurt, so the ship couldn't be made to go. There wasn't any sails to her, of course."

"I see," said Bobby, gravely, nodding.

"So they had to take to the boats. You know how it is: Women and children first! The sailors are always so brave. And the officers stand by to the last—and if the ship sinks, the captain always goes down with her, standing on the quarter deck, with the flags flying. You've read about it, Bobby!"

"Sure!" choked Bobby.

"Of course there are always boats enough for the passengers—and life-rafts. And they float about for a while and are either picked up by other ships, or the natives row out in their canoes and save them."

"Yes!" gasped Bobby, letting out the great fear at his heart. "But—but suppose she should get cold? You know she has a weak throat. The doctor always tells her to look out for bron—bron-*skeeters*, or somethin' like that."

"*Who* has bronchitis?" demanded Barry, rather puzzled.

"My mother."

"Oh! don't you know it's a warm climate down there? Sure! It's in the Tropics. No chance of catching cold—not at all."

"Oh!" murmured Bobby, and he felt somewhat relieved.

"And they've been picked up by some ship bound around the world, maybe—that is why you haven't heard from them. You won't hear till they touch at some port clear across the world, from which they can send mail.

"Or perhaps," said the comforting captain, "they have gone to some tropic island, where boats don't often touch. And the sailors will build shelters for the passengers against the coming of the rainy season, and then a boat-load of volunteers will hike out looking for a civilized port, and it will be months and months before help comes to the island.

"Meanwhile," said the imaginative youngster, his eyes glowing and his cheek flushed, "your mother and the other ladies will get well and strong, and all brown like Indians. And the men will have to dress in goat-skins, for their clothes will wear out, and they'll learn to make fire by rubbing two sticks together, and they'll have fights with jaguars—But no!" exclaimed the big boy, suddenly; "of course, there will be no harmful creatures on an *island*.

"Say! I guess they're having fun all right. Don't you worry, Bobby."

They halted at the doctor's door, and Barry rapped. The voice of the big principal told them to "Enter!" and the bigger boy pushed open the door.

"Here he is, sir," said Barry, winking fast over the head of the smaller boy

at Dr. Raymond. "I have just been telling him what a jolly good time his folks are likely having right now. It must be *so* interesting to be shipwrecked."

CHAPTER XVIII
THE BLOODY CORNER

The news went over the school at noon, of course, and most of the smaller boys eyed Bobby Blake askance. The boy himself seemed walking in a kind of cloud; his mind was stunned, and it was lucky that Dr. Raymond had said to him, kindly:

"You are excused from recitations to-day, Robert."

The good doctor had spoken to him quite cheerfully of the probable loss of the steamship on which Mr. and Mrs. Blake had sailed from New York. The principal seemed to have taken his cue from Barrymore Gray.

To tell the truth, what Barry had said cheered Bobby more than anything else. Even Fred Martin was a trifle depressing. Fred wanted to give him his share in the bats and mask and other baseball paraphernalia, and turn over to him, in fact, most of his personal property, likely to be dear to a boy's heart.

This was the red-haired boy's way of showing sympathy. But it did not help much.

The roseate picture Barry had drawn of the shipwreck stuck in Bobby's mind. He was very glad his mother could not take cold down there, even if she got her feet wet.

For several days the other boys were very gentle with Bobby. It did not make Bobby feel very comfortable, but he knew they meant it kindly.

Soon, however, their awkwardness wore off, and they were as rough and friendly as ever, and he liked it better. Deep in his heart he kept thinking all the time of his parents, and the possibilities arising out of the wreck of the steamship. Outwardly he was much the same as ever.

Only one thing Bobby Blake desired now more than before. He longed—oh! how he *did* long—to win the Medal of Honor. If his parents were shipwrecked, and there was any suffering for them in it, it seemed to Bobby that if he won the Honor Medal at Rockledge School, that fact would alleviate their misery, wherever they were!

Yet there was nothing of the mollycoddle about Bobby. Fun appealed to him just as strongly as it ever did to any ten year old boy.

There were certain set rules of Rockledge School that he would not break and that he kept Fred from breaking.

"There's no fun in getting caught and held up to the whole school as dishonorable," he told Fred. "We're expected to keep in bounds. We know the bounds well enough. And if we want to go out of them, we have only to ask, and give a good reason, to get permission to go farther."

"Aw, they treat us as if we were a lot of babies," growled Fred Martin.

"They do nothing of the kind," Bobby replied. "Doctor Raymond treats us as though we were gentlemen. He trusts to our *honor*. I wouldn't disappoint him for a farm!"

"We-ell!" sighed Fred. "I suppose you're right, Bobby. I—I almost wish he didn't treat us just this way. There'd be some fun in busting up the old rules!"

And that was where Dr. Raymond showed his wisdom. He knew how to manage boys with the least amount of friction.

Weeks passed, full of work and play, and no further news came of the lost steamship on which Mr. and Mrs. Blake had sailed for Brazil. The wreckage had been sighted off the Orinoco, and the name of the steamship was plain upon the wreck. But it might have drifted a long way after the catastrophe. Just *where* the ship had been burned, nobody could guess.

No boat from her, no word from her captain or crew, came to the owners in New York. She had been a freight boat, carrying on that trip scarcely a score of passengers.

Much of this Bobby did not hear, or understand. He clung like a limpet to the imaginative idea of a shipwreck that Barrymore Gray had drawn for him. And it was well that this was so.

Thanksgiving came and went. The Belden school came over in the forenoon to Rockledge and its football team was nicely thrashed by the Rockledge eleven. The Lower School went almost mad with delight; and Fred Martin and Larry Cronk, the Belden boy, came almost to blows on the campus.

Neither of the Lower Schools had forgotten the hot potato fight on the island. Ere this, Bobby and his friends had completed their camp and had begun to furnish it, but they hoped the youngsters from Belden would learn nothing about the hideout.

One thing pleased Bobby and Fred immensely at Thanksgiving. A big box came to them from Clinton. In it were all sorts of good things made by Meena and Mrs. Martin, fall apples and pears picked by Michael Mulcahey, candy from Mr. Martin's store, and gifts from Fred's sisters and smaller brothers.

The Second Dormitory had a great feast after hours one night, of which even Captain Gray knew nothing. Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks got onto it, and the small boys had to bribe the two bullies with some of the choicest of their

stores. Nevertheless, the midnight feast went off very smoothly.

There were a few more cases for the medical attendant to see to at Rockledge School after Thanksgiving than usual. The midnight feast coming so soon after the big Thanksgiving dinner, played havoc in the ranks of the smaller boys.

Pee Wee had what Bobby declared to be "internal, or civil war," and went to the hospital in Dr. Raymond's house for three days. He came out wan and interesting looking, declaring that he had lost pounds of flesh! But he proceeded to get his avoirdupois back again very promptly.

It was a full week before the school was back on its usual working basis—and the midwinter holidays only a month away. The teachers spurred the lazy scholars, and helped the dull ones, and out of this pushing in classes arose the trouble that became a very serious affair indeed for both Fred Martin and Bobby Blake.

Fred was not always bright in arithmetic. One morning he made a ridiculous blunder, and the whole class laughed at him. Mr. Carrin reprimanded Fred for his inattention, and as they filed out for recreation before dinner, Sparrow Bangs—named so because he had a whole cage-full of tame sparrows down at the gatekeeper's cottage—made fun of the red-haired boy.

Fred had been angered by the teacher's sharpness. Now he turned on Sparrow in a terrible passion.

"What's that you say? I'll give you a punch you'll remember."

"Aw, no you won't!" returned Sparrow. "And I'll say it again, Ginger! You've no time to play catch—you'll have to study the multiplication table, like Mr. Carrin said."

Fred rushed at the teasing lad, but Pee Wee and Howell Purdy came between them.

"Cheese it!" said the fat boy. "You two fellows want to get into trouble? Right under the schoolroom windows, too!"

"Well, he's got to stop nagging me," cried Fred, very red, and puffing very hard.

"Who are you, Ginger, that I should be so awfully careful of?" sneered Sparrow. "You're not so much!"

"I'll show you—"

"Stop it! stop it, Fred!" advised Bobby, catching his chum by the arm. "Come on, I want to throw you a few fast ones. We mustn't get out of practice, even if we *can't* play a regular game until next spring."

"There he goes!" cried Sparrow. "His boss takes him away. Great lad, that Ginger is. Afraid to say his soul's his own. Bobby Blake just bosses him around—"

It was all over, then! Fred flung off Bobby's hand and rushed at his tormentor. Smack! his fist shot into Sparrow's face.

Half a dozen of the boys then got between the antagonists.

"You want to get us all into trouble?" growled Mouser, one of those who held Fred Martin. "Cut it out. If you've got to fight, there's the 'bloody corner.' Do it right."

The chums had heard of "the bloody corner," but since their appearance at Rockledge School there had been no real pugilistic encounter between any of their mates.

Down in the far corner of the grounds—oh! a long way from the buildings—behind a tall hedge of hemlock, there had once been a toolshed. It had been removed and the corner was just a heap of soft sand. No matter how hard the frost was, this sand did not freeze.

And here, from time immemorial, had been arranged the school fights. Whether the good Doctor was aware that in this arena was fought out such feuds as could not be otherwise settled, nobody knew. Usually the fights were arranged by the older fellows, and the captain of the school was supposed to be present and see fair play.

It spoke well for Barrymore Gray that thus far under his régime, not a fight had occurred in "bloody corner."

The belligerents—Fred and Sparrow—were separated for the time, but as Bobby and his friend started to run to dinner when the big gong rang, Shiner stopped them.

"Hey, Ginger," said he. "Are you game to fight Sparrow?"

"I'm going to fight him," declared the red-haired boy, showing his teeth. "He can't get out of it."

"Oh! he's not trying to," said Shiner. "In fact, he told me to put it up to you. He wants to knock your head off."

"He'll have a fine time trying it," declared Fred, hotly. "I'll show him—"

"Aw, drop it!" begged Bobby. "You don't want to fight Sparrow—and he doesn't want to fight you."

"Better keep out of this, Bobby Blake," advised Shiner, importantly. "Sparrow says Fred's afraid, anyway—"

"I'll show him!" cried the maddened red-haired boy.

"Bluffing's all right," sneered Shiner. "But will you *fight*?"

"Give me a chance!"

"Aw-right. We'll put it up to the captain and you and Sparrow can get together down in the corner."

"With gloves? and have Barry Gray boss it? No, I won't," declared the pugnacious Fred. "Sparrow's trying to get out of it. I'll box him in the gym. But if he's got the pluck of a flea, he'll come down to the corner with his bare fists—and you and Bobby here are enough to see fair play."

"Whew!" whistled Shiner, his eyes dancing. "Do you mean it?"

"You'll find out that I do," threatened Fred, wagging his head.

"You sha'n't fight that way, Fred!" cried Bobby. "The School won't stand for it."

"You mean that bully, Barry Gray, won't stand for it. He always wants to boss."

"You game to see them through, Bobby?" demanded Shiner.

"If you don't want to come with me, I'll get Pee Wee," growled Fred.

