CHAPTER IX

BEFORE THE STORM

Your real, devastating row has many points of resemblance with a prairie fire. A man on a prairie lights his pipe, and throws away the match. The flame catches a bunch of dry grass, and, before any one can realise what is happening, sheets of fire are racing over the country; and the interested neighbours are following their example. (I have already compared a row with a thunderstorm; but both comparisons may stand. In dealing with so vast a matter as a row there must be no stint.)

The tomato which hit Wyatt in the face was the thrown-away match. But for the unerring aim of the town marksman great events would never have happened. A tomato is a trivial thing (though it is possible that the man whom it hits may not think so), but in the present case, it was the direct cause of epoch-making trouble.

The tomato hit Wyatt. Wyatt, with others, went to look for the thrower. The remnants of the thrower's friends were placed in the pond, and "with them," as they say in the courts of law, Police Constable Alfred Butt.

Following the chain of events, we find Mr. Butt, having prudently

changed his clothes, calling upon the headmaster.

The headmaster was grave and sympathetic; Mr. Butt fierce and revengeful.

The imagination of the force is proverbial. Nurtured on motor-cars and fed with stop-watches, it has become world-famous. Mr. Butt gave free rein to it.

"Threw me in, they did, sir. Yes, sir."

"Threw you in!"

"Yes, sir. Plop!" said Mr. Butt, with a certain sad relish.

"Really, really!" said the headmaster. "Indeed! This is--dear me! I shall certainly--They threw you in!--Yes, I shall--certainly----"

Encouraged by this appreciative reception of his story, Mr. Butt started it again, right from the beginning.

"I was on my beat, sir, and I thought I heard a disturbance. I says to myself, ''Allo,' I says, 'a frakkus. Lots of them all gathered together, and fighting.' I says, beginning to suspect something, 'Wot's this all about, I wonder?' I says. 'Blow me if I don't think it's a frakkus.' And," concluded Mr. Butt, with the air of one

confiding a secret, "and it was a frakkus!"

"And these boys actually threw you into the pond?"

"Plop, sir! Mrs. Butt is drying my uniform at home at this very moment as we sit talking here, sir. She says to me, 'Why, whatever 'ave you been a-doing? You're all wet.' And," he added, again with the confidential air, "I was wet, too. Wringin' wet."

The headmaster's frown deepened.

"And you are certain that your assailants were boys from the school?"

"Sure as I am that I'm sitting here, sir. They all 'ad their caps on their heads, sir."

"I have never heard of such a thing. I can hardly believe that it is possible. They actually seized you, and threw you into the water----"

"Splish, sir!" said the policeman, with a vividness of imagery both surprising and gratifying.

The headmaster tapped restlessly on the floor with his foot.

"How many boys were there?" he asked.

"Couple of 'undred, sir," said Mr. Butt promptly.

"Two hundred!"

"It was dark, sir, and I couldn't see not to say properly; but if you ask me my frank and private opinion I should say couple of 'undred."

"H'm--Well, I will look into the matter at once. They shall be punished."

"Yes, sir."

"Ye-e-s--H'm--Yes--Most severely."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes--Thank you, constable. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

The headmaster of Wrykyn was not a motorist. Owing to this disadvantage he made a mistake. Had he been a motorist, he would have known that statements by the police in the matter of figures must be divided by any number from two to ten, according to discretion. As it was, he accepted Constable Butt's report almost as it stood. He thought that he might possibly have been mistaken as to the exact

numbers of those concerned in his immersion; but he accepted the statement in so far as it indicated that the thing had been the work of a considerable section of the school, and not of only one or two individuals. And this made all the difference to his method of dealing with the affair. Had he known how few were the numbers of those responsible for the cold in the head which subsequently attacked Constable Butt, he would have asked for their names, and an extra lesson would have settled the entire matter.

As it was, however, he got the impression that the school, as a whole, was culpable, and he proceeded to punish the school as a whole.

It happened that, about a week before the pond episode, a certain member of the Royal Family had recovered from a dangerous illness, which at one time had looked like being fatal. No official holiday had been given to the schools in honour of the recovery, but Eton and Harrow had set the example, which was followed throughout the kingdom, and Wrykyn had come into line with the rest. Only two days before the O.W.'s matches the headmaster had given out a notice in the hall that the following Friday would be a whole holiday; and the school, always ready to stop work, had approved of the announcement exceedingly.

