

## CHAPTER XXI

### MARJORY THE FRANK

At the door of the senior block Burgess, going out, met Bob coming in, hurrying, as he was rather late.

"Congratulate you, Bob," he said; and passed on.

Bob stared after him. As he stared, Trevor came out of the block.

"Congratulate you, Bob."

"What's the matter now?"

"Haven't you seen?"

"Seen what?"

"Why the list. You've got your first."

"My--what? you're rotting."

"No, I'm not. Go and look."

The thing seemed incredible. Had he dreamed that conversation between Spence and Burgess on the pavilion steps? Had he mixed up the names? He was certain that he had heard Spence give his verdict for Mike, and Burgess agree with him.

Just then, Mike, feeling very ill, came down the steps. He caught sight of Bob and was passing with a feeble grin, when something told him that this was one of those occasions on which one has to show a Red Indian fortitude and stifle one's private feelings.

"Congratulate you, Bob," he said awkwardly.

"Thanks awfully," said Bob, with equal awkwardness. Trevor moved on, delicately. This was no place for him. Bob's face was looking like a stuffed frog's, which was Bob's way of trying to appear unconcerned and at his ease, while Mike seemed as if at any moment he might burst into tears. Spectators are not wanted at these awkward interviews.

There was a short silence.

"Jolly glad you've got it," said Mike.

"I believe there's a mistake. I swear I heard Burgess say to Spence----"

"He changed his mind probably. No reason why he shouldn't."

"Well, it's jolly rummy."

Bob endeavoured to find consolation.

"Anyhow, you'll have three years in the first. You're a cert. for next year."

"Hope so," said Mike, with such manifest lack of enthusiasm that Bob abandoned this line of argument. When one has missed one's colours, next year seems a very, very long way off.

They moved slowly through the cloisters, neither speaking, and up the stairs that led to the Great Hall. Each was gratefully conscious of the fact that prayers would be beginning in another minute, putting an end to an uncomfortable situation.

"Heard from home lately?" inquired Mike.

Bob snatched gladly at the subject.

"Got a letter from mother this morning. I showed you the last one, didn't I? I've only just had time to skim through this one, as the post was late, and I only got it just as I was going to dash across to school. Not much in it. Here it is, if you want to read it."

"Thanks. It'll be something to do during Math."

"Marjory wrote, too, for the first time in her life. Haven't had time to look at it yet."

"After you. Sure it isn't meant for me? She owes me a letter."

"No, it's for me all right. I'll give it you in the interval."

The arrival of the headmaster put an end to the conversation.

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By a quarter to eleven Mike had begun to grow reconciled to his fate. The disappointment was still there, but it was lessened. These things are like kicks on the shin. A brief spell of agony, and then a dull pain of which we are not always conscious unless our attention is directed to it, and which in time disappears altogether. When the bell rang for the interval that morning, Mike was, as it were, sitting up and taking nourishment.

He was doing this in a literal as well as in a figurative sense when Bob entered the school shop.

Bob appeared curiously agitated. He looked round, and, seeing Mike, pushed his way towards him through the crowd. Most of those present congratulated him as he passed; and Mike noticed, with some surprise,

that, in place of the blushful grin which custom demands from the man who is being congratulated on receipt of colours, there appeared on his face a worried, even an irritated look. He seemed to have something on his mind.

"Hullo," said Mike amiably. "Got that letter?"

"Yes. I'll show it you outside."

"Why not here?"

"Come on."

Mike resented the tone, but followed. Evidently something had happened to upset Bob seriously. As they went out on the gravel, somebody congratulated Bob again, and again Bob hardly seemed to appreciate it.'

Bob led the way across the gravel and on to the first terrace. When they had left the crowd behind, he stopped.

"What's up?" asked Mike.

"I want you to read----"

"Jackson!"

They both turned. The headmaster was standing on the edge of the gravel.

Bob pushed the letter into Mike's hands.

"Read that," he said, and went up to the headmaster. Mike heard the words "English Essay," and, seeing that the conversation was apparently going to be one of some length, capped the headmaster and walked off. He was just going to read the letter when the bell rang. He put the missive in his pocket, and went to his form-room wondering what Marjory could have found to say to Bob to touch him on the raw to such an extent. She was a breezy correspondent, with a style of her own, but usually she entertained rather than upset people. No suspicion of the actual contents of the letter crossed his mind.

He read it during school, under the desk; and ceased to wonder. Bob had had cause to look worried. For the thousand and first time in her career of crime Marjory had been and done it! With a strong hand she had shaken the cat out of the bag, and exhibited it plainly to all whom it might concern.

