

CHAPTER XXV

MARCHING ORDERS

A silence followed. To Mike, lying in bed, holding his breath, it seemed a long silence. As a matter of fact it lasted for perhaps ten seconds. Then Mr. Wain spoke.

"You have been out, James?"

It is curious how in the more dramatic moments of life the inane remark is the first that comes to us.

"Yes, sir," said Wyatt.

"I am astonished. Exceedingly astonished."

"I got a bit of a start myself," said Wyatt.

"I shall talk to you in my study. Follow me there."

"Yes, sir."

He left the room, and Wyatt suddenly began to chuckle.

"I say, Wyatt!" said Mike, completely thrown off his balance by the events of the night.

Wyatt continued to giggle helplessly. He flung himself down on his bed, rolling with laughter. Mike began to get alarmed.

"It's all right," said Wyatt at last, speaking with difficulty. "But, I say, how long had he been sitting there?"

"It seemed hours. About an hour, I suppose, really."

"It's the funniest thing I've ever struck. Me sweating to get in quietly, and all the time him camping out on my bed!"

"But look here, what'll happen?"

Wyatt sat up.

"That reminds me. Suppose I'd better go down."

"What'll he do, do you think?"

"Ah, now, what!"

"But, I say, it's awful. What'll happen?"

"That's for him to decide. Speaking at a venture, I should say----"

"You don't think----?"

"The boot. The swift and sudden boot. I shall be sorry to part with you, but I'm afraid it's a case of 'Au revoir, my little Hyacinth.' We shall meet at Philippi. This is my Moscow. To-morrow I shall go out into the night with one long, choking sob. Years hence a white-haired bank-clerk will tap at your door when you're a prosperous professional cricketer with your photograph in Wisden. That'll be me. Well, I suppose I'd better go down. We'd better all get to bed some time to-night. Don't go to sleep."

"Not likely."

"I'll tell you all the latest news when I come back. Where are my slippers? Ha, 'tis well! Lead on, then, minions. I follow."

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In the study Mr. Wain was fumbling restlessly with his papers when Wyatt appeared.

"Sit down, James," he said.

Wyatt sat down. One of his slippers fell off with a clatter. Mr. Wain

jumped nervously.

"Only my slipper," explained Wyatt. "It slipped."

Mr. Wain took up a pen, and began to tap the table.

"Well, James?"

Wyatt said nothing.

"I should be glad to hear your explanation of this disgraceful matter."

"The fact is----" said Wyatt.

"Well?"

"I haven't one, sir."

"What were you doing out of your dormitory, out of the house, at that hour?"

"I went for a walk, sir."

"And, may I inquire, are you in the habit of violating the strictest school rules by absenting yourself from the house during the night?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is an exceedingly serious matter."

Wyatt nodded agreement with this view.

"Exceedingly."

The pen rose and fell with the rapidity of the cylinder of a motor-car. Wyatt, watching it, became suddenly aware that the thing was hypnotising him. In a minute or two he would be asleep.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, father. Tap like that, I mean. It's sending me to sleep."

"James!"

"It's like a woodpecker."

"Studied impertinence----"

"I'm very sorry. Only it was sending me off."

Mr. Wain suspended tapping operations, and resumed the thread of his discourse.

"I am sorry, exceedingly, to see this attitude in you, James. It is not fitting. It is in keeping with your behaviour throughout. Your conduct has been lax and reckless in the extreme. It is possible that you imagine that the peculiar circumstances of our relationship secure you from the penalties to which the ordinary boy----"

"No, sir."

"I need hardly say," continued Mr. Wain, ignoring the interruption, "that I shall treat you exactly as I should treat any other member of my house whom I had detected in the same misdemeanour."

"Of course," said Wyatt, approvingly.

"I must ask you not to interrupt me when I am speaking to you, James. I say that your punishment will be no whit less severe than would be that of any other boy. You have repeatedly proved yourself lacking in ballast and a respect for discipline in smaller ways, but this is a far more serious matter. Exceedingly so. It is impossible for me to overlook it, even were I disposed to do so. You are aware of the penalty for such an action as yours?"

"The sack," said Wyatt laconically.

"It is expulsion. You must leave the school. At once."

Wyatt nodded.

"As you know, I have already secured a nomination for you in the London and Oriental Bank. I shall write to-morrow to the manager asking him to receive you at once----"

"After all, they only gain an extra fortnight of me."

"You will leave directly I receive his letter. I shall arrange with the headmaster that you are withdrawn privately----"

"Not the sack?"

"Withdrawn privately. You will not go to school to-morrow. Do you understand? That is all. Have you anything to say?"

Wyatt reflected.

"No, I don't think----"

His eye fell on a tray bearing a decanter and a syphon.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Can't I mix you a whisky and soda, father, before I go off to bed?"

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"Well?" said Mike.

Wyatt kicked off his slippers, and began to undress.

"What happened?"

"We chatted."

"Has he let you off?"

"Like a gun. I shoot off almost immediately. To-morrow I take a well-earned rest away from school, and the day after I become the gay young bank-clerk, all amongst the ink and ledgers."

Mike was miserably silent.

"Buck up," said Wyatt cheerfully. "It would have happened anyhow in another fortnight. So why worry?"

Mike was still silent. The reflection was doubtless philosophic, but

it failed to comfort him.