

CHAPTER XI

THE CONCLUSION OF THE PICNIC

If the form-rooms had been lonely, the Great Hall was doubly, trebly, so. It was a vast room, stretching from side to side of the middle block, and its ceiling soared up into a distant dome. At one end was a dais and an organ, and at intervals down the room stood long tables. The panels were covered with the names of Wrykynians who had won scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge, and of Old Wrykynians who had taken first in Mods or Greats, or achieved any other recognised success, such as a place in the Indian Civil Service list. A silent testimony, these panels, to the work the school had done in the world.

Nobody knew exactly how many the Hall could hold, when packed to its fullest capacity. The six hundred odd boys at the school seemed to leave large gaps unfilled.

This morning there was a mere handful, and the place looked worse than empty.

The Sixth Form were there, and the school prefects. The Great Picnic had not affected their numbers. The Sixth stood by their table in a solid group. The other tables were occupied by ones and twos. A buzz of conversation was going on, which did not cease when the masters

filed into the room and took their places. Every one realised by this time that the biggest row in Wrykyn history was well under way; and the thing had to be discussed.

In the Masters' library Mr. Wain and Mr. Shields, the spokesmen of the Common Room, were breaking the news to the headmaster.

The headmaster was a man who rarely betrayed emotion in his public capacity. He heard Mr. Shields's rambling remarks, punctuated by Mr. Wain's "Exceedinglys," to an end. Then he gathered up his cap and gown.

"You say that the whole school is absent?" he remarked quietly.

Mr. Shields, in a long-winded flow of words, replied that that was what he did say.

"Ah!" said the headmaster.

There was a silence.

"M!" said the headmaster.

There was another silence.

"Ye--e--s!" said the headmaster.

He then led the way into the Hall.

Conversation ceased abruptly as he entered. The school, like an audience at a theatre when the hero has just appeared on the stage, felt that the serious interest of the drama had begun. There was a dead silence at every table as he strode up the room and on to the dais.

There was something Titanic in his calmness. Every eye was on his face as he passed up the Hall, but not a sign of perturbation could the school read. To judge from his expression, he might have been unaware of the emptiness around him.

The master who looked after the music of the school, and incidentally accompanied the hymn with which prayers at Wrykyn opened, was waiting, puzzled, at the foot of the dais. It seemed improbable that things would go on as usual, and he did not know whether he was expected to be at the organ, or not. The headmaster's placid face reassured him. He went to his post.

The hymn began. It was a long hymn, and one which the school liked for its swing and noise. As a rule, when it was sung, the Hall re-echoed. To-day, the thin sound of the voices had quite an uncanny effect. The organ boomed through the deserted room.

The school, or the remnants of it, waited impatiently while the prefect whose turn it was to read stammered nervously through the lesson. They were anxious to get on to what the Head was going to say at the end of prayers. At last it was over. The school waited, all ears.

The headmaster bent down from the dais and called to Firby-Smith, who was standing in his place with the Sixth.

The Gazeka, blushing warmly, stepped forward.

"Bring me a school list, Firby-Smith," said the headmaster.

The Gazeka was wearing a pair of very squeaky boots that morning. They sounded deafening as he walked out of the room.

The school waited.

Presently a distant squeaking was heard, and Firby-Smith returned, bearing a large sheet of paper.

The headmaster thanked him, and spread it out on the reading-desk.

Then, calmly, as if it were an occurrence of every day, he began to call the roll.

"Abney."

No answer.

"Adams."

No answer.

"Allenby."

"Here, sir," from a table at the end of the room. Allenby was a prefect, in the Science Sixth.

The headmaster made a mark against his name with a pencil.

"Arkwright."

No answer.

He began to call the names more rapidly.

"Arlington. Arthur. Ashe. Aston."

"Here, sir," in a shrill treble from the rider in motorcars.

The headmaster made another tick.

The list came to an end after what seemed to the school an unconscionable time, and he rolled up the paper again, and stepped to the edge of the dais.

"All boys not in the Sixth Form," he said, "will go to their form-rooms and get their books and writing-materials, and return to the Hall."

("Good work," murmured Mr. Seymour to himself. "Looks as if we should get that holiday after all.")

"The Sixth Form will go to their form-room as usual. I should like to speak to the masters for a moment."