There was a curious absence of construction about the letter. Most authors of sensational matter nurse their bomb-shell, lead up to it, and display it to the best advantage. Marjory dropped hers into the body of the letter, and let it take its chance with the other

news-items.

"DEAR BOB" (the letter ran),--

"I hope you are quite well. I am quite well. Phyllis has a cold, Ella cheeked Mademoiselle yesterday, and had to write out 'Little Girls must be polite and obedient' a hundred times in French. She was jolly sick about it. I told her it served her right. Joe made eighty-three against Lancashire. Reggie made a duck. Have you got your first? If you have, it will be all through Mike. Uncle John told Father that Mike pretended to hurt his wrist so that you could play instead of him for the school, and Father said it was very sporting of Mike but nobody must tell you because it wouldn't be fair if you got your first for you to know that you owed it to Mike and I wasn't supposed to hear but I did because I was in the room only they didn't know I was (we were playing hide-and-seek and I was hiding) so I'm writing to tell you,

"From your affectionate sister

"Marjory."

There followed a P.S.

"I'll tell you what you ought to do. I've been reading a jolly good book called 'The Boys of Dormitory Two,' and the hero's an awfully

nice boy named Lionel Tremayne, and his friend Jack Langdale saves his life when a beast of a boatman who's really employed by Lionel's cousin who wants the money that Lionel's going to have when he grows up stuns him and leaves him on the beach to drown. Well, Lionel is going to play for the school against Loamshire, and it's the match of the season, but he goes to the headmaster and says he wants Jack to play instead of him. Why don't you do that?

"M.

"P.P.S.--This has been a frightful fag to write."

For the life of him Mike could not help giggling as he pictured what Bob's expression must have been when his brother read this document. But the humorous side of the thing did not appeal to him for long. What should he say to Bob? What would Bob say to him? Dash it all, it made him look such an awful ass! Anyhow, Bob couldn't do much. In fact he didn't see that he could do anything. The team was filled up, and Burgess was not likely to alter it. Besides, why should he alter it? Probably he would have given Bob his colours anyhow. Still, it was beastly awkward. Marjory meant well, but she had put her foot right in it. Girls oughtn't to meddle with these things. No girl ought to be taught to write till she came of age. And Uncle John had behaved in many respects like the Complete Rotter. If he was going to let out things like that, he might at least have whispered them, or looked behind the curtains to see that the place wasn't chock-full of female



kids. Confound Uncle John!

Throughout the dinner-hour Mike kept out of Bob's way. But in a small community like a school it is impossible to avoid a man for ever. They met at the nets.

"Well?" said Bob.

"How do you mean?" said Mike.

"Did you read it?"

"Yes."

"Well, is it all rot, or did you--you know what I mean--sham a crooked wrist?"

"Yes," said Mike, "I did."

Bob stared gloomily at his toes.

"I mean," he said at last, apparently putting the finishing-touch to some train of thought, "I know I ought to be grateful, and all that. I suppose I am. I mean it was jolly good of you--Dash it all," he broke off hotly, as if the putting his position into words had suddenly showed him how inglorious it was, "what did you want to do if

for? What was the idea? What right have you got to go about playing Providence over me? Dash it all, it's like giving a fellow money without consulting him."

"I didn't think you'd ever know. You wouldn't have if only that ass Uncle John hadn't let it out."

"How did he get to know? Why did you tell him?"

"He got it out of me. I couldn't choke him off. He came down when you were away at Geddington, and would insist on having a look at my arm, and naturally he spotted right away there was nothing the matter with it. So it came out; that's how it was."

Bob scratched thoughtfully at the turf with a spike of his boot.

"Of course, it was awfully decent----"

Then again the monstrous nature of the affair came home to him.

"But what did you do it for? Why should you rot up your own chances to give me a look in?"

"Oh, I don't know.... You know, you did me a jolly good turn."

"I don't remember. When?"

"That Firby-Smith business."

"What about it?"

"Well, you got me out of a jolly bad hole."

"Oh, rot! And do you mean to tell me it was simply because of that----?"

Mike appeared to him in a totally new light. He stared at him as if he were some strange creature hitherto unknown to the human race. Mike shuffled uneasily beneath the scrutiny.

"Anyhow, it's all over now," Mike said, "so I don't see what's the point of talking about it."

"I'm hanged if it is. You don't think I'm going to sit tight and take my first as if nothing had happened?"

"What can you do? The list's up. Are you going to the Old Man to ask him if I can play, like Lionel Tremayne?"

The hopelessness of the situation came over Bob like a wave. He looked helplessly at Mike.

"Besides," added Mike, "I shall get in next year all right. Half a

second, I just want to speak to Wyatt about something."

He sidled off.

"Well, anyhow," said Bob to himself, "I must see Burgess about it."