"No," said Bobby, in great trouble. "If you mean to fight Sparrow, of course I'm going to stand by you."

"And keep your mouth shut about it?" snapped Shiner.

"Bobby's no snitch," exclaimed Fred, hotly. "If we're caught, it won't be because either Bobby or I tell."

"Nuff said," declared Shiner, shortly. "I'll see Sparrow again and put it up to him. We'll find a time when nobody else will be around. Be ready," and Shiner went off whistling, evidently feeling his importance in the matter.

Bobby felt pretty badly. He did not want to see Fred fight at all. And he certainly did not want him to meet Sparrow Bangs in this way. A sparring match was one thing, but a fist fight, deliberately arranged, and held in secret, was an entirely different matter.

"You can't do it!" he said to Fred, greatly disturbed. "Dr. Raymond might send you home."

"I don't care if I'm sent home twice!" exclaimed the hotheaded Fred. "I am going to thrash that fellow, or he'll thrash *me*."

Bobby wanted to shake Fred—he could have hit his chum himself! And yet—he couldn't desert him. They had come here to this school, strangers. They had agreed to stand by each other, through thick and thin—of course without a word being said about it! Boys do not talk about their friendships like girls.

If Fred were wrong, Bobby could be angry with him, but he could not desert him. If his chum intended to fight Sparrow Bangs in this disgraceful way, Bobby would "second" him—of course he would!

If Dr. Raymond should hear of it and suspend them both from school, it could not be helped. He knew very well that he was running a risk of losing all chance for the Medal of Honor; yet he would stick to his chum.

He was unhappy that night—very, very unhappy. Fred and he said little when they were alone. Shiner came to him and whispered, at bedtime, that there would be a chance to "pull off" the fight the next noontime after dinner. They could cut the mid-day study hour to do it, without being caught.

Beyond his determination to stand by Fred, right or wrong, Bobby wanted his chum—as long as he *would* fight—to win! He advised him in the morning:

"Now, Fred, eat a good breakfast—a *big* breakfast. But you're going to go light on dinner."

"I know," grunted the red-haired one.

"Don't drink much water at dinner time, either. If you think you'll be tempted too much, keep out of the dining-room."

"No," growled Fred. "They'll think I'm afraid."

"All right. But eat lightly," urged Bobby.

For once something was going on in the Lower School that the whole crowd of boys was not "on to." Shiner and Sparrow had been as mum as Fred and Bobby.

The two combatants did not even scowl at each other; they kept apart. They did not want any of the other boys to suspect.

Howell Purdy asked Bobby if "Ginger wasn't going to knock Sparrow's head off?" and Bobby dodged the question adroitly.

It seemed to Bobby as though that forenoon would never come to an end. At half past eleven the Lower School was let out. Bobby took Fred into the gymnasium and they put on the gloves together for a little practice.

With the experience they had had before, and the instruction of the Rockledge athletic teacher, for boys of their size, Bobby and Fred were quite proficient in the so-called manly art.

Sparring, as a game like baseball or tennis, is splendid exercise and good training for mind and temper. It may, or may not, lead to fisticuffs among boys. Certainly boys who spar together in a gymnasium are much less likely to have rude fights as the outgrowth of sudden temper. They respect each other's prowess too much.

Fred was careful at dinner. As soon as they could, he and Bobby slipped out, and made their way to the distant corner, and by a roundabout way so that they could not be seen. Five minutes later Sparrow and Jimmy Ailshine appeared.

CHAPTER XIX
THE RESULT

Just who would have won in that battle between Fred Martin and Sparrow Bangs remains one of the unsolved mysteries of Rockledge School.

It was never finished. The quartette of boys had made one mistake. They should have taken a fifth youngster into their confidence and set him on watch.

Mr. Leith, the head master under Dr. Raymond, always took a constitutional around the grounds after the midday meal. Not often did he cross the campus, for he was not a man given to spying upon his young charges.

But this day the campus seemed to be deserted. It was a cold day, and most of the boys had remained indoors to take advantage of the hour of study before afternoon lessons.

He came down the railing that defended the cliff's edge, and he heard, as he approached the notorious "bloody corner," boyish voices.

"That's it, Sparrow! Hit him again!" shrieked one voice.

"Let him hit me—I'll give him as good as he sends!" spoke up another voice.

There was the instant sound of blows interchanged. The teacher could not doubt what was going on.

"Boys! boys! how dare you fight?" he demanded, and strode toward the hedge of hemlock trees, his coattails flapping behind him.

The fight had not continued long. Both boys had removed their coats and vests and caps. They were hard at it indeed when Mr. Leith's voice smote upon their ears.

"Cheese it!" gasped Shiner. "Leith's onto us!"

With the fear of being apprehended in all their minds, the four boys sprang for the underbrush, on the other side of the corner. They knew which way the teacher was coming.

The two belligerents had picked up their discarded clothing, but as they got under cover Fred gasped:

"Scubbity-*yow*! I've dropped my cap."

"Keep on!" exclaimed Bobby. "I'll get it."

He was so earnest to shield his chum from the result of his wrong doing, that he forgot his own danger. If Fred's cap were found, Mr. Leith would know it, and Fred would be called upon to explain.

Bobby darted back while the other boys scudded through the bushes. He saw the cap on the ground just inside the open space. He sprawled all over it, grabbed it up, and then was stricken motionless and dumb by the voice of the master who stepped into view:

"Robert! What does this mean?"

Bobby shook all over, but he stuffed the cap into the breast of his jacket.

"Robert, stand up!" commanded the teacher.

Bobby did so. He looked timidly across at the gentleman. Certainly Mr. Leith was a very stern looking man!

"Come here, Robert," said Mr. Leith.

Bobby crossed the sandlot at a slow crawl. Mr. Leith cleared his throat, removing his eyeglasses to wipe them. On the instant, as the boy reached the

fence, he flung Fred's cap through the rails and out over the edge of the cliff. It disappeared like a shot.

"What was that, sir?" demanded Mr. Leith, putting on the eyeglasses and looking at Bobby again.

The boy hesitated. The gentleman repeated:

"What was it? I saw you throw something away."

"It—it was a cap," said Bobby.

"A cap? Not your own cap?" exclaimed the teacher, in surprise. "You have your own cap on."

"No, sir. Not my own cap," admitted Bobby.

"Whose cap was it, then?"

Bobby was silent. He looked up at Mr. Leith pleadingly. That gentleman knew well enough what was in the boy's mind. He, too, understood boys pretty well, but he did not believe in handling them just as the old Doctor did.

"Do you hear me, young man?" he asked, harshly.

"Yes, sir."

"Why do you not answer me?"

Bobby wanted to cry out and plead with him. Mr. Leith had no *right* to ask such a question! That is the way the boy looked at it. The teacher was tempting him to do the meanest thing in a boy's catalog of sins.

He was asking Bobby to *snitch*!

"I—I can't tell you, sir," stammered the boy.

"You mean you are determined not to tell me?" repeated Mr. Leith.

Bobby was silent, but still looked straight into his face. No frown could make Bobby Blake drop his eyes in shame.

"Two boys were fighting here just now," said the teacher, slowly and sternly. "Isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir," said Bobby, quietly.

"Barrymore Gray was not here?" asked the other, sharply.

"Oh, no, sir. Barry knew nothing about it, sir," cried Bobby.

"Ah! Indeed? Then this fight was a strictly private affair?"

Bobby looked miserable, but said nothing.

"How many boys were here?"

Bobby wagged his head negatively. "I—I can't tell you, sir."

"Nor the names of the boys who fought?"

"No, sir."

"You know who they are?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"And you refuse to tell me?"

"I—I can't tell!" gasped Bobby, both hands clutched tightly upon the breast

of his jacket. It seemed to him as though the teacher must see the pounding of his heart.

"Robert," said Mr. Leith, "I do not like such actions as this. I will not allow a boy to refuse me answers to perfectly proper questions. Go to your class-room. You must not go to the gymnasium, nor out of doors at all, until I bid you. When you are not in classes, remain in your dormitory.

"I am disappointed in you, Robert. You have shown yourself to be a studious boy heretofore and not a ruffian."

"Oh, sir—"

"Silence! You may not have been one of the boys fighting; but you were aiding and abetting a ruffianly encounter between two of your schoolmates. It cannot be overlooked.

"I had hopes of you, Robert. We all had. Dr. Raymond himself had commended your course since you came to Rockledge. But no boy who wishes to stand in the honor class can break the rules of the school and then refuse to stand the full punishment for his act."

"Oh, Mr. Leith!" cried Bobby, brokenly. "I am not trying to get out of anything. Truly I'm not! Punish me all you want to, sir, but *don't* ask me to tell on the other boys. I can't do that."

"We shall see, Robert," said the teacher, grimly. "Return to your class-room."

Now began a very terrible time for Bobby Blake—or so it seemed to the heartsick boy. He held a secret that he could not speak of, and his refusal to reveal it broke down his chances of gaining that Honor Medal on which he had set his hopes.

Of course, it never entered his mind for a moment that he *could* tell—even though the other boys did not realize what he had been through with Mr. Leith, and what his punishment was.

Fred and Sparrow, made friends by the emergency, with Jimmy Ailshine, waited for Bobby in a secure hiding place known to all four; but Bobby did not come. When they got back to the classroom at half past one, Bobby was there ahead of them.

His face was very red; he may have been crying, but Fred could not tell. The latter slipped a brief note to him:

"Did he catch you?"

Bobby nodded, but did not write back. Fred, after a while, slipped over another written question:

"Where's my cap?"

This time Bobby replied: "At the foot of the cliff. He doesn't know any of you. Keep still."

"Good old sport, Bobby," quoth Fred to Sparrow, when recitations were over

and they filed out. "Scubbity-*yow*! that was a soaker you gave me on the jaw. It's sore yet."

"I believe I'm going to have a black eye," revealed Sparrow, with pride.

They went off together, inseparable friends for the time being. Bobby remained behind, taking his books into the big study.

Mr. Leith did not speak to him again. In fact, nobody came near him before supper. When the boys came in, giggling and talking, just as unable as usual to settle down quietly to the meal until an adult eye was turned threateningly upon them, Bobby entered, too, but with such a lump in his throat that he felt that he could scarcely swallow a mouthful.

Nobody noticed his condition but Pee Wee, and he only to seize upon the pudding that Bobby could not touch. "You act as if you had the mumps and couldn't swallow," whispered the fat boy. "But what you can't eat I'll get rid of for you, Bobby."

Three wistful days passed. Bobby remained indoors, and the boys knew that he was being punished. Only three knew what for, and they did not know how much.

"Good old scout, Bobby!" said Shiner, clapping him on the shoulder. "Wild horses wouldn't get anything out of you, eh!"

Fred began to eye his chum askance. Thoughtless as the red-haired one usually was, he began to worry.

Then Mr. Leith called Bobby to him again.

"Will you tell me who was fighting down there at the corner?" he asked.

"Please—please do not ask me, sir!" begged the boy.

"Ahem! you are still stubborn, are you!"

"Ye—yes, sir," said Bobby, not knowing what else to say.

