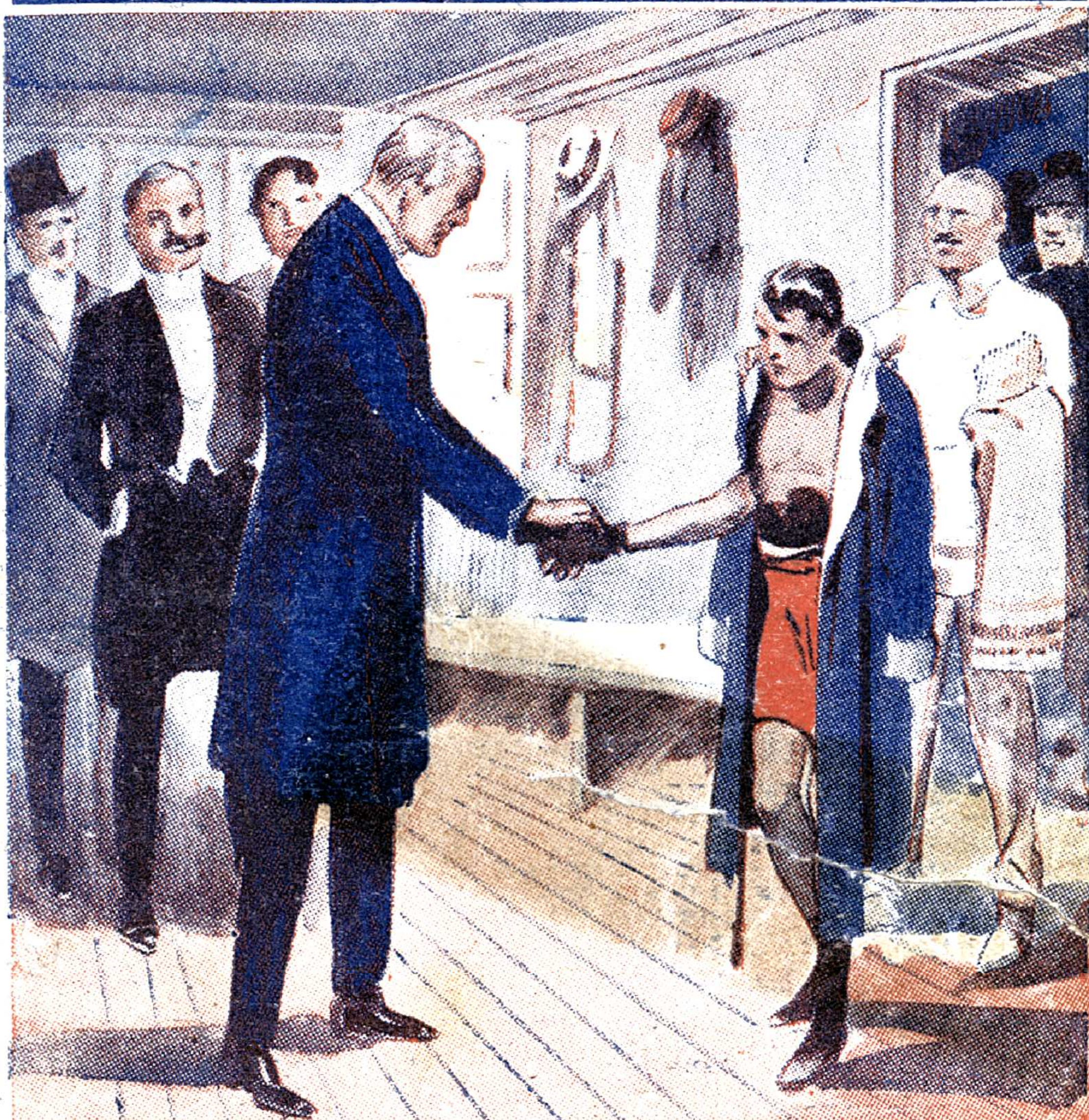


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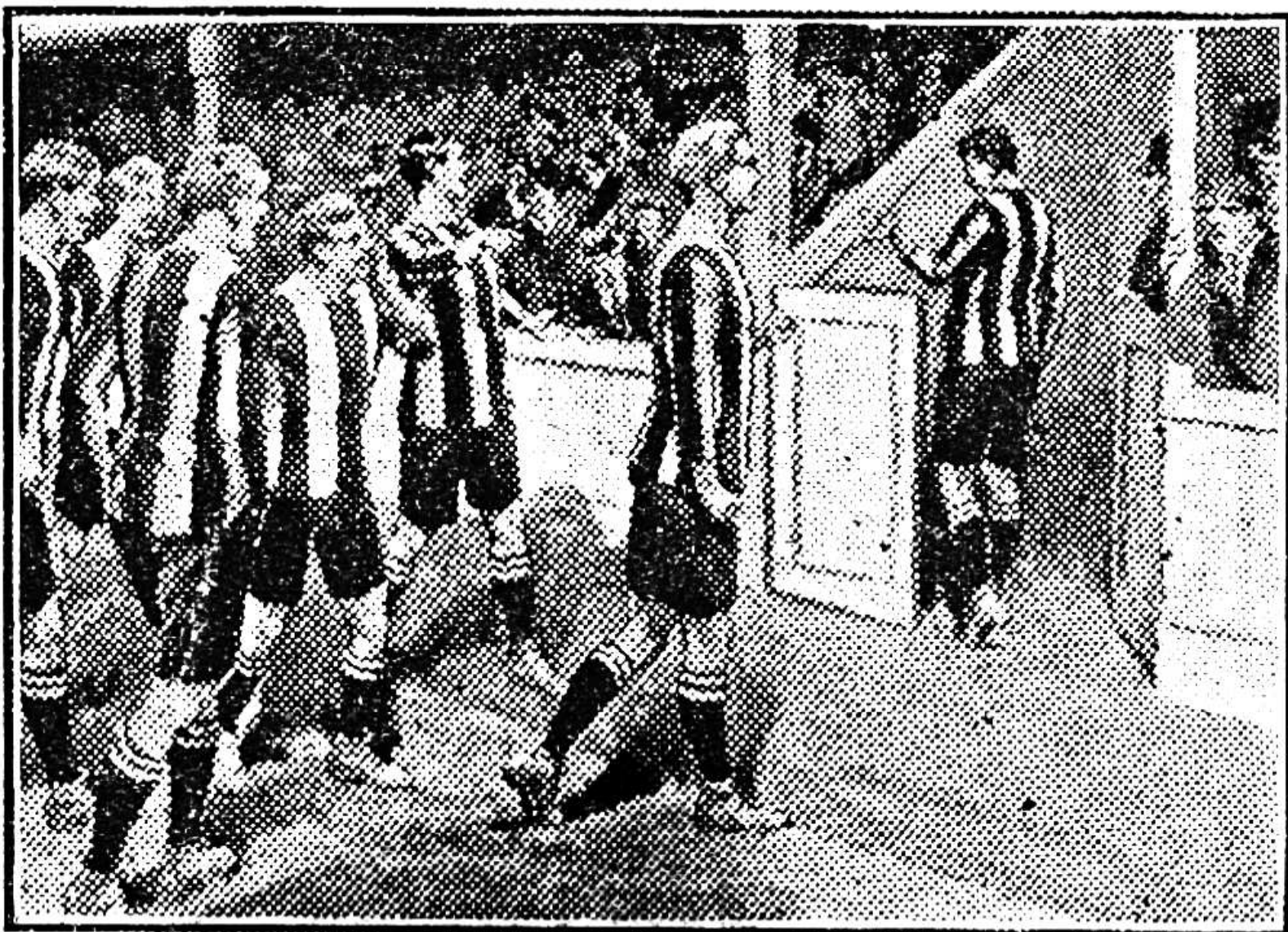
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