

## MUFFLING THE SCHOOL-BELL.

Merrier school-boys than those who occupied the seats in the Brown High School could not be found anywhere. Their shouts of laughter awoke every echo, and old men passing by the school-house would stop and watch the boys in their happy games, and think what a line of years had passed away since they ran and jumped in the same games, on the same spot.

It was a pretty picture. The old brick school-house, two stories high, was ornamented with a cupola, in which hung the school-bell, a clear, sharp-toned instrument which could be heard to the farthest corner of the village. On top of the cupola was a quill, which answered originally for a vane; but as the boys made it a target to throw stones at, it had become stationary, and pointed to neither point of the compass, but almost straight up into the air. One of the boys, who was somewhat of a wag, said the old quill wanted mending.

The Brown High School boys were, for the most part, good boys; but there are black sheep in every flock, and this school was not exempt.

A boy named George Beck was the most mischievous scholar; he had only been there a short time, but his hurtful influence was already noticed by Mr. Cutter, the teacher. He taught the boys a great many tricks which they had been innocent of before, and one or two of the boys had fallen off very much in their studies in consequence of their intimacy with George Beck.

Rufus Blake and Stephen Holt seemed to be most influenced by Beck's good-natured mischief; they liked him because he was so bold and daring; and he liked them because he could make them help him carry out his plans and projects.

One night, after school was dismissed, Beck informed Rufus that he had succeeded in fixing a key to fit the school-house, and he proposed having some fun out of it.

"Agreed," said Rufus; "what fun shall we have?"

"I will tell you a nice game to play," said George. "We will muffle the bell, and then in the morning Mr. Cutter won't hear any bell ring, and he will be late to school."

"But how can we get at the bell? how can we get up to the cupola?" asked Rufus.

"Oh! easy enough; I know where the ladder is, and we can put it up to the trap-door, and go very easily. I will get Steph. Holt to join with us, and he can hold the ladder, while we tie a cloth round the tongue of the old bell," said George.

"Both the boys agreed that it would be a grand trick, and they started down to Stephen Holt's house, to enlist him in the enterprise. They found him in the wood-shed sawing some wood. Stephen was an only son, and inclined to be a very

good boy; but, like most all boys, he was afraid of being laughed at; and Beck knew this, and therefore always laughed at him and called him a coward when he hesitated in joining Beck in his mischievous frolics. Stephen listened to the bell project, and, much to the gratification of his comrades, assented to accompany them on the exploit.

The question then arose as to when the deed should be attempted, and the next evening was suggested as the one; but Rufus thought that they had better take that very night, for something might happen if they delayed. So it was decided to take that evening, and after playing till it was dark, they set out for the school-house. Everything was quiet; the tall elm trees waved their giant arms over the roof, now and then grating harshly against the eaves. Each of the boys felt a thrill of fear as they ascended the steps, but they tried to laugh it off with a joke. The key fitted the lock exactly; they entered, and after securing the door on the inside, they groped their way down cellar, where George had seen the ladder; after stumbling round a great deal, they succeeded in getting hold of it; it was very heavy and quite long, and they were some time in getting it up into the school-room without making a noise.

It required the united strength of the three boys to raise it to the trap-door, but at length it was done, and Rufus and George ascended, leaving Stephen, who was the youngest and smallest, to stand at the foot of the ladder and keep it from slipping.

The boys had never been into the attic before, and were wholly unacquainted with the locality; it was pitch dark, and felt very close and hot; pretty soon they found a flight of steps, and ascending to the top found a heavy scuttle, which they were unable to lift.

"What shall we do now?" said Rufus.

"I guess we shall have to call Steph. to come and help us," replied George.

So Stephen was called to come up, but he said he was afraid to go up such a high ladder, and no one would be at the foot to hold it. At last he was induced to ascend, the two boys in the attic holding the top of the ladder. But it seemed that all three could not raise the scuttle, and then they discovered that it was fastened on one side by a padlock. Here was something they hadn't reckoned on. However, the boys had several keys with them, and they were intent on trying them, when they were startled by a tremendous crash which resounded through the building, frightening the boys half out of their wits. If they could have seen each other's faces, they would have been startled still more, for they were as white as sheets.

"What was that?" asked Stephen, in a tremulous voice.

"I don't know," said the others; "let's go down and see."

They approached the trap-door, when, to their horror and dismay, they found that the ladder was gone. It had slipped from its position and fallen to the floor. By the faint glimmer of moonlight which began to break from the clouds, the boys could see that in its course it had knocked down the stove-pipe, tipped over the teacher's table, and splintered several of the scholar's desks. Here was mischief enough, and, worse than all, they could not run away from it, for there they were in the dark loft, fifteen feet from the floor, and no way of getting down.

"Now we're in a fix!" exclaimed Beck.

Stephen and Rufus thought so too, and the former began to cry and wish he was safe at home.

"Can't we take the bell-rope and go down on that?" suggested Rufus.

It was a happy thought, but was a fruitless one, for on examination they found that the bell-rope was tied fast to a cleat in the school-room, and the other end was made fast to the bell-wheel, which was equally unattainable.

George Beck said he had half a mind to drop down to the floor, but on looking down he saw that a row of desks and chairs ran directly beneath, which would render a fall perilous.

It was growing very late in the evening, and the boys knew that their parents would be anxious about them, and might, perhaps, send out in search of them; but how could they ever find them in such an out-of-the-way hole as that? They saw no escape from remaining in their prison all night. The floor was hard and dusty, and all they had was the old coat which Beck had brought to muffle the bell with. Stephen Holt laid down on this and sobbed himself to sleep. His companions sat up, trying to conceive some method of release, for another difficulty presented itself; the air of the loft was close and oppressive, and they felt almost suffocated. They knew that it was impossible to avoid detection. If they remained till morning they would be discovered, and it would be no worse if they should seek relief then. So Rufus and George resolved to adopt the only mode of release which they could think of; it was a bold one, but the best one.

A small portion of the bell-rope passed through the attic on its way to the bell. Beck cut the rope off close to the floor with his pen-knife, and then waking Stephen, they all three caught hold and rang the old bell with all their might. It was just midnight, and the whole village had retired to rest, when the iron clang of the school-house bell reverberated through the air. A sound so unusual started every one from their slumbers, and windows were pushed up and night-capped heads protruded, asking "What's the matter?" The general idea seemed to be that something was on fire, and very soon this alarming cry ran through