"Very well. I shall keep you indoors no longer. I see that gentle means will not cure *your* trouble. At the last, I should have been tempted to keep the matter to myself and give you a chance for the medal. But I see leniency is wasted upon you.

"You may have your freedom, Robert. Nothing you can do now will wipe out the fact that you have deliberately refused to answer my questions. That is all."

And Bobby Blake forgot the Doctor's office door was unlocked!

He accepted the punishment of Mr. Leith as final. He knew he had lost all chance of winning the Medal of Honor. Young as he was, it seemed to him as

though his punishment was almost too great for him to bear!

CHAPTER XX
ON THE BRINK OF WAR

To everybody else, affairs at Rockledge School seemed to go on as ever. There were hard lessons, and easy lessons (the former predominating, the boys thought) and there were many, many good times as the season advanced.

Monatook Lake froze completely over. At first the boys were not allowed upon it; but when a team of horses, hitched to a pung, had been driven from shore to shore—from the edge of Rockledge town to Belden—word was given from the teachers' desks that skating on the lake within so many yards of the boathouse, would be allowed.

The gate-keeper set stakes, to which little red flags were attached, at the corners of the ice-bounds, and for a few days, at least, the Rockledge boys were satisfied with the restrictions.

They saw the Belden boys skating on their side of the lake, too, and other boys, from the two villages, who did not go to either school, skated where they pleased.

On half holidays bounds were released, but if the boys wished to skate the length of the lake a teacher went along. Owing to the feeling between the boys of the two schools, Dr. Raymond did not even test the Lower School with Barry Gray for monitor.

Bobby, of course, entered into all these sports. Even Fred thought that his chum's punishment had ended, and likely enough the red-haired boy had forgotten all about his interrupted fight with Sparrow Bangs.

Fred and Sparrow were the best of friends. To tell the truth, Bobby Blake was somewhat gloomy these days—he was not as much fun as usual.

Fred put it down to the fact of the mystery regarding Mr. and Mrs. Blake. Of course, a fellow could not be very jolly when he did not know for sure whether his father and mother were dead or alive!

However, Fred did not see how he could help his chum. He did his best to liven Bobby up; but was not very successful at it. It did really seem to Fred as though Bobby "gloomed about" altogether too much.

"It's all right for a fellow to feel badly about his folks," said Ginger to Spar-

row, who had become his confidant for the time being, "but you can't get him out of his grouch."

"He's trying to be too good," scoffed Sparrow. "I bet he's aiming to get the medal."

"Scubbity-*yow*!" ejaculated Fred. "That would be great!"

"Pshaw! he can't get it. No Lower School boy ever got it. I expect Barry Gray will be medal man *this* year."

"He won't get *my* vote," declared Fred, shaking his head.

"Why not, Ginger?"

Fred was used to this nickname now, and did not get mad at it, but he shook his head, and said:

"Just for *that*. Barry nicknamed me. He's too fresh."

"Aw, pshaw! you're prejudiced," laughed Sparrow.

None of the boys realized what the matter was with Bobby. And he would not tell Fred that he had anything to do with forming the cloud under which Bobby suffered.

The silence of his father and mother—the uncertainty about them—*did* trouble Bobby continually. Yet he had a deep-seated hope that all would come out right about them. Barry Gray's comforting words regarding the shipwreck had fired his imagination.

The thought, however, that no matter how well he stood in his classes, or how high his marks of deportment were, he could not win the Medal of Honor, disturbed the boy's mind.

Christmas week came. Bobby and Fred had intended to go home to Clinton for the short holiday, but the very day the term closed a great snowstorm set in. It snowed so heavily the first night that the railroads were blocked. Dr. Raymond would not let any of the boys leave the school, save two or three who lived near and whose people came for them in sleighs.

The good doctor telegraphed to the parents of his boys instead, and great preparations were made for a dinner and celebration at the school which would make the boys forget their disappointment.

Presents could arrive by express, too, by New Year's, and Dr. Raymond said that the actual distribution of gifts at Rockledge would be advanced one week. New Year's should be celebrated like Christmas.

The two and a half days' snow covered the lake two feet deep on a level. The ice had been more than a foot thick when it began to snow. In fact, the Rockledge and Belden icemen had been getting ready to cut, but would now have to put it over until after New Year's, because of the scarcity of labor.

There was no danger on the ice. There was not one airhole anywhere between the shore-fronts of the two schools—a stretch of nearly four miles of level,

glistening snow.

The boys of the Rockledge Lower School had had much fun, on half holidays, up the lake at the island where the winter camp had been built; but that was a long way to go over the snow. Nobody had ever tried snowshoeing and skiing, and the authorities at the school rather frowned upon these sports. However, the field of snow between the bluffs on which the rival schools were built was a vast temptation for a hundred active boys.

There was a snowball skirmish between the larger boys of the two schools the very first day after the storm ceased. Captain Gray and his crowd had met a bunch of Beldenites ("Bedlamites," the Rockledge boys called their rivals) near the first island—a little, rocky cone, now a snowy mound, and with only a few trees upon it.

The fight had been fast and furious as long as it lasted, but it was rather a good-natured one, after all. Finally Captain Gray and the captain of the Belden School met for a few minutes' conversation. In that few minutes a challenge was given and accepted. Unless the teachers interfered, it was arranged to have a general snow battle between the schools.

Free from lessons, and with most of the ordinary rules relaxed, Captain Gray could plan a coup that the enemy would not possibly expect. It had been agreed that the coming battle should be fought near the island, which was about in the middle of the lake between the two schools.

That night, after supper, Captain Gray picked a dozen boys to help him—and not all big boys, for Bobby and Fred were among them—and they slipped out of the house.

"We'll get the bulge on those Bedlamites," chuckled the captain. "Come on, now. Run!" and he set off in the lead.

He would not tell what was afoot, but every boy was excited enough to follow and obey.

They crossed the campus and went down the long flight of stairs to the boathouse. The cold was so intense, and the wind had blown so hard while it was snowing, that they crunched along right on top of the drifts, and the walking was easy.

There was no moon, but the stars gave them light enough. Besides, it is never really dark when the snow covers the ground.

The twelve boys speeded across the white expanse. Bobby and Fred were proud that they had been chosen by the bigger fellows to take part in this mysterious adventure.

Captain Gray insisted upon several snow-shovels being brought along, and as soon as they reached the island, he put them all to work. The idea was to fortify the islet and hold it against the expected attack next day of the Belden School.

"This will be a surprise to them," declared Gray, proudly. "I saw right off that whichever side could get this island and hold it, would have an advantage.

"Building breastworks down on the pond is all right, but from this height we can throw snowballs right into any breastworks that those fellows can build.

"A bunch of us will come out here to-morrow morning with our breakfasts in our hands (I've fixed it all up with Mary, the cook) and we'll hold this island till the crowd on both sides gets here."

Two hours' work under the direction of Barry turned the island (which was barely ten yards long) into a veritable fort. Within that time, the twelve boys had built the fortress, partly of bowlders that had been well placed by Nature, and pieced out the rock buttresses with thick walls of snow.

The party got back to school just before the retiring bell rang, and escaped a scolding only because the rules were relaxed for the holidays. In the cold, chilly dawn, half a dozen of the boys of Dormitory Two were awakened by the bigger fellows. Bobby and Fred were among them.

"Aw, crickey!" gaped Fred, burrowing in the pillow. "I don't want to get up now."

Bobby was out of bed in a moment. "Come along! It's going to be fun, Fred," he said.

Fred was lazy. He burrowed deeper. In about thirty seconds a large, juicy snowball, scooped off the window sill by Max Bender, was thrown into the back of Fred Martin's neck.

"Yee-ow!" yelled the startled Ginger, and rose up to fight back. The big boy ran, however, chuckling, and all Fred could do was to dress, grumblingly.

"All these big fellows are fresh," he confided to Bobby.

"I wonder what *we'll* be when we are as big as they are, and boss the school?" returned his more thoughtful chum.

That feazed Fred a little. By and by—as he finished his dressing—he admitted:

"Well, Bobby, I'd never thought of that!"

The guard thus called to duty by Captain Gray gathered, shivering, in the kitchen. Good natured Mary had risen an hour earlier than usual and made a big can of coffee, and there were sandwiches and doughnuts.

"Worth getting up early for, that's sure," announced Fred, becoming more content. "Won't Pee Wee be sore because he's not in this?"

They marched away with shovels and sleds. Overnight the smaller boys had made a lot of snowballs and they had been packed in boxes and put on the sleds. But before the early procession started, Barry examined all the boxes, and finding that somebody had made "soakers," he dumped them out.

"Let me catch any of you boys icing the ammunition, and I'll tend to you,"

he promised, angrily.

"Aw, those Bedlamites busted Frankie Doane's head open with a soaker last winter," complained Sparrow Bangs.

"We won't be mean just because they've been," declared Captain Gray. "You see that you're not guilty, Sparrow."

"Gosh!" muttered Fred, in Sparrow's ear, "don't that sound just like Bobby?"

"You bet! They're a pair. Guess Bobby's a copy-cat. He's following in Barry's 'feet-prints.'"

"Don't you say that!" flamed up Ginger, at once. "Bobby has *always* been like that. He's the fairest chap that ever was. If anybody's the copy-cat, it's old Captain Gray!"

Neither of the boys in question beard this, and it was just as well perhaps that they didn't.

It was scarcely daylight when the party reached the island. They did not see a Belden boy stirring on the farther bank of the lake. After setting the tasks to be done by these guards, Barry went back to the school, leaving Max Bender in charge of the fortress.

Max was rather a lazy fellow, and he always let the smaller boys do his work—if they would agree. He was good natured enough about it.

He sat down in a sheltered place, and had Bobby and Fred cut the under branches of the firs for firewood, and they soon had a nice little fire going.

This might attract the attention of the enemy to the fort, but Max did not care for that.

"You boys keep on making snowballs. You'll have to make them outside the fort—down on the ice, there, and then you can draw them in on the sleds. Get busy now."

"What are *you* going to do?" demanded Ginger Martin, rather perkily.

"Never you mind, youngster," returned Max. "You never read of the officers in authority getting on the firing line, do you? I've got to stay up here and keep watch, and plan the defense of the island."

"Oh, crickey!" exclaimed Ginger, scornfully. "You're a regular Napoleon—*not*!"

And it was a fact that, had the younger boys holding the fort depended upon Bender's watchfulness, the Beldenites would have been upon them unannounced.

Naturally the boys making snowballs did so on the side of the island facing Rockledge School. The island hid from them the Belden side of the lake.

But suddenly Bobby, who had dragged in a heavy sled load of snowballs, and was packing them securely in a pile behind an upper fortification, chanced to stand up to stretch his limbs and looked over the breastwork.

"Oh, look here!" he yelled. "Here's the Bedlamites right onto us!"

And it was true. The captain of the rival school had seen what the Rockledge boys were about—or he had suspected it, seeing the smoke of Max Bender's fire.

He had brought out his whole crew, and the vanguard of Belden boys was now but a few yards from the shore of the snow-covered and embattled island. They were making the attack in silence, and hoped to take the garrison of the fort by surprise.