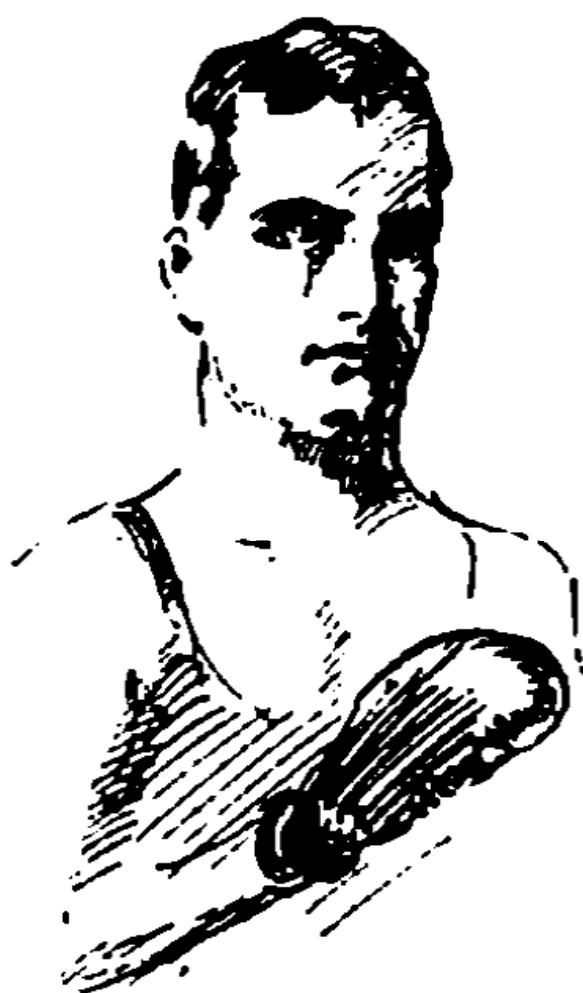
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE EVE OF THE GREAT FIGHT.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" declared Church firmly.

