

CHAPTER VIII

A ROW WITH THE TOWN

The beginning of a big row, one of those rows which turn a school upside down like a volcanic eruption and provide old boys with something to talk about, when they meet, for years, is not unlike the beginning of a thunderstorm.

You are walking along one seemingly fine day, when suddenly there is a hush, and there falls on you from space one big drop. The next moment the thing has begun, and you are standing in a shower-bath. It is just the same with a row. Some trivial episode occurs, and in an instant the place is in a ferment. It was so with the great picnic at Wrykyn.

The bare outlines of the beginning of this affair are included in a letter which Mike wrote to his father on the Sunday following the Old Wrykynian matches.

This was the letter:

"DEAR FATHER,--Thanks awfully for your letter. I hope you are quite well. I have been getting on all right at cricket lately. My scores since I wrote last have been 0 in a scratch game (the sun got in my eyes just as I played, and I got bowled); 15 for the third against an

eleven of masters (without G. B. Jones, the Surrey man, and Spence); 28 not out in the Under Sixteen game; and 30 in a form match. Rather decent. Yesterday one of the men put down for the second against the O.W.'s second couldn't play because his father was very ill, so I played. Wasn't it luck? It's the first time I've played for the second. I didn't do much, because I didn't get an innings. They stop the cricket on O.W. matches day because they have a lot of rotten Greek plays and things which take up a frightful time, and half the chaps are acting, so we stop from lunch to four. Rot I call it. So I didn't go in, because they won the toss and made 215, and by the time we'd made 140 for 6 it was close of play. They'd stuck me in eighth wicket. Rather rot. Still, I may get another shot. And I made rather a decent catch at mid-on. Low down. I had to dive for it. Bob played for the first, but didn't do much. He was run out after he'd got ten. I believe he's rather sick about it.

"Rather a rummy thing happened after lock-up. I wasn't in it, but a fellow called Wyatt (awfully decent chap. He's Wain's step-son, only they bar one another) told me about it. He was in it all right.

There's a dinner after the matches on O.W. day, and some of the chaps were going back to their houses after it when they got into a row with a lot of brickies from the town, and there was rather a row. There was a policeman mixed up in it somehow, only I don't quite know where he comes in. I'll find out and tell you next time I write. Love to everybody. Tell Marjory I'll write to her in a day or two.

"Your loving son,

"MIKE.

"P.S.--I say, I suppose you couldn't send me five bob, could you? I'm rather broke.

"P.P.S.--Half-a-crown would do, only I'd rather it was five bob."

And, on the back of the envelope, these words: "Or a bob would be better than nothing."

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The outline of the case was as Mike had stated. But there were certain details of some importance which had not come to his notice when he sent the letter. On the Monday they were public property.

The thing had happened after this fashion. At the conclusion of the day's cricket, all those who had been playing in the four elevens which the school put into the field against the old boys, together with the school choir, were entertained by the headmaster to supper in the Great Hall. The banquet, lengthened by speeches, songs, and recitations which the reciters imagined to be songs, lasted, as a rule, till about ten o'clock, when the revellers were supposed to go back to their houses by the nearest route, and turn in. This was the

official programme. The school usually performed it with certain modifications and improvements.

About midway between Wrykyn, the school, and Wrykyn, the town, there stands on an island in the centre of the road a solitary lamp-post. It was the custom, and had been the custom for generations back, for the diners to trudge off to this lamp-post, dance round it for some minutes singing the school song or whatever happened to be the popular song of the moment, and then race back to their houses. Antiquity had given the custom a sort of sanctity, and the authorities, if they knew--which they must have done--never interfered.

But there were others.

Wrykyn, the town, was peculiarly rich in "gangs of youths." Like the vast majority of the inhabitants of the place, they seemed to have no work of any kind whatsoever to occupy their time, which they used, accordingly, to spend prowling about and indulging in a mild, brainless, rural type of hooliganism. They seldom proceeded to practical rowdyism and never except with the school. As a rule, they amused themselves by shouting rude chaff. The school regarded them with a lofty contempt, much as an Oxford man regards the townee. The school was always anxious for a row, but it was the unwritten law that only in special circumstances should they proceed to active measures. A curious dislike for school-and-town rows and most misplaced severity in dealing with the offenders when they took place, were among the few

flaws in the otherwise admirable character of the headmaster of Wrykyn. It was understood that one scragged bargees at one's own risk, and, as a rule, it was not considered worth it.

But after an excellent supper and much singing and joviality, one's views are apt to alter. Risks which before supper seemed great, show a tendency to dwindle.

When, therefore, the twenty or so Wrykynians who were dancing round the lamp-post were aware, in the midst of their festivities, that they were being observed and criticised by an equal number of townees, and that the criticisms were, as usual, essentially candid and personal, they found themselves forgetting the headmaster's prejudices and feeling only that these outsiders must be put to the sword as speedily as possible, for the honour of the school.

Possibly, if the town brigade had stuck to a purely verbal form of attack, all might yet have been peace. Words can be overlooked.

