THROUGH CLASH OF CLANS.

By Vincent Oswald.

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"Hesitatingly Took the Hand He Held Out."

AS the rival teams lined up for the last great crucial game of the football season hundreds of pairs of eyes—belonging to certain knowing students of the home college—focussed anxiously to a common point in the vast field.

Peering from the midst of the unbroken sea of variegated color produced by the waving flags, streaming pennants and fluttering ribbons of the banked humanity which lined three sides of the great arena, the straining eyes concentrated upon two antithetically prominent figures—those of Owen Duncan, the giant guard, and Flit Fletcher, the little quarter back.

When the knowing owners of the solicitous eyes recognized those two familiar figures, each in its accustomed place, a great sigh of relief and anticipatory exultation went up from the pent breasts of the loyal home rooters, for not a man of them doubted the outcome of the impending titanic struggle with that peerless pair in place and fettle.

That the two were in place in the line-up the anxious ones satisfied themselves by ocular evidence, and that both were in fettle and thoroughly "fit" for the climactic combat the faithful were assured after they had caught a fleeting glimpse of the contented expression on the swarthy face of Maguire, the head coach.

This was the last season of the famous pair, too, as well as their last big game of the season. Both were senior men, and the simultaneous graduation of two such stars would be a sore blow to the university's athletics. In addition to being admittedly the greatest guard in the football history of his college, gigantic Owen Duncan held all intercollegiate records for hammer throwing and shot putting, while "Little Flit," as he was affectionately known, was American amateur sprinter and the greatest quarter back of his day.

Many of those knowing ones knew also that these two physical opposites were inseparable bosom friends. As a matter of fact, big Owen cherished for "Little Flit" a depth of affection that was almost tender, and Flit never tired asseverating that "Owen Duncan's the greatest thing the Lord ever manufactured in human flesh and blood!"

Out there in the field, even while waiting tensely for the starting signal, Owen's gaze was irresistibly drawn to a characteristic blue ribbon which fluttered from a girl's hat. With vivid certainty that ribbon marked the spot occupied by Vera Kirby's slim form in the centre of the mammoth stretch of solid humanity which covered the whole longitudinal north side of the great enclosure.

Just as Owen's eyes turned reluctantly from the ribbon they met Flit's alert gaze, and the big guard winked telegraphically, while the little quarter back smiled in genial understanding.

Owen's great secret was no secret to the trusted and trusty Flit, who knew that his friend's heart had long ago been stolen by the sweet, demure face from above which fluttered that revealing, unmistakable blue ribbon. Flit knew, too, that the otherwise dauntless Owen, unable to get his courage up to the "popping" point, had recently been suffering the diabolical tortures which Old Nick seems to preserve exclusively for ardent lovers. These sufferings were precipitated by the indubitable nature of the industrious attentions which a fellow classman, the wealthy Walter Devlin, had lately been showering upon the charming Vera. At this very moment, indeed, Devlin was at her side; in fact, had brought her to the game in his father's big touring car.

Down in the bottommost depths of his heart Flit, though intensely sympathetic with his friend's misery, was profoundly glad that so long as things had to be thus they were thus just at this particular time, for on the one hand Flit Fletcher, captain of the team, knew that this day he and his men were up against the battle of their lives, a cyclopean conflict in which a single ounce of muscle or a single instant of speed, one lung cell of breath or one filament of nerve power might be the deciding factor; while on the other hand Flit Fletcher, the bosom chum of Owen Duncan, and the man who understood the latter better than did any other living being, knew also that, things being just as they were, including the presence of that fluttering blue ribbon, dangled by the roguish wind coquettishly in Devlin's face, the giant guard would play like a mad Goliath and nothing human would be able to stand against him.

So the shrewd Captain Flit Fletcher smiled with grim confidence as he critically scanned the opposing line-up and waited for the signal that should start the heart-breaking battle.

A minute after that exchange of glances the great conflict was on in deadly earnest, and the immense throng of packed humanity, banked in those vari-colored tiers around the three sides of the enormous rectangular stadium, grew tense and silent.

The Strength of "Big" Duncan.

A hundred times during that wild, breathless conflict was Captain Fletcher thankful for "things as they are," and especially for the presence of that fluttering thing called a blue ribbon. For always the towering, massive figure of Duncan was in the thick of the fray; always the might of his marvellous strength was able to stay the fierce, desperate charges of the formidable adversary, and always wherever he plunged strong men gave way before him or were brushed helplessly to earth like puny puppets.