CHAPTER XXI
GIVE AND TAKE

Bobby was scared at first by his sudden discovery. Here the Belden boys were coming on the rush, and there was only a handful of Rockledge boys—ten in all—at the island, to stand the unexpected charge.

Hi Letterblair, the captain of the Belden School, was at the head of the charging column. He and eight of the biggest boys of Belden were very near the island already.

Directly in the rear of the vanguard were a dozen smaller boys with schoolbook bags over their shoulders. Bobby knew by the bulky appearance of these receptacles, that they were full of snowballs.

Some distance behind were the rest of the Belden boys, dragging sleds heaped with ammunition. The entire force of the enemy was approaching.

Bobby wheeled about, even before he cried out, save for that first exclamation of surprise, to look at the Rockledge shore. There was not another Rockledge boy in sight save those at the island.

"What's the matter!" lazily demanded Max Bender, warming his hands over the tiny blaze.

"Look! Look!" repeated Bobby, turning to point again. "Here they come!"

"Here *who* come?" asked Bender, jumping up.

He shuffled up to the place where Bobby stood. One look he gave and then vented his amazement in a long whistle.

"My goodness!" he muttered. "They've got us beaten before we even begin."

"Aren't we going to fight?" demanded Bobby, with energy.

"What! fight the whole bunch—just us few?"

"Of course. We've got the island—"

"And a fat time we'd have trying to keep it," grunted Max.

"Why, you're a quitter!" exclaimed the smaller boy, under his breath. He whirled and waved his hands to the boys below, busy making snowballs. "Get up here, fellows—in a hurry!" he cried. "Here come the Bedlamites."

"Scubbity-*yow*!" was Ginger Martin's response, and the red head came on the run. A fight was meat and drink to Fred.

The other boys hurried up the slope, too. Bobby yelled to them to bring in the sleds and all the ammunition.

In making the fortress the evening before, and in rolling "snow bombs" to fling down upon the heads of the enemy should they get to close quarters, the island itself had been for the most part swept clean of snow. The bulwarks of the fortress were as tall as most of the boys defending it at the present moment.

"We're going to get licked," muttered Max Bender again.

Sparrow grinned at Ginger. "I always believed Bender was a softie," he whispered. Ginger nodded, but he looked at Bobby.

"We've *got* to hold on here till Captain Gray gets over with reinforcements," the boy from Clinton was saying, eagerly.

"Sure we have!" agreed most of the ten, in chorus.

"And the way to do it is not to let those Belden fellows see how few in numbers we are," said Bobby, thoughtfully. "We have heaps of ammunition. We'll beat them off till Captain Gray comes."

"We can't do it," declared Max Bender, with conviction.

Fred turned on him with his face as well as his hair aflame: "You're a healthy lieutenant, you are!" he snarled. "Why didn't Captain Gray leave a baby in command? Come on! you can fling snowballs, can't you, like Bobby says?"

"Well—But these fellers will surround the island and then they'll get us," croaked Max.

Sparrow laughed sneeringly. It was Bobby who replied.

"If you propose to run, you start now before the fight begins," he said, gravely. "Then they'll think we're sending a messenger for reënforcements, not that one of our side is a coward and is running away."

"Hurrah!" yelled Sparrow.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" exclaimed Ginger. "Now he's got it."

Max Bender was actually pale. He was scared to fight and he was scared to run! In truth his position was pitiable.

But Bobby Blake gave the big fellow very little attention. The other boys just naturally looked to Bobby to lead them.

"Don't show yourselves, fellows, if you can help it. Don't throw too quickly; we don't want to waste ammunition. Let's all line up along here now, and one of us peek over and give the word to fire—"

"I'll do that!" cried the excited Mouser Pryde.

"Yes you will!" sneered Fred. "I'd like to see you. Bobby's bossing this."

"That's right!" exclaimed Sparrow, generously. "If this big simpleton, Bender, won't take the lead, let Bobby do it."

"Sure! let Bobby do it!" shouted the others.

Bobby, his eyes flashing, his cheeks red with excitement, did not argue the point. Of course he wanted to lead—what boy would not?

Besides, he believed they could hold the Beldenites off until reinforcements came. Max Bender stood beside him, packing a snowball tighter, and said nothing. Bobby jumped up and looked over the high parapet. It was almost two feet across at the top, and lots thicker at the bottom. The inside was cut straight up and down, but outside it sloped.

Bobby could stand upon a rock and see over the top of the wall. Hi Letterblair and his crowd was now quite near. When Bobby popped up Hi saw the Rockledge boy.

"Hurrah!" yelled the Belden leader. "Come on, fellows! Charge!"

"Let's fire at them, Bobby!" gasped Fred, fairly dancing up and down in his eagerness.

"No. They're too far away yet. Hold your fire."

"Till we see the whites of their eyes—just like Bunker Hill!" exclaimed Sparrow Bangs.

"They'll hammer the life out of us if they get up here," grumbled Max.

Bobby turned on him suddenly. Big as Bender was, he was doing all he could to scare the rest of the garrison.

"You be still!" commanded Bobby. "If you won't fight, run; but if you stay with us, you keep your mouth shut and throw snowballs as hard as you can!"

And actually, big as he was, the pale faced Max did not reply!

Bobby whirled back to look over the parapet. His eyes danced and he was so excited that he could scarcely keep still.

"Now!" he cried. "Up and at them! Fire three each, and then drop down. And take aim—*do* take aim!"

Most of the boys obeyed him. The snowballs flew in a shower upon the advancing enemy. With the advantage of their position, the Rockledge boys pelted the on-comers well.

Belden's leader brought up his whole force before he attempted to reply to the fusillade. Letterblair knew that they would have to get nearer to pelt their missiles at the garrison with any precision.

Behind the wall of snow and rock, Bobby said:

"Now, three more snowballs. Get ready!" Each boy could hold two missiles in his left hand while he threw the third. The idea was to get in the fusillade and

then drop out of sight before the enemy could return the compliment.

"All ready?" cried Bobby again. "Come on, now! Let them have it!"

Up jumped the nine youngsters and saw that Hi Letterblair and his crew was now very near the island.

"Shoot!" yelled the captain of the Belden boys.

They were at a disadvantage, however. They had to throw up, while the Rockledge garrison threw down.

The missiles from the island-fortress descended upon the charging enemy with considerable force. Before the Beldens could return the fire, Bobby and his crowd dropped out of sight again.

The Beldens cheered. Bobby popped up, saw that they were still advancing, and gave the order for another volley.

"At them again!" he shouted.

Fred was yelling his battle-cry like a crazy boy, and Shiner and Sparrow were scarcely less excited. In the midst of one of Fred's vociferous shouts, *slam* came a snowball right into his mouth!

"Oh! oh! that was a soaker!" cried Sparrow.

Fred was hopping mad. He wanted to keep on firing at the enemy when Bobby gave the command to dip down for another supply of ammunition.

"Obey the captain!" bawled Howell Purdy.

"Get ready!" called Bobby, steadily. "Don't throw so wild. They are getting too near for comfort."

"They'll just give us *fits* when they get up here," murmured the shaking Max.

"I never *did* see such a lump of uselessness," grumbled Mouser. "Did you, Bobby?"

"Come on!" shouted the young leader of the defenders. "Give them as good as they send—and take what they send us laughing."

The Rockledge boys popped up again. Their last volley had stopped the Belden boys. Some of the youngsters had run away with the ammunition. Hi Letterblair had halted his party to make new snowballs.

"Give it to them!" shouted Bobby, and down upon the attacking party hurtled another well-aimed volley.

They drove the besiegers back several yards, but now Hi Letterblair saw that there was but a small garrison on the island. He saw only boys from the Rockledge Lower School, and it was evident that Captain Gray was not present.

He called a council of war, and soon the Belden party began to spread out and quickly surrounded the island. Bobby and his crowd were completely hemmed in.

"What did I tell you?" whined Max Bender. "Now we *can't* get away at all."

"You had your chance to go," Bobby said, with scorn. "We can beat the whole crowd off—for awhile, at least. We have plenty of snowballs."

"But there's not much snow to make any more," said Howell Purdy.

"We should worry!" exclaimed Sparrow. "We'll throw them just as fast as we can, as long as they last."

"No use in trying to throw so far," advised Bobby. "We have the advantage of them, anyway. They have to throw higher than we do."

Soon a shower of snowballs was flung at every head which appeared above the ramparts. Nor could Bobby and his friends remain in hiding all the time. If they did so, the Beldens would soon charge and rout them by the weight of superior numbers.

It was only by returning the enemy's fire with vigor and precision that the Rockledge boys held the fort at all. Hi Letterblair had ten or a dozen big boys massed to make a charge; Bobby could see that.

Therefore the young leader of the defending party urged his followers to concentrate their attack upon the captain of the Belden School.

"Keep them off! we've *got* to keep them off till Captain Gray gets here," panted Bobby.

"Hurrah! here they come!" yelled one of the smaller boys, suddenly.

Bobby shot a glance toward the Rockledge shore. Indeed, there they did come! With Captain Gray and the school flag at their head, the bulk of the Rockledge boys were coming across the snow-covered lake towards the island.

"Keep still! don't wake them up!" begged Bobby, before anybody else could cheer. "If the Bedlamites don't know they're coming till they get here—why, all the better."

The appearance of reënforcements put pluck into Max Bender. He began to hurl snowballs with more precision and with more force. He became very active. Hi Letterblair's crew of big boys charged only half heartedly.

The boys behind the ramparts almost smothered them before the attacking party got upon the island. They had chosen the easiest ascent, but only one of the attackers reached the snow-wall.

Instantly half a dozen hands reached for this plucky enemy, and it was Max who hauled him over into the fort and sat on him.

"Hurrah! we've got a prisoner!" yelled Howell Purdy, dancing up and down.

"What'll we do with him, Bobby?" demanded Fred.

"Huh! *I* captured him," grumbled Max. "I guess I'll do what I please with him."

"While we're fooling with that fellow, the others will get up here," declared Shiner.

"Come on! here they come!" shouted Bobby, who was ever on the watch.

The second charge of Hi and his cohorts was resultless to either party. And then, almost immediately, Captain Gray and the rest of the Rockledge boys came upon the Beldens.

Hi Letterblair ordered his party to face about, and brought up the smaller boys from the other side of the island. At once the garrison of the fort leaped upon the ramparts and drove down a withering fire upon the enemy.

Thus held between two fires, the Beldenites were driven back around the island, and out of shot from the fortress. Captain Gray ordered his army to spread out and hold them at bay.

They had dragged out from the shore thousands of snowballs. The Rockledge party had ammunition enough to last for hours, both in the fort and on the sleds.

Captain Gray hurried into the fort. Max had let the prisoner up and the boys were all dancing about excitedly.

"You fellows did fine!" cried Barry Gray, his eyes shining. "Max! you're all right! You held them off in fine shape."

"They gave us a hard rub, Barry," said the big fellow, coolly. "And I yanked this chap inside when they charged."

His statement was perfectly correct—as far as it went; but for Max to accept praise for the defense of the fort struck most of the smaller boys dumb. Not Fred Martin, however.