But tomatoes cannot.

No man of spirit can bear to be pelted with over-ripe tomatoes for any length of time without feeling that if the thing goes on much longer he will be reluctantly compelled to take steps.

In the present crisis, the first tomato was enough to set matters

moving.

As the two armies stood facing each other in silence under the dim and mysterious rays of the lamp, it suddenly whizzed out from the enemy's ranks, and hit Wyatt on the right ear.

There was a moment of suspense. Wyatt took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, over which the succulent vegetable had spread itself.

"I don't know how you fellows are going to pass the evening," he said quietly. "My idea of a good after-dinner game is to try and find the chap who threw that. Anybody coming?"

For the first five minutes it was as even a fight as one could have wished to see. It raged up and down the road without a pause, now in a solid mass, now splitting up into little groups. The science was on the side of the school. Most Wrykynians knew how to box to a certain extent. But, at any rate at first, it was no time for science. To be scientific one must have an opponent who observes at least the more important rules of the ring. It is impossible to do the latest ducks and hooks taught you by the instructor if your antagonist butts you in the chest, and then kicks your shins, while some dear friend of his, of whose presence you had no idea, hits you at the same time on the back of the head. The greatest expert would lose his science in such circumstances.

Probably what gave the school the victory in the end was the righteousness of their cause. They were smarting under a sense of injury, and there is nothing that adds a force to one's blows and a recklessness to one's style of delivering them more than a sense of injury.

Wyatt, one side of his face still showing traces of the tomato, led the school with a vigour that could not be resisted. He very seldom lost his temper, but he did draw the line at bad tomatoes.

Presently the school noticed that the enemy were vanishing little by little into the darkness which concealed the town. Barely a dozen remained. And their lonely condition seemed to be borne in upon these by a simultaneous brain-wave, for they suddenly gave the fight up, and stampeded as one man.

The leaders were beyond recall, but two remained, tackled low by Wyatt and Clowes after the fashion of the football-field.

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The school gathered round its prisoners, panting. The scene of the conflict had shifted little by little to a spot some fifty yards from where it had started. By the side of the road at this point was a green, depressed looking pond. Gloomy in the daytime, it looked unspeakable at night. It struck Wyatt, whose finer feelings had been

entirely blotted out by tomato, as an ideal place in which to bestow the captives.

"Let's chuck 'em in there," he said.

The idea was welcomed gladly by all, except the prisoners. A move was made towards the pond, and the procession had halted on the brink, when a new voice made itself heard.

"Now then," it said, "what's all this?"

A stout figure in policeman's uniform was standing surveying them with the aid of a small bull's-eye lantern.

"What's all this?"

"It's all right," said Wyatt.

"All right, is it? What's on?"

One of the prisoners spoke.

"Make 'em leave hold of us, Mr. Butt. They're a-going to chuck us in the pond."

"Ho!" said the policeman, with a change in his voice. "Ho, are they?"

Come now, young gentleman, a lark's a lark, but you ought to know where to stop."

"It's anything but a lark," said Wyatt in the creamy voice he used when feeling particularly savage. "We're the Strong Right Arm of Justice. That's what we are. This isn't a lark, it's an execution."

"I don't want none of your lip, whoever you are," said Mr. Butt, understanding but dimly, and suspecting impudence by instinct.

"This is quite a private matter," said Wyatt. "You run along on your beat. You can't do anything here."

"Ho!"

"Shove 'em in, you chaps."

"Stop!" From Mr. Butt.

"Oo-er!" From prisoner number one.

There was a sounding splash as willing hands urged the first of the captives into the depths. He ploughed his way to the bank, scrambled out, and vanished.

Wyatt turned to the other prisoner.

"You'll have the worst of it, going in second. He'll have churned up the mud a bit. Don't swallow more than you can help, or you'll go getting typhoid. I expect there are leeches and things there, but if you nip out quick they may not get on to you. Carry on, you chaps."

It was here that the regrettable incident occurred. Just as the second prisoner was being launched, Constable Butt, determined to assert himself even at the eleventh hour, sprang forward, and seized the captive by the arm. A drowning man will clutch at a straw. A man about to be hurled into an excessively dirty pond will clutch at a stout policeman. The prisoner did.

Constable Butt represented his one link with dry land. As he came within reach he attached himself to his tunic with the vigour and concentration of a limpet.

At the same moment the executioners gave their man the final heave. The policeman realised his peril too late. A medley of noises made the peaceful night hideous. A howl from the townee, a yell from the policeman, a cheer from the launching party, a frightened squawk from some birds in a neighbouring tree, and a splash compared with which the first had been as nothing, and all was over.

The dark waters were lashed into a maelstrom; and then two streaming figures squelched up the further bank.

[Illustration: THE DARK WATERS WERE LASHED INTO A MAELSTROM]

The school stood in silent consternation. It was no occasion for light apologies.

"Do you know," said Wyatt, as he watched the Law shaking the water from itself on the other side of the pond, "I'm not half sure that we hadn't better be moving!"