As the crazy home rooters hysterically followed the course of the maddening game those aforesaid knowing ones realized that it was only big Owen Duncan's irresistible strength and endurance and little Flit Fletcher's miraculous skill and speed that won the tempestuous battle for the home team that day.

The big guard was invulnerable and invincible, nothing could overwhelm him, nothing stay him. He tore holes in the determined enemy at will; he swept down the field, carrying all before him, he met the crush of their wild onslaughts and held his ground while their grim warriors swarmed over every available inch of his great body in vain attempts to bear him to earth.

And Flit, "Little Flit," was everywhere at once—as hard for opponents to find as the proverbial flea, as difficult to lay hold of as a wriggling eel; as impossible to overtake as the Twentieth Century Limited when she hits the rail under full steam.

Vera Kirby's face was pale with excitement when the final gong rang the end of that stupendous combat and the scant triumph of the bedraggled home warriors.

With little Jessie, her seven-year-old sister, clinging to her hand upon one side and Devlin walking upon the other, the girl, smiling dutifully but obliviously at her escort's remarks and silent in spite of the child's ceaseless stream of wondering, admiring prattle anent "our grand Owen," moved with the great mass of humanity through the narrow lanes of seats toward the big exit gate in the southwest corner of the field.

The whole western end of the grounds was occupied by an immense gymnasium building, into the ground floor of which the players had all rushed immediately upon the termination of the game. All but two—the home team's giant guard and its small but wiry and marvellously active quarter back.

Flit walked off to the far eastern end of the field to search for a shoe cleat he had lost in one of the scrimmages, while Duncan stood in the centre of the emptying arena, his eyes again glued upon the blue ribbon—which his gaze had instinctively sought whenever a pause in the game permitted his glance to wander.

And still his eyes followed the band of color as, in the midst of the dense throng, it moved toward the short, wide roadway which, terminating in the great exit gate, was formed on the one side by a transverse end wall of the vast gymnasium building and on the other by a portion of the solid fifteen foot fence that surrounded the remaining three sides of the entire field.

But, see!

What was that sudden turmoil in the short exit road through which the sophomore and freshman classes were leaving the grounds in a single, compact body?

Hark to those shouts and cries of menace and defiance coming from both within and without the grounds!

What the mischief was going on, anyway?

From the exit end of the field proper the ground slightly sloped toward the wide roadway, while the latter again declined still more toward the gate. Aided by this difference of elevation, which was supplemented by his own towering height, Duncan beheld a mob of dark forms in close mass pouring furiously in through the gate from the street and falling fiercely upon the two departing classes corralled in the roadway.

But the serried sophomores and freshmen must have received some sort of warning, for instead of being taken by surprise and overwhelmed they appeared fully prepared for the attack. The consequence was a ferocious pitched battle as, shoulder to shoulder, the men of the combined classes fought savagely until the short, wide roadway between the grounds and the exit gate was a turbulent sea of desperately struggling humanity, from which rose the conflicting roars of class yells and the reverberating booms of college slogans.

In the first moment Owen was utterly nonplussed; in the next he comprehended the mad combat. Undoubtedly it was the inevitable culmination of a slumbering, bitter feud which had broken into open conflict on several occasions, growing each time in intensity, and which had long existed between the medical students and the sophomores, the latter supported in this special quarrel—probably for the mere sake of the excitement—by their hereditary and otherwise consistent foes, the freshmen.

"On, for a Centre Rush!"

Before the smile of amused disdain which began to creep over Owen's battle smudged face had reached even the corners of his mouth it froze in its inception and the blood went cold in his veins as his quick eye detected there in the very heart of the flying fists and the crazy, heaving mass the flutter of a blue ribbon.

Vera—and little Jessie—caught in that maelstrom of surging savagery!—surrounded by wild men as blind with excitement and passion during these brutish minutes as nature ever made mole for the whole span of its burrowing existence! And, even were they not blind, as well expect that boiling blood to cool instantly at mere sight of a waving ribbon as look for the white hot lava of Vesuvius to turn out of its course in order to spare the peaceful hamlets in its path. Moreover, the few close enough to see the girls could not, if they would, stay the crush of the many oblivious ones behind, while explanation or exhortation was impossible in that thunderous uproar.

But these thoughts had not run the compass of his brain when Owen, his jaws set, was charging toward the corral like an elephant gone stark mad with rage at the bungling shot of a hunter.