"Well I never!" gasped the red-haired boy. "Will you listen to *that*? Talk about the brass cheek of him!"

"What's the matter with you, Ginger?" demanded Max, scowling.

"Say! do you think you can get away with it?" shouted Fred. "*You* getting thanked for holding this island? Why, Barry," he cried, turning on the captain, with blazing eyes, "that big simpleton wanted to give up the fort and run away when he saw the Bedlamites coming. Yes he did! I'll leave it to Sparrow and the rest of the boys."

Sparrow shouldered his way to the front. "That's right, captain," he said. "Max was having a fit of shivers here, and wouldn't give orders. Bobby fought us."

"Sure he did!" cried Shiner and Howell Purdy together. "It was Bobby who did it. We'd have been whipped, if it hadn't been for Bobby."

"Well, did I say he *didn't* do his share?" snarled Max Bender, the wind all taken out of his sails. "I—I had a headache, anyway. And I *did* grab this fellow prisoner."

He looked around for the boy in question. But while they had been arguing,

the Belden boy had slipped out of the fort and made his escape.

CHAPTER XXII
WHAT BOBBY SAID

The battle between the Rockledge and the Belden Schools continued furiously until noon. The former had the advantage because of their entrenchments on the island, but Hi Letterblair was not a bad general, and Barry and his helpers were often put to it to hold the enemy in check.

At one time when the Rockledge troops made a sally, four of them were captured and were held prisoners for an hour. Then they were rescued, Bobby and Fred being of the rescuing party.

Altogether the snow-battle was carried on in good temper, but there could not help being some rough work, especially when it came to hand-to-hand encounters.

Fred Martin and Ben Allen, one of the Lower School boys on the other side of the lake, had a short and vigorous fist fight in one scrimmage, and the captains put them out of the battle and sent them back to their respective schools in disgrace.

Noon came and an armistice was declared until the next morning at nine o'clock. It was agreed that the battle should begin just as it left off—with Rockledge holding the island against Belden.

The masters of both schools had begun to take an interest in the snow fight and that afternoon Dr. Raymond gave a pleasant talk to his boys in the big study, on the science of battle formation and military maneuvers.

The boys were interested. Captain Gray tried to put into execution in the next forenoon's fighting some of the advice the Old Doctor had given them. But Hi Letterblair had been advised by his instructors, too.

The teachers from both schools walked over to the island to watch the fight. It was a less rough-and-tumble affair than that of the previous day's battle, and in the end Rockledge lost the fort and island to the enemy.

Time was called, and both sides retired to renew the battle on the third morning. Captain Gray instructed his followers just what to do, and, at the beginning of the third morning's attack, Rockledge had recovered the fort, and captured half the Belden School in less than an hour!

It was great fun, and the boys learned to keep their tempers better as the fighting continued on more scientific lines. A storm came on and spoiled the fun, however, for the rest of the week.

Captain Gray came to Bobby and said: "You're all right! I've been getting the facts about that fight you put up at the island, holding off the Belden crowd, and it was smart of you.

"I thought Max Bender had more gumption in him. But he's a big bluff. Well! we won't talk about him. But I've told the Old Doctor what you did—"

"I didn't do any more than the other fellows," said Bobby, rather sheepishly. "They all put up a good fight."

"Sure! But they all say you did it—you kept them at it, and told them what to do. And Hi Letterblair says he'd have taken the fort right then, if it hadn't been for you. Oh, you can't escape the credit for it, old chap!"

Bobby knew that, although the boys might praise him, and even the Old Doctor himself might be his friend, there was one member of the faculty who did not approve of him. Mr. Leith seldom spoke to him, save when it was necessary in class-room.

New Year's Day came, and the presents from home were given out in the big hall after breakfast. It was a time of great hilarity and fun; but Bobby had hard work to keep back the tears when there were put into his hands presents addressed in his mother's and his father's writing—presents prepared far back in the summer before they had gone on that fatal voyage, and left in the care of Mrs. Martin.

Michael Mulcahey and Meena had not forgotten the boy, either. Their little presents breathed of love and friendship. Meena had a tender place in her heart for Bobby, after all. Michael wrote that she had refused to marry him on Christmas day, for the seven hundred and fifteenth time!

It was hard work by this time for Bobby Blake to believe that Gray's imaginary shipwreck was the real truth. Surely, if his parents were alive, some word must come from them.

The owners of the steamship that had been lost had never heard from any survivor. The newspapers had ceased to speak of the affair. It had become one of the many marine mysteries recorded within the last few years.

"S'pose you shouldn't ever hear about them till you grew up, Bobby?" suggested Fred, with awe. "They'd come home, and find you grown up and living in the same house, and—"

"I wouldn't be living there," declared Bobby, choking back that big lump that *would* rise in his throat.

"Where'd you be?" demanded Fred, in wonder.

"When I'm big enough, I'll go off and look for them."

"You will? Way down to Brazil?"

"I'd search all over South America. Maybe some bad tribe of natives has them. I'll find and rescue them," said Bobby, nodding his head.

"Scubbity-*yow*!" cried the ever enthusiastic Fred. "That'll be great. I'll go with you, and we'll hide in the jungle, and catch a native and make him show us the way to the village where the captives are held.

"Crickey, Bobby! you'd make out you were a magician, and you'd have a storage battery, and things, and you'd show them blackies more magic than they ever saw before, and they'll kill their old medicine man and make you chief of the tribe.

"And then we can get into the temple where your folks are held prisoners, and release them. We'll all get out through the secret passage and take enough gold and precious stones with us to load a donkey, and come home as rich as mud! Say! it's a great idea."

"Well! what do you think of *that*?" was Bobby's comment. "You must have been reading some of Sparrow's story-papers."

"Huh! they're jolly good stories."

"Wait till the Old Doctor catches him at it," said Bobby. "Those are just foolish stories. Nothing ever really happens like it says in those stories."

"Aw—well," said Fred, grinning, "it would be great if they *did* happen, wouldn't it?"

Lessons began right after New Year again, and it seemed harder than ever to buckle down to them because of the fun that week between Christmas and the first of the year.

"Wish it would be vacation all the time," grumbled Pee Wee, who had spent several days in bed because of the way he had abused his stomach.

"Goodness, Pee Wee!" exclaimed Bobby. "If every day was a holiday, you'd be sick all the time."

"No I wouldn't," returned the fat boy, who had figured the thing all out. "If we had holiday dinners every day, I'd get used to them and wouldn't get sick. See?"

Although Bobby had concluded that he had no chance at all for the Medal of Honor, he tried to stand as well as he could in his classes, and never again did Mr. Leith, or anybody else, catch him in an infraction of the rules of the school.

Not that he refused to go in for any legitimate fun, but he kept out of mischief, and did his best to keep his chum and the other boys of the Lower School out of trouble, too.

After that first snow-ball fight with Belden at the island, Bobby Blake became quite an influence among the smaller boys of Rockledge. The story of his taking charge of the defense of the island, after the defection of Max Bender, was

common property, although Bobby himself would never discuss the matter.

Off and on, there was both snow and ice for two months following the great battle, but the boys had only the two half holidays a week in which to play on the frozen lake.

By and by the lake became unsafe, too, and, after a time came the spring thaw, the ice went out, and the boys could get into the boats again.

Every morning when he got up, Bobby ran to the window first of all and sniffed the moist, sweet air. Spring was on the way. And spring sets the blood to coursing more swiftly in the veins of every healthy boy.

For two months the boys of the Second Dormitory had not seen their camp in the woods on the larger island at the other end of Lake Monatook. When it was whispered around that there was a chance for a trip there the next Saturday, all were agreed.

Bobby and Pee Wee were the committee to "rustle up" the necessities for a feast at the camp. No potatoes and corn this time of year; the school commissary department had to be approached.

No boy in the school, save Barry Gray himself, had more influence with Mary, the head cook, than Bobby Blake. Like the other servants about Rockledge, the good woman knew all about the loss of Bobby's parents at sea. Besides that, he was always polite and friendly, and never mischievously tried to raid the pantry.

Pee Wee's influence lay in his inordinate love for sweet cakes and the like, for which he was always willing to spend his pocket-money. Many of the fat boy's dimes and quarters reached Mary's palm for "bites" between meals.

It chanced to be a good day with Mary, and the committee of two got the promise of a big hamper of good things for the first picnic of the year. Bobby had refused to be one of those who asked for the privilege of going up the lake. He knew that the request would have to be made to Mr. Carrin or Mr. Leith, and neither of them, he feared, were favorably inclined to him.

The permission was granted, however, and the crowd of nearly twenty boys raced down to the boathouse immediately after they were released from study at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning.

They had three boats, four boys at the oars in each. Some of the big fellows were going to get out the shells and begin practicing for the June regatta, but Bobby and his friends were eager to see their old camp.

"If those Bedlamites haven't found it and busted the camp all up," grumbled Pee Wee, pulling at an oar. "'Member how they pelted us with hot potatoes that time?"

"I hope they'll keep on their own side of the lake this spring," said Mouser.

"I expect they have as much right at the islands as we have," ventured

Bobby. "Only it ought to be 'first come, first served.'"

"We'll serve them out nicely, if they bother us this spring," grunted Fred, who was likewise pulling.

"We'll beat them as we did in the snowball fight," cried Shiner.

"If we can spell 'able,'" laughed Bobby.

"Aw, we'll spell it all right, won't we, Ginger?" demanded Sparrow Bangs.

"Let me at them—that's all," boasted Fred.

When they got to the upper island, there was nobody there. They pulled their boats ashore and went up into the wood. There was the shack they had built the previous fall, almost as good as new.

Of course, the roof was rotting and wet, but it was pretty dry inside and they patched up the walls and roof in a little while.

Then they built a fire, made cocoa, opened a can of condensed milk, and spread out the sandwiches and pie that Mary had furnished. In the midst of the picnic, a chunk of sod popped right into the tin cup out of which Pee Wee was drinking.

"Oh! who did that?" demanded the fat boy.

In a moment a big sod came slap into the fire, and scattered the burning brands. Then followed a fusillade from the woods on two sides of the camp!

"The Bedlamites! I see that Larry Cronk!" yelled Howell Purdy.

The feast was spoiled. The boys from the rival school had pulled up a lot of soft, wet turf, and they bombarded the boys from Rockledge nicely.

It was an uneven fight at first, for the picnickers had been totally unprepared for such an attack.

Nobody wanted to run, however, and Bobby and Sparrow stemmed the tide of defeat with pine-cones, until their mates could cut clubs and come to close quarters.

The Rockledge boys were driven out of their camp. With great hilarity, Larry Cronk and his mates held the camp, and drove off their antagonists every time they attacked.

"They're too many for us," growled Fred, when the Rockledge crew finally retired. "Why! there are four boatloads of them."

"I tell you," whispered Shiner, "let's get back at them."

"Crickey! we've been back at them enough," complained Pee Wee. "I'm beaten black and blue. And look at our clothes—all mud! We'll hear about this, when we get back to the school."

In fact, it was a sorrowful and angry group that went down to the boats. These were on one side of the island, while those belonging to the Belden boys were beached on the other side.

