CHAPTER X

THE GREAT PICNIC

Morning school at Wrykyn started at nine o'clock. At that hour there was a call-over in each of the form-rooms. After call-over the forms proceeded to the Great Hall for prayers.

A strangely desolate feeling was in the air at nine o'clock on the Friday morning. Sit in the grounds of a public school any afternoon in the summer holidays, and you will get exactly the same sensation of being alone in the world as came to the dozen or so day-boys who bicycled through the gates that morning. Wrykyn was a boarding-school for the most part, but it had its leaven of day-boys. The majority of these lived in the town, and walked to school. A few, however, whose homes were farther away, came on bicycles. One plutocrat did the journey in a motor-car, rather to the scandal of the authorities, who, though unable to interfere, looked askance when compelled by the warning toot of the horn to skip from road to pavement. A form-master has the strongest objection to being made to skip like a young ram by a boy to whom he has only the day before given a hundred lines for shuffling his feet in form.

It seemed curious to these cyclists that there should be nobody about. Punctuality is the politeness of princes, but it was not a leading

characteristic of the school; and at three minutes to nine, as a general rule, you might see the gravel in front of the buildings freely dotted with sprinters, trying to get in in time to answer their names.

It was curious that there should be nobody about to-day. A wave of reform could scarcely have swept through the houses during the night.

And yet--where was everybody?

Time only deepened the mystery. The form-rooms, like the gravel, were empty.

The cyclists looked at one another in astonishment. What could it mean?

It was an occasion on which sane people wonder if their brains are not playing them some unaccountable trick.

"I say," said Willoughby, of the Lower Fifth, to Brown, the only other occupant of the form-room, "the old man did stop the holiday to-day, didn't he?"

"Just what I was going to ask you," said Brown. "It's jolly rum. I distinctly remember him giving it out in hall that it was going to be stopped because of the O.W.'s day row."

"So do I. I can't make it out. Where is everybody?"

"They can't all be late."

"Somebody would have turned up by now. Why, it's just striking."

"Perhaps he sent another notice round the houses late last night, saying it was on again all right. I say, what a swindle if he did. Some one might have let us know. I should have got up an hour later."

"So should I."

"Hullo, here is somebody."

It was the master of the Lower Fifth, Mr. Spence. He walked briskly into the room, as was his habit. Seeing the obvious void, he stopped in his stride, and looked puzzled.

"Willoughby. Brown. Are you the only two here? Where is everybody?"

"Please, sir, we don't know. We were just wondering."

"Have you seen nobody?"

"No, sir."

"We were just wondering, sir, if the holiday had been put on again, after all."

"I've heard nothing about it. I should have received some sort of intimation if it had been."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean to say that you have seen nobody, Brown?"

"Only about a dozen fellows, sir. The usual lot who come on bikes, sir."

"None of the boarders?"

"No, sir. Not a single one."

"This is extraordinary."

Mr. Spence pondered.

"Well," he said, "you two fellows had better go along up to Hall. I shall go to the Common Room and make inquiries. Perhaps, as you say, there is a holiday to-day, and the notice was not brought to me."

Mr. Spence told himself, as he walked to the Common Room, that this might be a possible solution of the difficulty. He was not a house-master, and lived by himself in rooms in the town. It was just conceivable that they might have forgotten to tell him of the change in the arrangements.

But in the Common Room the same perplexity reigned. Half a dozen masters were seated round the room, and a few more were standing. And they were all very puzzled.

A brisk conversation was going on. Several voices hailed Mr. Spence as he entered.

"Hullo, Spence. Are you alone in the world too?"

"Any of your boys turned up, Spence?"

"You in the same condition as we are, Spence?"

Mr. Spence seated himself on the table.

"Haven't any of your fellows turned up, either?" he said.

"When I accepted the honourable post of Lower Fourth master in this abode of sin," said Mr. Seymour, "it was on the distinct understanding that there was going to be a Lower Fourth. Yet I go into my form-room

this morning, and what do I find? Simply Emptiness, and Pickersgill II. whistling 'The Church Parade,' all flat. I consider I have been hardly treated."

"I have no complaint to make against Brown and Willoughby, as individuals," said Mr. Spence; "but, considered as a form, I call them short measure."

"I confess that I am entirely at a loss," said Mr. Shields precisely. "I have never been confronted with a situation like this since I became a schoolmaster."

"It is most mysterious," agreed Mr. Wain, plucking at his beard. "Exceedingly so."

The younger masters, notably Mr. Spence and Mr. Seymour, had begun to look on the thing as a huge jest.

"We had better teach ourselves," said Mr. Seymour. "Spence, do a hundred lines for laughing in form."

The door burst open.

"Hullo, here's another scholastic Little Bo-Peep," said Mr. Seymour. "Well, Appleby, have you lost your sheep, too?"

"You don't mean to tell me----" began Mr. Appleby.

"I do," said Mr. Seymour. "Here we are, fifteen of us, all good men and true, graduates of our Universities, and, as far as I can see, if we divide up the boys who have come to school this morning on fair share-and-share-alike lines, it will work out at about two-thirds of a boy each. Spence, will you take a third of Pickersgill II.?"

"I want none of your charity," said Mr. Spence loftily. "You don't seem to realise that I'm the best off of you all. I've got two in my form. It's no good offering me your Pickersgills. I simply haven't room for them."

"What does it all mean?" exclaimed Mr. Appleby.

"If you ask me," said Mr. Seymour, "I should say that it meant that the school, holding the sensible view that first thoughts are best, have ignored the head's change of mind, and are taking their holiday as per original programme."

"They surely cannot----!"

"Well, where are they then?"

"Do you seriously mean that the entire school has--has rebelled?"

"'Nay, sire,'" quoted Mr. Spence, "'a revolution!'"

"I never heard of such a thing!"

"We're making history," said Mr. Seymour.

"It will be rather interesting," said Mr. Spence, "to see how the head will deal with a situation like this. One can rely on him to do the statesman-like thing, but I'm bound to say I shouldn't care to be in his place. It seems to me these boys hold all the cards. You can't expel a whole school. There's safety in numbers. The thing is colossal."

"It is deplorable," said Mr. Wain, with austerity. "Exceedingly so."

"I try to think so," said Mr. Spence, "but it's a struggle. There's a Napoleonic touch about the business that appeals to one. Disorder on a small scale is bad, but this is immense. I've never heard of anything like it at any public school. When I was at Winchester, my last year there, there was pretty nearly a revolution because the captain of cricket was expelled on the eve of the Eton match. I remember making inflammatory speeches myself on that occasion. But we stopped on the right side of the line. We were satisfied with growling. But this----!"

Mr. Seymour got up.

"It's an ill wind," he said. "With any luck we ought to get the day off, and it's ideal weather for a holiday. The head can hardly ask us to sit indoors, teaching nobody. If I have to stew in my form-room all day, instructing Pickersgill II., I shall make things exceedingly sultry for that youth. He will wish that the Pickersgill progeny had stopped short at his elder brother. He will not value life. In the meantime, as it's already ten past, hadn't we better be going up to Hall to see what the orders of the day are?"

"Look at Shields," said Mr. Spence. "He might be posing for a statue to be called 'Despair!' He reminds me of Macduff. Macbeth, Act iv., somewhere near the end. 'What, all my pretty chickens, at one fell swoop?' That's what Shields is saying to himself."

"It's all very well to make a joke of it, Spence," said Mr. Shields querulously, "but it is most disturbing. Most."

"Exceedingly," agreed Mr. Wain.

The bereaved company of masters walked on up the stairs that led to the Great Hall.