"Rot!"

"I tell you it's impossible——"

"And I tell you that you're talking out of the back of your silly neck!" roared Handforth, glaring across the table. "Nothing's impossible—that's my motto! Absolutely nothing is impossible!"

"Oh, don't talk piffle!" put in McClure. "I suppose if you were asked to climb up the wall to the ceiling, you'd do it?"

Handforth gave his chum a withering look.

"We won't go into details of that sort!" he said sourly. "I like to talk to people who've got sense. When I say impossible, I mean——"

"Goodness knows what you do mean!" said Church wearily. "But all I know is that we can't go to this boxing match in London. It's all very well to talk about it—but that's all it'll come to. I'd like to go, too—and so would McClure. We'd all like to see Lawrence knock the stuffing out of this Welsh chap——"

"He ain't Welsh, you ass!" said McClure.

"Well, it's his name, isn't it?" retorted Church. "Kiddy Welsh, or something like that. I've got an idea that

Lawrence will knock him sideways—and I'd give a term's pocket money to be there and see him do it. But we're at St. Frank's and this fight is going to take place in London, on Wednesday evening. If either of you chaps can suggest how we can be in London—well, I'd like to hear it!"

"There are several ways of going," said Handforth. "Wednesday is a half-holiday, and we could go on the afternoon train——"

"And get back the next day, I suppose?" asked Church. "That would be first class, wouldn't it? What would we say to Mr. Lee? Oh, we could see the fight all right—it's not impossible, providing we are prepared to be sacked from the school. But, personally, I don't fancy it's worth it."

Handforth looked at his chums pityingly.

"My dear sloppy, senseless asses!" he said politely. "You're all right, both of you, but you've got no brains. You can't think of things. All we've got to do is to find some decent excuse that will keep us in London overnight. Then we shall be O.K."

"But I'm not going to tell a lot of lies——"

"It won't be necessary to tell any lies," said Handforth. "All we need to do is a bit of wangling. And you can leave that to me."

"Oh, of course—certainly!" said McClure. "But if we leave it to you,

Handy, you'll wangle such a terrific lot that you'll get everything into a hopeless muddle—and it'll end by the three of us being wangled out of St. Frank's—on our necks!"

Handforth glared.

"That's the worst of having chums like you!" he said bitterly. "Whenever I need support, all you can do is to sneer. Whenever I get a decent idea all you can do is to pull it to pieces. One of these days I shall walk out of this study, and never come back!"

"When do you think that day will be?" asked McClure hopefully.

Handforth ignored the remark.

"Now, this idea of mine——" he began.

"Which idea?"

"The one I'm going to tell you, of course!" roared Handforth. "Am I going to speak or not? I'm getting fed up with you chaps! I'm the leader of this study, and you fellows jaw and jaw, and never let me get a word in edgeways! There's nothing heard in this study except your voices!"

Church and McClure thought it as well to say nothing. Considering that Handforth spoke ninety words out of every hundred in the study the last statement of his was hardly accurate. But Church and McClure had no desire to start an argument. Once an argument commenced in Study D it generally ended in a powerful display of Handforth's listic ability—much to the detriment of the good looks of Church and McClure.