Straight into the dense mass he crashed—tearing, battering, smashing, raving rips with the pile driver thrusts of his massive elbows, clutching throats in a grip that made the eyes bulge and the heads roll back—as when a farmer's thumb nips the necks of tender squabs; cracking heads together like resounding billiard balls; shaking from his shoulders, as a St. Bernard might a swarm of rats, those who, leaping upon his invading figure, sought to bear him down by sheer weight. Right through them he went, not even scrupling to meet the dangerously resistant with merciless blows of his ponderous fists. On! On!—straight for the blue ribbon!

Away off, at the far end of the field, Flit Fletcher after recovering the precious shoe cleat wheeled about when the first shouts of the struggling combatants began to rise from the scene of the sudden conflict. He was just in time to behold the object of his idolatrous friendship crash through the outer crust of humanity and vanish in the seething chaos.

In anxious curiosity Flit leaped upon the empty benches and rushed up the ascending tiers to the topmost row. Overlooking from that vantage the heads of the combatants, he beheld in the very centre the gleam of the blue ribbon that Owen before the line-up had pointed out to him with a terse exclamation which Flit's position as exclusive confidant made easy of interpretation.

Heavens!—Vera Kirby in the midst of that raging college devilry!

For Flit, too, knew well the utter intoxication of a genuine college row. If in front there were any with eyes clear enough to see the girl and brains calm enough to realize the jeopardy to her frail form with which the situation was fraught they would nevertheless be helpless against the press of those behind, while the latter, seeing nothing, would stanchly maintain the loyal, fierce crush.

But Vera, Flit suddenly remembered, had brought her sister with her. Was it possible, then, that the fragile, diminutive Jessie was totally engulfed somewhere in that sea of ruthless combat?

Even as the question occurred to Flit's mind a face reared itself immediately in front of the blue ribbon and obscured the latter from view. The quarter back had played behind his friend too often not to recognize, even at that distance, the head of Owen Duncan. The great guard had won through the mad rabble to the girl's side, but surely his face was covered with blood.

The next instant a child's small form was swung aloft on one shoulder beside the bloody face, while at the same time the arm belonging to the other shoulder crashed repeatedly down upon the passion drunk, wrath blinded maniacs in front—doubtless driving each time a sledge hammer into some unfortunate face.

Flit came off that topmost tier and down over the banked benches with the dizzy evolutions of a circus tumbler. As his toes touched the earth he wheeled and shot down the field, measuring its length with a speed of a greyhound when it lays its belly along the ground.

Holy Moses!—if he only had his team with him! They'd go through that howling mob to Owen's side like a hungry dog through a pan of mush. But never mind that, he must reach Duncan without a pause—the delay of a single instant might mean irreparable injury to one of those tender girls.

Yet, oh, for a centre rush!

But away in there at the dressing rooms, in the heart of the big gymnasium building, the boys couldn't possibly hear his shout, so he might as well save his breath for better use.

Nevertheless he instinctively let out a shrill signal yell as he drew near.

On he flew to the mouth of the roadway and, without slackening his wild flight, launched himself upward and forward, catapulting his body horizontally over the heads of the combatants and landing far forward, stomach down, on the astonished craniums of the dense contestants; then with the momentum of his mad leap ricocheting yet further toward the frightened child that sat weeping on the towering shoulder, while that ruthless arm like a terrible flail still smashed up and down in front.

Many times in the big gymnasium Flit had turned the same trick in fun during the corner fights. Never had he done it in such desperate earnest or on such a long drive as now, when he landed over a yard short of his goal and lay helplessly on the smothered heads, seized vengefully by a dozen relentless hands.

As his eyes despairingly met Owen's he saw Duncan in the instant's lull which the diversion created slip Jessie from his shoulder, dropping her to shelter behind his burly figure, at the side of the slim form from the crown of which fluttered the blue ribbon. Then just as Flit felt himself being drawn down into the vengeful mass it trembled and swayed as Owen, with one foot planted against the fence, urged his body forward in a bull like drive. The dazed Flit felt himself seized in the middle of the back by two hands that laid hold of him like a pair of steel tongs. For a second he thought he was being torn limb from limb, but in another moment above the ominous sound of the ripping and rending of his precious "togs" he heard howls of savage disappointment as he was drawn forward and dropped lightly upon his feet beside Owen.