The step which the headmaster decided to take by way of avenging Mr. Butt's wrongs was to stop this holiday.

He gave out a notice to that effect on the Monday.

The school was thunderstruck. It could not understand it. The pond affair had, of course, become public property; and those who had had nothing to do with it had been much amused. "There'll be a frightful row about it," they had said, thrilled with the pleasant excitement of those who see trouble approaching and themselves looking on from a comfortable distance without risk or uneasiness. They were not malicious. They did not want to see their friends in difficulties. But there is no denying that a row does break the monotony of a school term. The thrilling feeling that something is going to happen is the salt of life....

And here they were, right in it after all. The blow had fallen, and crushed guilty and innocent alike.

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The school's attitude can be summed up in three words. It was one vast, blank, astounded "Here, I say!"

Everybody was saying it, though not always in those words. When condensed, everybody's comment on the situation came to that.

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There is something rather pathetic in the indignation of a school. It

must always, or nearly always, expend itself in words, and in private at that. Even the consolation of getting on to platforms and shouting at itself is denied to it. A public school has no Hyde Park.

There is every probability--in fact, it is certain--that, but for one malcontent, the school's indignation would have been allowed to simmer down in the usual way, and finally become a mere vague memory.

The malcontent was Wyatt. He had been responsible for the starting of the matter, and he proceeded now to carry it on till it blazed up into the biggest thing of its kind ever known at Wrykyn--the Great Picnic.

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Any one who knows the public schools, their ironbound conservatism, and, as a whole, intense respect for order and authority, will appreciate the magnitude of his feat, even though he may not approve of it. Leaders of men are rare. Leaders of boys are almost unknown. It requires genius to sway a school.

It would be an absorbing task for a psychologist to trace the various stages by which an impossibility was changed into a reality. Wyatt's coolness and matter-of-fact determination were his chief weapons. His popularity and reputation for lawlessness helped him. A conversation which he had with Neville-Smith, a day-boy, is typical of the way in which he forced his point of view on the school.

Neville-Smith was thoroughly representative of the average Wrykynian. He could play his part in any minor "rag" which interested him, and probably considered himself, on the whole, a daring sort of person. But at heart he had an enormous respect for authority. Before he came to Wyatt, he would not have dreamed of proceeding beyond words in his revolt. Wyatt acted on him like some drug.

Neville-Smith came upon Wyatt on his way to the nets. The notice concerning the holiday had only been given out that morning, and he was full of it. He expressed his opinion of the headmaster freely and in well-chosen words. He said it was a swindle, that it was all rot, and that it was a beastly shame. He added that something ought to be done about it.

"What are you going to do?" asked Wyatt.

"Well," said Neville-Smith a little awkwardly, guiltily conscious that he had been frothing, and scenting sarcasm, "I don't suppose one can actually do anything."

"Why not?" said Wyatt.

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you take the holiday?"

"What? Not turn up on Friday!"

"Yes. I'm not going to."

Neville-Smith stopped and stared. Wyatt was unmoved.

"You're what?"

"I simply sha'n't go to school."

"You're rotting."

"All right."

"No, but, I say, ragging barred. Are you just going to cut off, though the holiday's been stopped?"

"That's the idea."

"You'll get sacked."

"I suppose so. But only because I shall be the only one to do it. If the whole school took Friday off, they couldn't do much. They couldn't sack the whole school."

"By Jove, nor could they! I say!"

They walked on, Neville-Smith's mind in a whirl, Wyatt whistling.

"I say," said Neville-Smith after a pause. "It would be a bit of a rag."

"Not bad."

"Do you think the chaps would do it?"

"If they understood they wouldn't be alone."

Another pause.

"Shall I ask some of them?" said Neville-Smith.

"Do."

"I could get quite a lot, I believe."

"That would be a start, wouldn't it? I could get a couple of dozen from Wain's. We should be forty or fifty strong to start with."

"I say, what a score, wouldn't it be?"

"Yes."

"I'll speak to the chaps to-night, and let you know."

"All right," said Wyatt. "Tell them that I shall be going anyhow. I should be glad of a little company."

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The school turned in on the Thursday night in a restless, excited way. There were mysterious whisperings and gigglings. Groups kept forming in corners apart, to disperse casually and innocently on the approach of some person in authority.

An air of expectancy permeated each of the houses.