The three famous chums had come into their study in the Ancient House at St. Frank's to have a chat before breakfast. It was quite early morning, in fact, and decidedly early for the trio to commence squabbling. They usually started in earnest after dinner.

"There's no need to get excited," continued Handforth. "Now let's get the facts. Lawrence, of the College House, has decided to fight the light-weight champion of London, a chap named Kiddy Welsh. Of course, this is a secret——"

"It won't be a secret long if you talk in that tone!" said Church. "Why can't you speak quietly, Handy?"

"What's the good of whispering to you chaps?" demanded Handforth. "You won't take any notice even if I yell. And don't keep interrupting! It's a secret—at least, only a few chosen fellows at St. Frank's know about it.

It would be pretty serious for Lawrence if the Head got to know that he was fighting professionals in the ring. Things like that ain't allowed at St. Frank's. That's why Lawrence appears in the Ring under the name of Young Ern. And, by what I can understand, he's only been doing it because his pater's hard up. Well, anyway, that's not our business, so we needn't discuss it. All we need know is that Lawrence is going in for the fight of his life to-morrow evening, and this fight is to take place at the West End Sporting Club Hall, in Kensington. I'd give quids to see the fight, because it's going to be a corker. And I'm pretty certain that Lawrence will win. If I was a betting chap, I'd lay ten to one that he'll knock Welsh out stiff before the fifteenth round."

"Well, you're not the only chap who's got that opinion," said Church. "Nipper thinks so, too, and so does Christine. Lawrence himself has got an idea that he might go under. But he always was a modest chap. He certainly is the best boxer I've ever seen, and it oughtn't to take long to polish off this professional. In any case, whether he wins or loses, he'll get five hundred quid!"

"Phew!" whistled McClure. "I can hardly believe it, you know."

Handforth sniffed.

"Some chaps get all the luck," he said. "It's influence—that's what it is! Now look at me! You chaps know what a ripping boxer I am, and do I get any chance? No! It's because I was born unlucky. If I'm not as good a boxer as Lawrence I'll eat my hat!"

"There's nothing like modesty!" murmured Church.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Church.

"I don't want any sneers!" said Handforth tartly. "I don't expect you chaps to back me up. You're supposed to be my chums, but you generally manage to hinder me all you can. I've learnt that it's never any good relying on friends. If I only had my chance, I could go and earn five hundred quid, just for having a scrap with somebody. Why, I'd fight anybody for ten bob!"

Church and McClure grinned.

"We seem to have gone off the mark," said Church. "We were talking about Lawrence, I believe, not about you, Handy."

"Exactly," said Handforth. "Lawrence is going to London to-morrow—

although I don't know how he'll get the time off. Still, that's his business. We've got to decide how we can do the trick. And I've got an idea!"

"Another one?" asked McClure.

"No, you ass—it's the same idea."

"Oh, we haven't heard it yet—of course not!" said Church, yawning. "You're always so giddy brisk, Handy. You get to the point so rapidly."

"It's no good getting to the point before the right time," said Handforth.

"Now, this is my wheeze. We three chaps want to get to London, and we want to do it without telling any lies. Now, this is where brain power comes in. To-morrow morning, at dinner-time, Church, you'll be taken ill!"

"Shall I?" said Church in surprise. "That's frightfully interesting."

"You'll be taken horribly ill!" declared Handforth. "Dr. Brett will be sent for, but you won't be able to speak to him—you'll be so bad. You'll be rolling about in agony—"

"How do you know?" asked Church, staring. "Are you going to poison me, or something?"

"No, you babbling ass!"

"Then how do you know that I shall be rolling about in agony?"

Handforth sighed.

"Haven't you got sense enough to realise that you'll be spoofing?" he demanded. "You won't tell any lies, because you won't be able to speak at all. Dr. Brett won't be able to do anything, and you'll still be squirming with pain."

"What a ripping idea!" said McClure enthusiastically. "Oh, top hole! It ought to take the first prize at any well-organised lunatic asylum!"

"Can't you wait until I've finished!" bawled Handforth fiercely. "I haven't finished yet!"

"Oh, sorry!" said McClure. "I thought that was all!"

"Church will be writhing about in agony," went on Handforth. "Brett won't be able to do anything, and then I shall come in!"

"Oh," said Church. "And you'll touch me with a wand, I suppose, and I'll get well?"

Handforth nearly choked.