He nodded dismissal to the school.

The masters collected on the dais.

"I find that I shall not require your services to-day," said the headmaster. "If you will kindly set the boys in your forms some work that will keep them occupied, I will look after them here. It is a lovely day," he added, with a smile, "and I am sure you will all enjoy yourselves a great deal more in the open air."

"That," said Mr. Seymour to Mr. Spence, as they went downstairs, "is

what I call a genuine sportsman."

"My opinion neatly expressed," said Mr. Spence. "Come on the river. Or shall we put up a net, and have a knock?"

"River, I think. Meet you at the boat-house."

"All right. Don't be long."

"If every day were run on these lines, school-mastering wouldn't be such a bad profession. I wonder if one could persuade one's form to run amuck as a regular thing."

"Pity one can't. It seems to me the ideal state of things. Ensures the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

"I say! Suppose the school has gone up the river, too, and we meet them! What shall we do?"

"Thank them," said Mr. Spence, "most kindly. They've done us well."

The school had not gone up the river. They had marched in a solid body, with the school band at their head playing Sousa, in the direction of Worfield, a market town of some importance, distant about five miles. Of what they did and what the natives thought of it all, no very distinct records remain. The thing is a tradition on the

countryside now, an event colossal and heroic, to be talked about in the tap-room of the village inn during the long winter evenings. The papers got hold of it, but were curiously misled as to the nature of the demonstration. This was the fault of the reporter on the staff of the Worfield Intelligencer and Farmers' Guide, who saw in the thing a legitimate "march-out," and, questioning a straggler as to the reason for the expedition and gathering foggily that the restoration to health of the Eminent Person was at the bottom of it, said so in his paper. And two days later, at about the time when Retribution had got seriously to work, the Daily Mail reprinted the account, with comments and elaborations, and headed it "Loyal Schoolboys." The writer said that great credit was due to the headmaster of Wrykyn for his ingenuity in devising and organising so novel a thanksgiving celebration. And there was the usual conversation between "a rosy-cheeked lad of some sixteen summers" and "our representative," in which the rosy-cheeked one spoke most kindly of the head-master, who seemed to be a warm personal friend of his.

The remarkable thing about the Great Picnic was its orderliness. Considering that five hundred and fifty boys were ranging the country in a compact mass, there was wonderfully little damage done to property. Wyatt's genius did not stop short at organising the march. In addition, he arranged a system of officers which effectually controlled the animal spirits of the rank and file. The prompt and decisive way in which rioters were dealt with during the earlier stages of the business proved a wholesome lesson to others who would

have wished to have gone and done likewise. A spirit of martial law reigned over the Great Picnic. And towards the end of the day fatigue kept the rowdy-minded quiet.

At Worfield the expedition lunched. It was not a market-day, fortunately, or the confusion in the narrow streets would have been hopeless. On ordinary days Worfield was more or less deserted. It is astonishing that the resources of the little town were equal to satisfying the needs of the picnickers. They descended on the place like an army of locusts.

Wyatt, as generalissimo of the expedition, walked into the "Grasshopper and Ant," the leading inn of the town.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" inquired the landlord politely.

"Yes, please," said Wyatt, "I want lunch for five hundred and fifty."

That was the supreme moment in mine host's life. It was his big subject of conversation ever afterwards. He always told that as his best story, and he always ended with the words, "You could ha' knocked me down with a feather!"

The first shock over, the staff of the "Grasshopper and Ant" bustled about. Other inns were called upon for help. Private citizens rallied round with bread, jam, and apples. And the army lunched sumptuously.

In the early afternoon they rested, and as evening began to fall, the march home was started.

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At the school, net practice was just coming to an end when, faintly, as the garrison of Lucknow heard the first skirl of the pipes of the relieving force, those on the grounds heard the strains of the school band and a murmur of many voices. Presently the sounds grew more distinct, and up the Wrykyn road came marching the vanguard of the column, singing the school song. They looked weary but cheerful.

As the army drew near to the school, it melted away little by little, each house claiming its representatives. At the school gates only a handful were left.

Bob Jackson, walking back to Donaldson's, met Wyatt at the gate, and gazed at him, speechless.

"Hullo," said Wyatt, "been to the nets? I wonder if there's time for a ginger-beer before the shop shuts."