Vera, her back against the solid fifteen foot wall, was huddled into a niche which that structure made with one of a series of thick, square concrete columns supporting it. At her side was the sobbing Jessie; in front of both was the muscle plated, screening body of Owen, his torn face smeared with blood, his cut fists beating the foe with those fearful smashing blows, while his eyes gleamed grimly from his disfigured countenance.

"If you can win the top of the fence," he panted into Flit's ear, "I'll sling you the kid. I can't guard 'em both—and she's so small she may be trampled to death before these crazy fools find their senses and grasp the situation."

In the few inches of space which Owen managed to conquer for him Flit clutched his friend's shoulder, set one foot on the hip beneath, gave a spring, and the next moment was squatted astride the ridge of the fence. Turning his invulnerable back to the storm of blows, Duncan, with a swift motion, tossed the child aloft, and Flit, catching the slight form, perched her squarely on the flat peak of the square concrete column, where he bade her sit quite still and not be frightened as he prepared to descend again to the aid of the hard pressed Duncan.

Flit had hoped that the mite of humanity thus appearing on high would strike the gaze and reach the understanding of the fevered combatants, but their eyes and brains were engrossed with things nearer the earth and the surge grew even fiercer through pressure of the oncoming horde of medical students who continued to drive in at the gate, so that Owen now found himself unable to resume his former position. He was hopelessly pinned there, his gory face within half a foot of Vera's pallid visage. The best he could do was to place his hands against the fence on each side of her, when, bracing his arms at full length, he succeeded, with the help of one leg similarly used, in defending her from the crush and blows of the ravening foes as with deafening shrieks of threat and menace they tore furiously at one another.

Just as Flit was about to slide down to Owen's assistance some craven blackguard, further in the throng, mistakenly spotting the immovable Duncan as the centre of a stubborn group of foemen, suddenly swung overhead a heavy walking stick. The next second, in the heartless delirium of combat, the brutal aggressor had crashed far forward and brought the knob handle of the bludgeon with a sickening thud down upon the bare, unprotected skull of the defenceless man whose back was turned to the blow.

Unwillingly, strugglingly, desperately, like a noble ox under the stroke of the slaughterer's hammer, Owen sank slowly to the ground at Vera's feet, his braced hands slipping regretfully down the wall as he fell.

The Courage of Flit.

Flit, perched on top of the structure, had momentarily turned toward the field as a new shout smote his ear. With a spasm of joy, he beheld the team, in all stages of deshabille, burst around the corner of the gymnasium building in familiar wedge formation and drive into the screeching mob. Perhaps one of his mates, nearer the doors than the rest, had heard his shout and, looking out and seeing him and the child "treed" on the high fence, had quickly organized the timely rescue charge.

With a smile of content on his face, Flit glanced down again—just in time to witness that fell stroke from far behind, and behold the stubborn collapse of his overwhelmed friend.

With a wild yell of rage, the quarter back, in frenzied grief, crouched low on the top of the wall; and, shaking his fist impotently at the upturned, mocking face of the cowardly assailant, panted with a fervidness intensified by his own helplessness:—

"Damn you!"

In the momentary cessation of conflict immediately around the fallen man and the suddenly revealed girl—to say nothing of the startled attention given, apparently for the first time, to the helpless infant squatted on high—the miscreant disdainfully turned his back upon the fuming Flit, yet prudently began to edge his way through the crowd toward the exit gate.

Goaded to reckless fury by the wanton atrocity of the deed and the sight of Duncan's huddled, senseless form—not to speak of the brutal complacence of the offender and his cool preparations to escape all penalty of his dastardly act—the raging quarter back did a thing that was talked of in the college long after his sprinting records were forgotten.

Suddenly rearing himself erect and balancing on his difficult perch, Flit sprang clear of the fifteen foot fence ridge like a savage panther dashing from a tree limb upon some doomed prey. As he launched himself into the air he screamed deliriously above the general uproar:—

"By God, I'll get you, you skunk!"

Before the retreating scoundrel could turn his head at the sound of that strident, menacing shriek something struck him behind the shoulders like a battering ram and he flashed to the earth, face down, with Flit's knees boring between the shoulder blades and the muscular fingers of the frenzied quarter back twining themselves vengefully about the throat of the victim.

At the same time Flit became suddenly conscious of an increase in the tumult—a multiplication of the shouts and yells. Then something swept heavily, smashingly over him and his quarry, and as he sank across the form of the latter things began to grow dark.