"If you continue this fatheaded rot, I'll slaughter the pair of you!" he snorted. "Keep quiet until I've finished! I shall appear, and I shall make a ripping suggestion. I shall say

that I know a specialist in London who can put Church right in next to no time, and I shall insist upon McClure and I taking Church to London by the afternoon train. Once we're in the train, we shall be O.K. And as soon as we get to London we'll send a wire to say that Church is better, and we shall be back on Thursday morning. Now, how's that for a ripping idea?"

"Gorgeous!" said Church. "But there's one thing I'd like to know before we go any further. If I'm so ill that I'm writhing on the floor how the dickens am I to go to London by train?"

"Oh, that's nothing," said Handforth.

"Nothing at all!" agreed Church. "And do you suppose Mr. Leo wouldn't smell a rat? Do you think he'd let us go?"

"Of course he'd let us go," said Handforth. "He can't do anything else. With a chap rolling about on the floor, howling with agony, he'll simply be compelled to agree to anything—"

"Rats!" said Church. "What Mr. Leo would do would be to send me into the sanny, and there I should stick until I pretended to get better! But I'll tell you what, Handy. We can work the idea as you suggest, except for one detail. You can be the chap to writhe on the floor!"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth.

"You can do it a lot better than me," said Church firmly. "I don't pretend to be such a good actor as you, old man. But the best thing we can do is to forget that idea—it's too dotty. And there goes the breakfast bell!"

Church and McClure were heartily glad, for they were saved from any further ideas which Handforth's brilliant brain might conceive. One was quite enough for them. Another idea of the same kind would have ruined their appetites.

But Handforth would not be subdued. He still considered that the scheme was terrific. He was tremendously anxious to see the forthcoming fight which had been arranged between Ernest Lawrence, of the College House, and Kiddy Welsh, the lightweight champion of London.

There had been quite a lot of excitement at St. Frank's recently.

Mr. Smale Foxe, the Housemaster of the College House, had provided most of it. His scheme to give the boys of the College House their freedom had

net panned out very well. Mr. Foxe's scheme had been to bring disgrace upon the school—for he had a grudge against St. Frank's which he was anxious to pay back. He had concluded that if the boys were allowed to do just as they liked, they would very soon bring disgrace and dishonour upon the fair name of the old school.

And, no doubt, this would have happened. But Christine and Co., the active leaders of the College House Remove, had put machinery in operation to kill Mr. Foxe's plan. They had formed a secret tribunal, which acted in just the same way as an ordinary Housemaster. If any boy committed an offence against the school rules, he was hauled before the tribunal, and made to suffer for his delinquencies.

At first, this tribunal idea had not panned out very well. The fellows had ignored the thing. But, after a while, they had been compelled to recognise the tribunal as an active force. And now—after the tribunal had been in existence for about a week—some semblance of order was restored in the College House. The majority of the fellows were behaving themselves. If they did otherwise, they were dropped on by the tribunal, and punished. The tribunal had eyes everywhere. Nobody knew who its agents were, or who it consisted of.

Most of the fellows believed that Christine and Co were at the back of it, and this, of course, was the actual truth. But there was no proof. Mr. Foxe himself was furious because this tribunal had been formed, for it was upsetting all his own schemes. However, he could do nothing since he could not discover the identity of the ringleaders.

However, the main thought at this present moment was the great fight which was due to take place on the following evening. In a way, it would be an amazing contest. For Ernest Lawrence, a junior of St. Frank's, would pit his skill and strength against that of a professional champion.

On the face of it, the match seemed absurd.

But Lawrence was no ordinary boy. His boxing was marvellous. Not only skilful, but masterly. And there was a power behind his punch that many a professional heavyweight would have envied.

Lawrence was being "handled" by

Mr. Norman Rook, a boxing promoter who had discovered the junior some weeks earlier. Mr. Rook had placed implicit faith in Lawrence, and he had not been disappointed.

In arranging this match with Kiddy Welsh, Mr. Rook knew well enough that he was taking a big risk. But he had seen Lawrence fighting on several occasions—and he knew exactly what Welsh could do. Upon the whole, Mr. Rook came to the conclusion that the schoolboy had an excellent chance of winning. But it would be a stiff fight.

Not many of St. Frank's fellows knew the truth. Lawrence had only taken a few into his confidence, and these few, naturally, were eager and anxious to see this great contest. One of those who was most eager was myself.