Shiner had whispered his bright idea to Bobby and some of the others.

Bobby was a little slow to accept it, but finally was convinced. The Beldens were watching them from the summit of the rocks.

Only one of the Rockledge boats was pushed into the water. Bobby, Shiner, Sparrow and Skeets Brody got in and took up the oars. They rowed away around the island.

Meanwhile the other boys collected a lot of pebbles as though they proposed to attack the Beldenites again. This would have been foolish, however, for the enemy had much the better position.

The two gangs were not above threats shouted to each other and make-believe dashes from either side. With volleys of stones and sod they kept up the interest in the fight for half an hour.

Then suddenly there came a shriek from some boy left on the other side of the island as a sentinel. He came flying, yelling his distress.

"Into the boats, boys!" Fred Martin commanded. "Bobby's got them."

They pushed off the two remaining boats and jumped in. At that moment the absent Rockledge boat appeared around the end of the island, and strung behind it, in one, two, three, four order were the boats belonging to the Belden boys. The latter were marooned.

"We've beaten them this time!" yelled Howell Purdy, with delight.

"You bet!" agreed Pee Wee. "We've been more'n a year getting them fixed just right. 'Member, Ginger, I told you and Bobby how those Bedlamites stole *all* our boats once? How about it now?"

There was great hilarity indeed. The boys from Rockledge manned the Belden boats and the whole flotilla pulled toward the south shore. At this place the lake was quite five miles wide and the island was in the middle. So the pull was quite arduous.

Besides, the wind had come up and there was a threatening black cloud mounting the sky. Soon thunder began to mutter in the distance, and the lightning tinged the lower edge of this cloud.

The first heavy thunder shower of the season was approaching.

As they rowed to the mainland, the Rockledge boys could see their enemies standing disconsolately on the shore, and wistfully looking after their boats.

"They'll get a nice soaking," declared Shiner. "Oh! maybe I'm not glad!"

"So am I," said Fred. "And we'll hide these boats—eh?"

"Sure," agreed Sparrow Bangs. "I know a dandy place right down at the edge of Monckton's farm. They wouldn't find them in a week of Sundays in the mouth of that creek."

The rain had begun to fall before the boys reached the shore. It was a lashing, dashing rain, with plenty of thunder and the sharpest kind of lightning. Several of the Rockledge boys were afraid of thunder and lightning, but they all

took shelter in an old tobacco barn—the farmers of the Connecticut Valley raise a certain quality of tobacco.

For an hour the storm continued. Then the thunder died away, and the rain ceased. By that time it was almost dark, and the boys stood a good chance of being belated for supper.

They hid the stolen boats and went home in their own. As they rowed steadily down the edge of the lake, they looked out across the darkening water to the island, and did not see a spark of light there.

"Maybe they haven't a match," said Bobby, suddenly, after a little silence.

"I should hope not!" snapped Fred.

"Anyway, there's no dry wood after this rain," said his chum.

"Good!" repeated the red-haired one.

"They're going to have a mighty bad time," ruminated Bobby. Fred only grunted, and Bobby fell silent.

Just the same, there was a troublesome thought in Bobby Blake's mind. He had little to say after they got to the school, and remained silent all through supper.

The boys had changed their clothes. The clouds had blown away and it was a starlit evening. They had their choice of playing outside for a while, or going to the big study until retiring hour.

"I say," said Shiner, going about quickly among the Second Dormitory lads, "Bobby wants us all in the gym. Something doing."

Jimmy Ailshine was a good Mercury. He got most of the boys who had been to the island together, in five minutes.

Bobby looked dreadfully serious; Fred was scowling; Sparrow looked as though he did not know whether to laugh, or not.

"Go on, Bobby!" advised Pee Wee, yawning. "What's doing!"

"I'll tell you," shot in Bobby, without a moment's hesitation. "We've done an awfully mean thing, and we've got to undo it."

"What's *that*?" demanded Howell Purdy, in amazement.

"What we did to those Bedlamites," said Bobby, firmly. "We mustn't let them stay there all night. Some of us have got to take their boats back so that they can get ashore."

CHAPTER XXIII

GOOD NEWS TRAVELS SLOWLY

The crowd of scatterbrained youngsters were smitten speechless for the moment. They stared at Bobby Blake, and then looked at each other curiously. Pee Wee was the first to find his voice.

"Aw, cheese it, Bobby!" he drawled. "You're kidding us."

"No. We've done a mean thing. We'll get them into trouble over to their school—"

"Good enough!" cried Howell Purdy, in delight.

"And maybe we'll get into trouble because of it, too," went on Bobby, seriously. "But whether we do, or we don't, we oughtn't to leave those fellows over there on the island all night. It's a mean trick."

"Say! haven't they played many a mean trick on us?" demanded Pee Wee, excitedly.

"That has nothing to do with it," said Bobby, still seriously. "It's cold and wet on that island. Maybe they are all soaking wet from the rain-storm. Suppose they should get cold—all of them—some of them—only *one* of them?"

This was rather a grave way to put it. Bobby was not much more thoughtful than other boys of his age—and he not eleven; but the thing had gripped him hard.

"I tell you," he said, quietly, "if none of you will go back with me, I'll go alone."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Pee Wee, "you couldn't row up there alone, Bobby Blake, let alone tugging those four boats after you."

"Well! and he doesn't have to—see?" snapped Fred Martin, dragging on his cap over his red hair. "I guess *two* of us can do something." He grinned rather sheepishly at Bobby.

"Three," said Sparrow Bangs, briefly.

"Me, too," said the Mouser. "You can stay home, if you want to, Pee Wee. *I'm* going."

"Oh—very well!" groaned the fat boy. "You can count me in."

"And me! And me!" cried several.

In the end there were two boats full of volunteers who left the Rockledge boathouse, known only to the man who had charge of it, and rowed up to Monckton's farm. There they dragged the four Belden boats out of the mud, and towed them across to the island.

It was pretty dark, for there was no moon. The marooned youngsters heard them coming and began to shout, believing that it was a rescue party from their own school.

Bobby and Fred stood up and yelled to them to come down to the shore for their boats. There was a good deal of bandying talk, and the two sets of boys said some sharp things to each other, but they separated without a fight.

"They'll tell, of course, and the Old Doctor will make an investigation," said

Fred, as they pulled for home.

"Sure!" groaned Shiner.

"But it won't be so bad for us as it would have been if we'd left them there for their own folks to find, and kept their boats hid," Pee Wee observed, with more thoughtfulness than he usually showed.

"And the Belden boys will be a deal more comfortable, eh?" chuckled Bobby.

There *was* an investigation. The Doctor conducted it himself. He went "back to the year one," as Barry Gray said, and considered all the causes of the rivalry between the two schools, and what each had done to the other.

The hot potato fight was taken into consideration, as well as the fact that the Belden schoolboys had once stolen every boat the Rockledge boys possessed, and hidden them for a week.

Then he rendered his decision: No party of boys without a teacher was to go to any of the islands. None of the boys were to venture across the lake to the Belden shore.

These decisions were repeated by the head of the Belden School, and from that time on there was less friction between the two institutions.

But, meanwhile, Dr. Raymond had heard all about Bobby Blake's action in the matter of the return of the boats to the marooned boys. He said nothing to Bobby about it, but he talked with his assistants.

This, too, made Bobby more popular with his mates. It had been the right thing to do, and, after all, boys respect a boy who is willing to do the right thing, even if it may make him unpopular for the time being.

The popularity that Bobby was winning at Rockledge School, however, was of a lasting kind. If Bobby said a thing, he meant it. If he made a promise, he stuck to it. He was no shirk, and no "goody-goody," and it began to be whispered around (goodness only knows how the story started) that Bobby might have a chance for the Medal of Honor if it was not for "Old Leith."

"What's Leith got it in for him for?" demanded the hot-headed Fred Martin. "What's Bobby ever done to him?"

"Something about Bobby's not giving away a fight," said Pee Wee, who had got the news pretty straight from a waitress, who had heard Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrin talking about it.

"Aw, get out!" muttered Fred, rather abashed. He suddenly remembered the fight he had started with Sparrow.

"Never was a Lower School boy yet that won the medal," said How Purdy.

"But we'd all pull for him—wouldn't we?" demanded Mouser. "I like Bob all right."

"I do, too," said Skeets Brody. "He was the only fellow that would stay in and play checkers with me, when I had the sore throat."

"He's done a lot of things for me," admitted Howell. "I haven't forgotten them."

"Well!" sighed Pee Wee. "I couldn't count the times Bobby's given me his pudding at supper."

"I guess we all like him," Sparrow said. "He's square as he can be. Old Leith hasn't anything against him, I don't believe. It's just his meanness."

"No," said Pee Wee. "It's because Bobby wouldn't tell on somebody. I put it up to Bobby myself, and he got mad and told me to mind my eye," and the fat boy grinned.

"Well! it gets me," said Shiner. "There haven't been many fights this year that Bobby could have been in. And he's not quarrelsome."

Fred said nothing. He was thinking hard, and from the expression on his face, it was apparent that his thoughts were not of a pleasant nature.

Bobby Blake certainly would have been surprised, had he known how his mates were talking about him. He went on his usual course now-a-days without much thought for the Medal of Honor.

Only, he did his best. For his absent mother's and father's sake, he did his best.

Where were they? The question was with him always. Deadened somewhat by time, the pain of his loss smarted just the same. He seldom mentioned the mystery, even to Fred. Nevertheless, there was at least one time in every day when he remembered it.

He was as earnest in his prayers at night for his parents' safety as ever he had been. He believed that some time he should hear good news.

It is famous that bad news travels quickly, while good news has leaden feet. It was so in this case.

The spring advanced. Mr. and Mrs. Blake had sailed from New York early in September, and nine months had nearly gone since then. The discovery of burned wreckage from the ship on which they had sailed was all the news that had ever come back to the United States regarding it.

There arrived in the port of Baltimore one day a bluff-bowed, frowsy-looking old two-stick schooner, with a tarnished figure-head under her patched bowsprit, dirty sails, and a bottom undoubtedly thick with barnacles.

She was the *Ethelina*, and she loafed into her dock as though she had never hurried within the knowledge of her owners. One of her owners stood upon her deck and gave orders—Captain Adoniram Speed.

His crew was partly made up of South American half-breeds, and the bulk of the crew of the steamship on which the Blakes had sailed, so long before, from New York.

The captain brought letters for various people from a trading station far

up a tributary of the Amazon. Had not a sharp reporter, nosing about for news on the Baltimore docks, gotten into conversation with Captain Speed, it is likely that the newspapers would never have obtained the full story of the loss of the steamship in question.

She had burned only a few hundred miles off the mouth of the Amazon. It was rough weather at the time and two of the boats' crews and most of the passengers had lost their lives before the *Ethelina* came loafing along and had taken the remainder of the survivors aboard.

The *Ethelina* was bound for an up-river station. She had no reason for touching at Para or any other big city of Brazil. She kept right on her course, and her course chanced to be the route to be followed by Mr. and Mrs. Blake, who were among the few passengers rescued.

