

CHAPTER X

INSTRUCTION IN DEPARTMENT

While the feast of reason and flow of soul had been in progress in the drawing-room, in the gymnasium on the top floor Jerry Mitchell, awaiting the coming of Mr. Pett, had been passing the time in improving with strenuous exercise his already impressive physique. If Mrs. Pett's guests had been less noisily concentrated on their conversation, they might have heard the muffled tap-tap-tap that proclaimed that Jerry Mitchell was punching the bag upstairs.

It was not until he had punched it for perhaps five minutes that, desisting from his labours, he perceived that he had the pleasure of the company of little Ogden Ford. The stout boy was standing in the doorway, observing him with an attentive eye.

"What are you doing?" enquired Ogden.

Jerry passed a gloved fist over his damp brow.

"Punchin' the bag."

He began to remove his gloves, eyeing Ogden the while with a disapproval which he made no attempt to conceal. An extremist on

the subject of keeping in condition, the spectacle of the bulbous stripling was a constant offence to him. Ogden, in pursuance of his invariable custom on the days when Mrs. Pett entertained, had been lurking on the stairs outside the drawing-room for the past hour, levying toll on the food-stuffs that passed his way. He wore a congested look, and there was jam about his mouth.

"Why?" he said, retrieving a morsel of jam from his right cheek with the tip of his tongue.

"To keep in condition."

"Why do you want to keep in condition?"

Jerry flung the gloves into their locker.

"Fadel!" he said wearily. "Fadel!"

"Huh?"

"Beat it!"

"Huh?" Much pastry seemed to have clouded the boy's mind.

"Run away."

"Don't want to run away."

The annoyed pugilist sat down and scrutinised his visitor critically.

"You never do anything you don't want to, I guess?"

"No," said Ogden simply. "You've got a funny nose," he added dispassionately. "What did you do to it to make it like that?"

Mr. Mitchell shifted restlessly on his chair. He was not a vain man, but he was a little sensitive about that particular item in his make-up.

"Lizzie says it's the funniest nose she ever saw. She says it's something out of a comic supplement."

A dull flush, such as five minutes with the bag had been unable to produce, appeared on Jerry Mitchell's peculiar countenance. It was not that he looked on Lizzie Murphy, herself no Lillian Russell, as an accepted authority on the subject of facial beauty; but he was aware that in this instance she spoke not without reason, and he was vexed, moreover, as many another had been before him, by the note of indulgent patronage in Ogden's voice. His fingers twitched a little eagerly, and he looked sullenly at his tactless junior.

"Get out!"

"Huh?"

"Get outa here!"

"Don't want to get out of here," said Ogden with finality. He put his hand in his trouser-pocket and pulled out a sticky mass which looked as if it might once have been a cream-puff or a meringue. He swallowed it contentedly. "I'd forgotten I had that," he explained. "Mary gave it to me on the stairs. Mary thinks you've a funny nose, too," he proceeded, as one relating agreeable gossip.

"Can it! Can it!" exclaimed the exasperated pugilist.

"I'm only telling you what I heard her say."

Mr. Mitchell rose convulsively and took a step towards his persecutor, breathing noisily through the criticised organ. He was a chivalrous man, a warm admirer of the sex, but he was conscious of a wish that it was in his power to give Mary what he would have described as "hers." She was one of the parlour-maids, a homely woman with a hard eye, and it was part of his grievance against her that his Maggie, alias Celestine, Mrs. Pett's maid,

had formed an enthusiastic friendship with her. He had no evidence to go on, but he suspected Mary of using her influence with Celestine to urge the suit of his leading rival for the latter's hand, Biggs the chauffeur. He disliked Mary intensely, even on general grounds. Ogden's revelation added fuel to his aversion. For a moment he toyed with the fascinating thought of relieving his feelings by spanking the boy, but restrained himself reluctantly at the thought of the inevitable ruin which would ensue. He had been an inmate of the house long enough to know, with a completeness which would have embarrassed that gentleman, what a cipher Mr. Pett was in the home and how little his championship would avail in the event of a clash with Mrs. Pett. And to give Ogden that physical treatment which should long since have formed the main plank in the platform of his education would be to invite her wrath as nothing else could. He checked himself, and reached out for the skipping-rope, hoping to ease his mind by further exercise.

Ogden, chewing the remains of the cream-puff, eyed him with languid curiosity.

"What are you doing that for?"

Mr. Mitchell skipped grimly on.

"What are you doing that for? I thought only girls skipped."

Mr. Mitchell paid no heed. Ogden, after a moment's silent contemplation, returned to his original train of thought.

"I saw an advertisement in a magazine the other day of a sort of machine for altering the shape of noses. You strap it on when you go to bed. You ought to get pop to blow you to one."

Jerry Mitchell breathed in a laboured way.

"You want to look nice about the place, don't you? Well, then! there's no sense in going around looking like that if you don't have to, is there? I heard Mary talking about your nose to Biggs and Celestine. She said she had to laugh every time she saw it."

The skipping-rope faltered in its sweep, caught in the skipper's legs, and sent him staggering across the room. Ogden threw back his head and laughed merrily. He liked free entertainments, and this struck him as a particularly enjoyable one.

There are moments in the life of every man when the impulse attacks him to sacrifice his future to the alluring gratification of the present. The strong man resists such impulses. Jerry Mitchell was not a weak man, but he had been sorely tried. The annoyance of Ogden's presence and conversation had sapped his self-restraint, as dripping water will wear away a rock. A short

while before, he had fought down the urgent temptation to massacre this exasperating child, but now, despised love adding its sting to that of injured vanity, he forgot the consequences. Bounding across the room, he seized Ogden in a powerful grip, and the next instant the latter's education, in the true sense of the word, so long postponed, had begun; and with it that avalanche of sound which, rolling down into the drawing-room, hurled Mrs. Pett so violently and with such abruptness from the society of her guests.

Disposing of the last flight of stairs with the agility of the chamois which leaps from crag to crag of the snow-topped Alps, Mrs. Pett finished with a fine burst of speed along the passage on the top floor, and rushed into the gymnasium just as Jerry's avenging hand was descending for the eleventh time.