

“Borer Horrificus”



WHEN we boys of Branksome School began to study Physiology a great change occurred in us, a change which lasted fully four days. Lads who had thought that they were merely indestructible leathery bags now discovered that they were very fragile machines, just fairly filled with delicate organs; and with the dread of hurting themselves upon them they walked around with grave faces, slowly and carefully, and held their hands carefully to their sides, as if they were filled with china or dynamite. Even fighting ceased, and the more pugnacious began to resume the countenances they were born with.

At dinner food was no longer “bolted,” but was carefully chewed and deliberately swallowed, and some even went so far as to leave the table feeling hungry.

These things were true of all but Jim. Jim never was very athletic anyway, but he always was a glutton, and as he had never felt sick he said he “didn’t see the use of being so jolly careful.” But the abstinence of the others pleased him exceedingly, as there was less pudding eaten by them at dinner, and he could get a larger share. Dick was the very opposite of Jim, and being thirteen years old—two years older than any of us—and exceedingly energetic, was the accepted “cock of the walk.”

In our dormitory there were eight cots, one for each boy, set side by side, with a space of three feet or so between. Dick’s and mine were at one end of the room, Jim’s at the other, and next the wall. This gave him one secluded side at least, and generally he went to bed with a bag of sweets under his pillow, and these he devoured when we were asleep. One night—it was during the fad of Physiology—Dick awoke me. It was about half past ten. “That little pig of a Jim has brought a lot of grub to bed with him; nuts, too, I think. Listen.” I listened, and from Jim’s direction I heard the sound of something being cracked between teeth. “Get up and get some,” I said. “Too late,” Dick answered, “he’s been eating for half an hour, I think, and it must be almost gone,” and he sighed. Then he said more cheerfully: “But tomorrow I’ll punch him till he tells me why I punch, and it’ll take him a long time to own up,” and with this delectable thought for comfort, he turned over and went to sleep. I followed suit.

My sleep was full of dreams. One was that I was hunting, and had wounded a lion, so that it groaned. This woke me. Still I heard sounds of pain, but they were far from lionlike. In fact, I recognized them as coming from Jim. Now and then they rose almost to an agonizing squeak. I awoke Dick, and he listened a moment, and then chuckled. “Glory!” he whispered, “Jim’s eaten too much for once,” and then he raised his voice and asked in a very sympathetic tone, “What’s the matter, Jim?” “Oh—h! Oh! O—h! I don’t know! I never had it before! I’m dyin’!” came back the sobbing answer. Dick jumped cheerfully out of bed; I followed. By the gray morning light we could see Jim sitting up in bed, his head on his knees, and his hands pressed to what we called the “bread-basket.” “Is it your heart?” asked Dick in the same sympathetic voice. “I dunno; are hearts down here? Oh!” said poor Jim.