The old hooker sailed up the Amazon, and several hundred miles up the tributary on which was situated the town of Samratam, which was the Blakes' goal.

The Blakes left letters for the captain of the *Ethelina* to bring back to civilization. Captain Speed had not considered it necessary to hurry these letters along.

He had waited to bring them himself, to mail at Baltimore. Good news surely had traveled slowly in this case. Almost at the time the old schooner was being warped into her dock at Baltimore, Mr. and Mrs. Blake, in good health, expected to leave Samratam for the United States!

The letters came in good time to Clinton, and to Rockledge School. Dr. Raymond sat before his great, flat-topped desk one warm May morning staring at a letter written on thin notepaper, with a packet of similar letters, wrapped in an oiled-paper wrapper, before him on the desk.

Somehow his spectacles were clouded, and he had to take them off and wipe them twice before he could finish reading the business-like lines.

The second time he wiped the glasses and set them astride his big nose, he saw a small figure standing in the open doorway.

"Ha! Robert!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"I sent for you, Robert," said the master of Rockledge School, in a very gruff voice—gruffer than usual, in fact.

"Yes, sir?" returned Bobby, timidly.

In spite of everything, he could not help being more than a little frightened of Dr. Raymond. He was so big, and he was so gruff when he spoke, and he had such searching eyes—usually—when he looked at one.

But stop! There was something entirely different about Dr. Raymond's eyes on this occasion. If Bobby Blake had not known that it was impossible, he

would have believed that there were tears in the Doctor's eyes.

"Robert," the gentleman said, finally, seeming to have some difficulty in getting his words out. "Robert, did you ever hear the old saying that 'no news is good news'?"

Bobby had no answer. His lips opened. He really *thought* he said "Yes, sir." But there was such a roaring in his ears, and his heart suddenly pounded so hard, that he could scarcely hear.

The furniture began to go around him in a sort of stately dance—and the good doctor went with the furniture! It was very curious. Bobby tried to rub his eyes free of the water that welled up, with his coat sleeves.

"Yes, Robert; 'no news is good news.' We haven't heard for months from those whom we wished to hear from. But always I have told you to keep up heart—"

Bobby could stand no more. He flung himself forward, around the corner of the great desk. He grabbed at the Doctor's coatsleeve before he could swim away from him again.

"My mother! my father! You've heard—?"

"They're all right, Robert! they're all right!" exclaimed the Doctor—and did his voice break strangely as he said it? "There, there, my boy! They're safe as can be and here's a whole packet of letters for you from them. Don't cry, my boy—"

But Bobby wasn't crying. It seemed to him that he never should cry again.

"Tell me!" he gasped, still clinging to the Doctor's arm. "Did—did she get her feet wet? Or is she all right? She didn't get the—the bron-skeeters, did she? Father was always afraid of that, if she got cold."

CHAPTER XXIV

RED HAIR STANDS FOR MORE THAN TEMPER

June had come. The regatta on Monatook Lake was but a few days away; Commencement followed. Even the boys of the Lower School were working hard to make up lost lessons these days.

Captain Gray was to graduate, and with him Max Bender and five of the other big boys. There would be at least seven new scholars to come to Rockledge the next September, for there were never less than fifty boys at the school and—as has been said—Dr. Raymond always had a waiting list.

Mr. Leith devoted most of his time to the older boys; but every fortnight, at least, he went over the reports of the entire school. He was a stiff and stern master, but he considered himself just. For that reason he called Bobby Blake to his desk one day and said:

"Robert, I am sorry there is a serious fault marked against you. In recitations you have done better than any boy in the Lower School and better than most in the Upper. But I do not like a stubborn boy; we can none of us—we teachers, I mean—excuse such a fault as that. I hear good reports of you in every direction, and your name has been mentioned among the few who stand a chance of winning the Medal of Honor.

"It is a most serious matter for a boy to refuse to answer proper questions put to him by those who have him in charge. You must learn this *now*. To obey is your duty. Do you realize that?"

"Yes, sir," said Bobby in a low tone, and swallowing hard. "I understand, sir."

What he understood was that, if he had been willing to tell on his chum, and Shiner, and Sparrow, he might have won the medal. *But he could not do that*!

He had never thought of taking the matter up with Dr. Raymond. An older boy—Captain Gray, for instance—might have gone to the Doctor and stated his side of the case. But Bobby did not question for a moment the right of Mr. Leith to put in that report against him.

It was pretty hard for the boy to bear. He wanted so much to write his parents that he had won the distinction of the gold medal Dr. Raymond had shown them on that first day of school. The Lower School was solid for Bobby and many of the older lads admired the pluck and good humor of the boy from Clinton. His strongest partisans were Fred Martin and Sparrow Bangs, who admired him so much because he was so different from themselves, perhaps.

Pee Wee was Bobby's staunch champion, too. The fat boy boldly declared his admiration for the Clinton boy in any company.

"There isn't another boy like him," Pee Wee said in gymnasium one day, when Bobby was absent. "Say! there's not one of you big fellows but what he's done a favor for—and more than once. I say—"

"Come! you needn't froth at the mouth over it," growled Max Bender.

"Huh! *you* haven't anything to say against Bobby," declared Pee Wee.

"I know I haven't," returned Max, red to his ears. "I'd vote for him right now. Barry can't get the medal anyway.

"He doesn't stand well enough in Latin and physics for one thing," pursued Max. "He knows it. Barry's a good fellow, and the Old Doc. is proud of him, I reckon; but he never was a bone for work."

Pee Wee was inspired by this statement to "root" all the harder for Bobby

Blake.

"He can get it, I know!" the fat boy kept saying. "There isn't another boy in the school stands as good a chance."

"But if Mr. Leith is bound not to vote for him, what chance is there for Bobby? Tell me that, now?" demanded Fred Martin.

"What's Old Leith got against him?" asked one of the other boys.

"Oh, it's that fight," said Pee Wee, with a side glance at Fred.

"You've said that before," Skeets Brody observed. "I don't know about any fight Bobby's been in since he came here."

"Oh, *he* wasn't in it," returned Pee Wee.

Fred's face colored deeply. He waited his chance and got the fat boy aside. "What's all this about Bobby fighting?" he demanded. "You know something more than you're telling."

"*You* know," said the fat boy.

"No, I don't!"

"Yes, you do; and Sparrow knows, and Shiner knows—"

"That old thing!" exclaimed Fred. "Who told you about it? And it happened months ago."

"Old Leith doesn't forget easily. You and Sparrow had a scrap, didn't you?"

"Who told you so?"

"Never you mind. I know you are as thick as thieves now," grinned Pee Wee. "But there was a time when you and Sparrow were going to knock each other's heads off. Isn't that so?"

"Aw—it wasn't a fight," growled Fred.

"And Bobby was in it."

"What if he was?"

"Leith knows. He caught Bobby somehow. And Bobby wouldn't tell on the rest of you," said Pee Wee. "That's how he got in bad with Mr. Leith, and it's what is going to keep him out of winning that medal—yes, it is!"

"Wow! I didn't know it was like that," gasped the red-haired boy. "Bobby ran back for my cap. I remember now. I thought Leith only punished him by keeping him shut in for three days."

"Huh! that's the *how* of it, is it?"

"He never said a word about it," declared Fred, gulping. "He's never peeped that Old Leith was holding it up against him."

"I know," declared Pee Wee, nodding. "He tried to make Bobby tell on you fellows, and Bobby wouldn't. So that busted up his chance of getting the medal."

"Why!" murmured Fred, "he's been working just as hard for it all the time."

The fat boy seemed to have a little better appreciation of Bobby's character than his own chum. "Why!" he said. "I reckon Bobby would do his best anyway.

He's that kind of a fellow."

Fred went to the dressing room and slowly got out of his gymnasium suit and stood under the shower. He was puzzled and disturbed. It was not his way to think very deeply.

But red hair stands for something besides a quick temper. Such hair usually belongs to a warm heart. Fred, if thoughtless, was as loyal to his chum as Damon was to Pythias, and all boys have read the story of those famous friends.

Fred had taken it for granted that Bobby's punishment, on that long-past occasion, was completed when he had remained indoors at Mr. Leith's command. Fred did not suppose it had gone farther.

Bobby had never said a word. Of course, he *would not* have! that was Bobby's way.

It smote Fred Martin hard that if Bobby lost his chance to win the medal, it would be partly his fault. And Bobby had tried to keep him out of the fight with Sparrow, in the first place!

The fight had not done him, or Sparrow, or Shiner, a bit of harm. He and Sparrow had been the best of friends ever since that day in the "bloody corner"! But poor Bobby—

"It's a mean shame," Fred muttered to himself. "Old Leith's not fair. What business has he got holding that against Bobby! He's punishing Bobby for *our* sins. It's a shame!"

Thinking about it, or talking about it, was not going to help his chum in the least. Fred had been a little afraid that some of the reports that had gone home to his father would call forth from Mr. Martin sharp criticism. He knew he did not stand any too well in his own classes, and in deportment.

He had not been caught in any great fault. However, if Mr. Leith knew that he had been fighting that day in the corner, it would mean a big, black smear on his report for the year. That was just as sure as could be.

"And Dad said if I didn't show up good this year, he'd take me into the store and make me run errands, and send me back to public school," thought Master Fred.

"Gracious! that would leave Bobby here alone. Not to come back to Rockledge next fall—"

The red-haired boy could not bear to think of such a calamity. It was certainly most awful to contemplate.

He got into his clothing and wandered out of the gymnasium. Nobody chanced to speak to him and he stood on the school steps for some minutes turning a very hard problem over in his mind.

And then a thought, like a keen-bladed rapier, stabbed Fred right in his most vulnerable point—his conscience!

"What does it matter if Bobby *does* appear cheerful? *You're wrong*!

"Oh, crickey!" groaned the red-haired boy, and he turned square around and climbed the steps. With dragging footsteps he made his way to Mr. Leith's class-room, where he knew he should find the master correcting examination papers.

Pee Wee, having gotten hold of one end of the thread, unraveled the whole piece in short order. He soon had the truth out of Sparrow and Shiner about the long-forgotten fight in "bloody corner."

The fat boy was something more than a gossip, however. He, whose mind seemed usually interested mainly in food, proved that he could think of something else.

He wasted little time on the Lower School but it was not long before every other boy at Rockledge knew how Bobby had pluckily—and silently—suffered for the wrong three other boys had done.

Pee Wee knew that the threat of the loss of the medal had hung over Bobby all the time. He—and the other boys, too—knew that Bobby's record was otherwise clean.

"Vote for Bobby Blake—he's all right!" became the rallying cry all over the school, and even Captain Gray took it up.

"You know, fellows," he said to his particular chums, "I haven't a ghost of a show for the medal. I'd like to get it, but your votes wouldn't win it for me. And I declare! beside Bobby, I don't think I deserve it."

The boys had a chance to express their individual opinion about the winner of the medal by secret ballot, several days before the actual vote was taken. In this way the teachers learned just who was most popular with the boys at large.

A slip was given each boy in class, on which was printed "First Choice," "Second Choice," "Third Choice." Every fellow in the Lower School wrote Bobby's name against each choice!