Indifferent to what happened to himself, Flit realized, with a throb of jubilation and pride, that this was the blind, headlong rush of the team—the drive of the irresistible wedge—sweeping all before it and clearing the roadway of its human chaff.

He exulted that he had nailed his man; he hoped that Owen wasn't dead, and as everything faded away he wondered [illegible] those other, more distant voices of gruff menace and sharp command were. He didn't learn until afterward when he was helped to his feet, none the worse but for innumerable bruises and a stiff, dizzy feeling, that those were the voices of a squad of policemen called in haste from a station house a couple of blocks above the college. To be perfectly frank, that was not the first time the officers had been needed to quell abnormal disturbances on the part of the student body, and, as "practice makes perfect," the policemen officiated with remarkable effectuality, dispersing the howling bedlamites in incredibly short order.

A few arrests were made, among them Flit's captive, and some patients were taken into the college hospital, where the doctors performed much skilful patchwork, aided by young medical students, some of whom, doubtless, also had assisted most strenuously to produce the damage they were so gently repairing.

Devlin, who had mysteriously disappeared during the melee, turned up while Owen's head was being dressed, and, solicitously seconding Vera's insistence that Duncan instead of going to his own distant home should return with them, promised that the car should be driven with the utmost smoothness. Upon that condition the doctors consented to release him, stipulating the further proviso that the patient remain in the house, preferably recumbent, for as many hours as the rest of the day permitted.

"By gad, it really was splendid of you, Duncan!" exclaimed Devlin, with generous admiration, during the ride back. "Lucky for these girls that you happened to be at hand with that Herculean frame of yours."

"The frame would have been useless without the courage," commented Vera softly, as she stole a covert glance at Devlin's own stalwart figure. "By the way," she added in a vague tone of voice, "what became of you in that awful mix-up, Walter? Up to the time we reached the roadway I thought you were right beside me."

"Oh, ah, you see!" explained Devlin, with a slight flush, "recognizing immediately that one man could be of no earthly use, I slipped off quietly to the station house and fetched that squad. Deuced clever move on my part, if I do say it myself; for they got there just in time to scatter the crazy brutes and pinch that cowardly devil who cracked Duncan's caput from the rear."

Vera stole a sidelong glance at Owen's face, but the eyes that shone from the patched features were gazing out of the car with a strange twinkle.

"If you'll all kindly excuse me," he said when the Kirby place was reached, "I think I'll just stretch myself on the lounge in the living room until dinner time. I'm ashamed to have to confess that I feel a little bit queer and wabbly."

He had barely installed himself in the solitude of the comfortable room when little Jessie stole in and, throwing her arms impulsively about his neck, covered the unpatched spots of his face with kisses. Then she smoothed back the hair from his forehead and gazed with tender pity into his eyes.

An Important Matter.

It was mighty sweet of her, thought Owen, and the hand was cool and [illegible] ful; but, well—he couldn't help wishing it was somebody else's hand.

"Oh, you dear, grand Owen!" she whispered softly, sympathetically patting his cheek with her hand, her eyes sparkled with childish admiration.

"Were you very much frightened, Jess?"

"Not after you came," she assured him, simply.

"Where's Vera?" he asked abruptly.

"Upstairs, in her room."

"Say, Jess, go ask her to come down here, won't you?—that's a good girl."

The child put her lips to his ear and whispered confidentially:—

"I—I don't think she will, Owen; she—she's crying something terrible."

Duncan, pulling her ear to his own lips, whispered in turn:—

"You just run up and tell her that I say I've got to see her right away; or—or—I'll get up, and—and—well, then, I might faint!"

In a few minutes Vera slipped into the room, and seating herself on a low stool at his side, hesitatingly took the hand he held out.

Owen never knew just how he succeeded in getting his recalcitrant nerve up to the point but personal desperation and providential opportunity make a nerve bracing combination.

So, in the growing dusk he softly pulled her near enough to whisper something in her crimsoning ear.

It must have been a question of some sort, for she murmured softly:—

"Yes! Yes, yes, Owen dear."

And it must have been a very important matter, requiring much subsequent thought for without pausing again, they remained there, with [illegible] unit the dinner bell rang.

"The Next Instant a Child's Small Form Was Swung Aloft on One Shoulder Beside the Bloody Face."

"Flit Sprang Clear Off the Fifteen Foot Fence."