And when the teachers, Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrin, came to count the votes from the other boys, Bobby's name predominated by a good majority. There were still some faithful to Barry Gray, and one or two other boys were named for the medal; but on every slip save two, Bobby's name appeared as either first, second, or third choice. Those two particular slips did not have Barry Gray's name on them, either, and the astute teachers recognized the handwriting of Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks!

If, after this first ballot, there were names voted for, whose owners could not possibly win the medal, because of their standing with the teachers, the fact was to be made known by the Doctor. The whole school waited, most anxiously,

for Dr. Raymond's decision in this case.

The regatta came in between. That was the great sporting event of the spring between the two schools which faced each other on opposite sides of Lake Monatook.

There were two-oared races, four-oared races, and then the big race of the day—the trial of speed between the eight-oared shells. The Rockledge boys thought Captain Gray and the others, in their white jerseys with a crimson "R" on each side, were "a pretty nifty crew," when they entered their boat and pushed out to the starter's place.

The Belden crew had rowed over from their side of the lake. The course was laid on the Rockledge side and was two miles in length—a mile straight away, then round the post and return to the starting point.

The younger boys forgot all other things and rooted for Gray and his crew with all the strength of their lungs. They were massed on a part of the bluff where they could see the whole race, and their friends and parents and the townspeople were on hand in force to add to the excitement of the occasion.

Clinton was too far away for Mr. and Mrs. Martin to come to the closing exercises of the school. Mr. Martin could not leave his store long enough for that, and there were too many children at home for Fred's mother to leave for over night.

The chums got warm letters from them, and there were presents for both Fred and Bobby. When the latter saw his mother's handwriting on his package, and knew that she had thought of this time so long ahead, and prepared for it, he was more touched than he had been by the Christmas presents that had reached him from the same source.

Fred was rather woebegone these last few days. "Wow! wait till Dad sees my report," he said, hopelessly. "He'll be sorry he sent me this watch and chain."

Nevertheless, both lads wore their watches very proudly. They were just what they had longed for, and although the timepieces were not very valuable, they were good, practical instruments.

The boys held them now, as they watched the racing shells, and came pretty close to knowing by how many seconds the Rockledge crew beat the Belden, when the shells raced down to the starter's boat.

There was an extra supper that night. Mary baked an enormous cake, with candles on it, and the date of the winning of the boat race traced in pink frosting. This was set down in the middle of the upper table, and Captain Gray had the honor of cutting it. A good-sized piece was sent around to each boy, and Gray was called on for a speech.

The handsome, well-dressed lad was not afraid to speak in public. He was a bit forward but goodhearted. Yet perhaps the Doctor was just as well suited

that Barrymore Gray should not be in line for the Medal of Honor.

There was a certain conceit about his character which had always troubled the good doctor; yet Barry had carried off the duties of his captaincy with success.

Frank Durrock was appointed captain for the coming year, and *he* was called on for a speech, too, having rowed bow in the winning shell. Frank was another sort of a boy. He could only nod his thanks and sit down in confusion.

The youngsters cheered Barry and laughed at Frank; yet they all liked the latter pretty well, too.

The Doctor himself covered Frank Durrock's confusion by making a little speech. His last words were: "And now, boys, to-morrow we decide upon the winner of the Medal of Honor. All electioneering must cease to-night, you know. Be prepared to-morrow to settle for yourselves who is the most popular candidate. You are dismissed."

CHAPTER XXV
THE WINNER

Pee Wee was so full of tickle that he was not sleepy! His father and mother had been up for the regatta, and were staying at the Rockledge Hotel until the school closed for the year.

Mr. Wise was a rich man and he could afford to do about anything that Pee Wee wanted him to do. There was something now on Pee Wee's mind and, as Fred said, "he'd have to get it out of his system or he couldn't go to sleep."

"Wait till the other boys are asleep," whispered the fat boy. "I'm going to keep pinching Mouser so he'll keep awake. You fellows pinch each other."

The beds of Bobby and Fred, and Pee Wee and Mouser Pryde, were side by side. It rather tickled Bobby and Fred to think they should keep each other awake in the way the fat boy suggested; but that he carried it out in Mouser's case was very evident from the occasional grunts and objections from the latter.

The chums from Clinton kept themselves awake by asking each other riddles, and telling stories. Fred had one "giggly" joke that went as follows: "Say, Bobby, do you know they're going to close the public library down town?"

"What for?" demanded his chum.

Just then Pee Wee's shrill whisper reached them: "Cheese it! Come here, fellows. I have something to tell you—honest!"

The dormitory was quite silent, save for the four boys in the corner. Fred slipped out of bed and Bobby followed him. Pee Wee and Mouser were sitting up in their own beds.

"Now listen," whispered the fat boy. "Just as soon as school's out, my folks are going to Bass Cove. We go there every summer. It's a dandy place—you bet!"

"All right. We've heard about that before," said Mouser, yawning. "You might let a fellow go to sleep and wait till morning to tell us your chestnuts."

"I've a good mind not to tell *you* at all," grunted Pee Wee.

"Say! you're not telling any of us very fast," whispered Fred, giving the fat boy a poke. "Get busy! some of the others will wake up."

"I'll tell you," whispered Perry Wise, earnestly. "I have the grandest father! He says I can have you three down to Bass Cove, if your folks will let you come. What do you know about *that*?"

"Oh—fine!" gasped Fred, when he could get his breath.

All three of the boys had heard about that summer place. Pee Wee was never weary of talking about it.

"Sure he'll let us come?" demanded Mouser, wide awake on the instant.

"That's what I said. I've been asking him in my letters. And he saw you today—and mother, too—and he said 'yes.' He liked you all—'specially Bobby—and he says you all can come."

"Say!" gasped Fred. "That'll be great. Won't it, Bobby?"

"I should say," admitted his chum. "And I was wondering what would become of me before my folks got home again."

"We'll go clamming, and crabbing, and fishing, and sailing—oh, crickey!" gasped Fred, with his head under the bedclothes, "what won't we do?"

"It will be great," admitted Bobby, with a sigh of longing. "I just hope your folks will let us go."

This hope was realized, as my readers may learn if they meet Bobby and Fred in the next volume of this series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Bass Cove; Or, The Hunt for the Motor Boat *Gem*."

The four giggled, and whispered, and talked the matter over for another hour before they could close their eyes. The outlook for the summer vacation was first in their mind, too, when they awoke in the morning.

But this was an important day at Rockledge School. Even the expected pleasures of a summer at Bass Cove must be put temporarily in the background.

In the afternoon the graduating exercises were to be held—called at Rockledge "the commencement exercises." In the evening the boys entertained socially all their friends and relatives who could or would come to the school.

There was something else—something that loomed almost as big to some of them as the graduation of the seven head boys.

After breakfast the whole school filed up to the big hall. It was a serious occasion, and even Fred Martin was not "cutting up" this morning, and was one of those who most solemnly reached their seats.

All the teachers were sitting on the platform with Dr. Raymond. The old captain of the school, and the new captain, each stood at a door in the back of the room to see that nobody slipped out, and to collect ballots when the time came.

"Now, boys," said the good Doctor, rising and smiling at the fifty. "This is a serious occasion yet it is a happy one, too. It should be happy for you all, because your teachers have found among you at least one boy who is worthy of the high honor of receiving the medal," and he displayed the gold star as he had on that first day, nine months before.

"It is happy for us on the platform," and he made a little bow to the gentlemen with him, "because you have found one among you whom so many seem to admire. And we know what you admire him for.

"It is unhappily impossible for every boy voted for to win the medal. That is understood. Not alone must he be popular with you all, but he must have stood high in every study and in his deportment as well. Several of those voted for the other day in the informal balloting by the school, cannot possibly receive the approval of myself and the other masters.

"Master Gray, unfortunately, is not eligible; neither is Masters Durrock, Converse, or Spelt. There is no dishonor attached to the records of these boys, but there are other reasons—reasons connected with their standing in class—that make it impossible for us teachers to agree on either of these names.

"Now, boys, on the ballot now handed around, you will have but one choice. And it looks as though your choice had already been indicated. Let me assure you that, if that is so, your teachers are, one and all, in favor of your choice."

There was a murmur of approval—almost a cheer—when the doctor had done speaking. Lots of the boys turned to smile at Bobby. He suddenly found himself very red in the face. Fred looked delighted. Pee Wee could scarcely keep in his seat.

Barry Gray and Frank Durrock passed the papers swiftly, and gathered them again in a few minutes. That the school was almost unanimous could not be doubted.

Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrin counted the slips. There was a bunch of them on one side of the table and only a few on the other side. The doctor rose, smiling with satisfaction.

"My dear boys!" he said, ringingly. "It is a joy to me to find you so nearly unanimous. And you have chosen the boy of whom, above all others, we approve.

"Robert Blake! stand up."

Then they cheered. It was impossible to silence the Lower School, at least,

for fully three minutes. Bobby stood, blushing and trembling during this "unseemly riot."

"Robert," said Dr. Raymond, quietly, at last, "you have been a good boy here, and an exceptionally faithful scholar. I have watched your course for the year with interest. You have won out under circumstances that were most trying.

"You boys have a code of morals of your own. I know it. 'Thou Shalt Not Tell Tales' seems greater to you than any other commandment. And I confess I do not uphold the tale-bearer.

"If a boy does wrong, he should tell on himself. *That* is being honorable. Especially if he knows that because of his wrong-doing any other fellow is suffering.

"You all know that Robert bore a burden of punishment for months which he did not really deserve. There is another among you, however—and I'm proud of him!" and the doctor flashed a single glance toward Fred Martin's red hair and red face, "who came forward when he understood, and did his all to remove the black mark from Robert's record.

"It makes me happy to know that I have such boys as these in Rockledge School. I do not believe there are fifty boys anywhere—in any school—any finer than *my* boys," declared the Doctor, with growing enthusiasm.

"And I have never presented the Medal of Honor to any of my boys with greater pride than I shall feel when I pin this star upon Robert Blake's coat this afternoon."

The school cheered again. Even Mr. Leith smiled at the enthusiasm displayed by the youngsters. They formed in line, Barry and Frank Durrock lifted Bobby to their shoulders, and the procession marched down stairs and out, and around the campus.

Bobby felt terribly disturbed. It seemed to him as though his ears would never stop burning.

They made too much of it. He was delighted that he could tell his mother and father of his success, and show them the gold star. But he could not see just how he had won it, nor how he had won the boys' enthusiastic approval.

There was another honor for him, too. He was selected as one of the new members of the school secret order—The Sword and Star. *That* went with the winning of the medal without question.

"Wow!" sighed Pee Wee, "he can hit as hard as any fellow in the Lower School, when he boxes. And he's good fun, and is not afraid to get into a game of fun, even if the teachers scowl on it a little."

"Huh! I guess not," grunted Fred. "That's right about Bobby. He's not afraid of *any*thing. That is, he's not afraid to do anything that isn't mean."

And that being a most just expression of his character, we will say good-by

for the present to Bobby Blake and his friends.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOBBY BLAKE AT ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL ***

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