And, needless to say, I had exercised my wits a great deal. But I was by no means confident that the thing could be managed. True, the Headmaster was away from St. Frank's, and it would only be necessary to obtain Nelson Lee's permission. But I had doubts as to whether the gov'nor would see eye to eye with me. In all probability he would squash the idea at once, and tell me to go and eat coke—or words to that effect.

But I was feeling quite cheerful after breakfast on that morning, and I had every reason to. As soon as the meal was over I went to Study C with my two chums, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"The others will be here presently," I said, "and then we can go and look up Christy. We'll see what he's got to say."

"About that letter, you mean?" asked Watson.

"Yes, of course."

The door opened and admitted Pitt and Jack Grey and De Valerie, but before they could say a word Handforth came charging in after them.

"Oh, good," said Handforth. "I'm glad you chaps are here. I've got a ripping idea to suggest—"

"Don't," pleaded Pitt. "Go away and bury it!"

"You—you ass—"

"We've heard of your ideas before," went on Pitt.

"But it's about this fight," said Handforth, lowering his voice. "I've thought of a way that Church and McClure and I can get to London to-morrow."

"My dear chap, there's no need for you to strain your enormous brain

power," I interrupted. "That idea of yours, whatever it is, needn't be discussed. As a matter of fact, I think that we shall manage it all serene. By a piece of tremendous luck I heard from Tinker this morning——"

"Tinker?" asked Handforth. "Do you mean Sexton Blake's assistant?"

"I do," I replied. "Tinker and I are old pals, you know. We don't see one another very often, but we still write. It seems that Tinker is on his own at present—Sexton Blake is up North, engaged upon a case. And I got a letter from Tinker this morning."

"That's very interesting," said Handforth. "But I don't see——"

"You're not supposed to see," I broke in. "Wait until you've read the letter. Then, perhaps, you'll be enlightened. This is what it says:

"Baker Street, London, N.

"My Dear Nipper,—I haven't heard from you for ages, and I'm wondering if you're still alive. It's getting near the end of the term at St. Frank's, I believe, and perhaps things aren't very strict down there. I was wondering if you could accept an invitation. I'm giving a little party on Wednesday evening, and it would please me tremendously if you could come up and bring a few of your friends with you—say, five or six. I shall be awfully delighted if you can. Tell Mr. Lee that I particularly want you to come, and that I'll be responsible for your safety."

"Ask him about it as soon as you get this note, and then send me a wire. If it's all serene telegraph at once, and I'll be down at St. Frank's in the big car by midday on Wednesday. Then we can all have a nice ride to London, spend a ripping evening, and you can come home here, to Baker Street, to sleep. And you can all be back at St. Frank's quite early on Thursday morning. That's the programme, old son."

"Do try to persuade Mr. Lee that I want you and your friends very urgently. And don't forget to send that wire."

"With kind regards to Mr. Lee and yourself,—Yours, as ever,

"TINKER."

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Pitt. "What a piece of luck!"

"Rather!" said De Valerie. "If Mr. Lee will only agree, we shall be on velvet. And Tinker is coming to fetch us, too! But what about this party of

his? If he's arranged something of that sort, we can't very well go to the boxing match."

I grinned and winked.

"Oh, we'll manage it somehow," I said. "You leave it to your uncle. Of course I'm a bit nervy about going to the guv'nor, but I'll do my best. I think I might be able to manage him all serene. If I stroke him the right way he might purr!"

"There's no telling," said Tommy Watson. "Anyhow, it's a chance, and I think Tinker is a brick for coming to the scratch like this. He couldn't have sent his letter at a more opportune moment!"

"Well, there's no time like the present," I said briskly. "You fellows wait here while I go along to the guv'nor's study. I'll see what can be done. I don't suppose I shall be long, and then we shall know our fate."

Without saying anything further I hurried out, and went straight along to Nelson Lee's study. I felt that my task would be a comparatively easy one, for, after all, Nelson Lee was not like an ordinary Housemaster—to me, at all events. I could generally manage things easily; things, that is, that were reasonable.

I found Nelson Lee reading the morning paper, and he nodded to me cheerfully as I entered.

"Good morning, young 'un," he said.

"Good morning, sir," I replied.

"Lovely morning, guv'nor."

Nelson Lee laid his paper aside, and removed the cigarette from his lips.

"I can detect from your looks and by your tone, Nipper, that you have come here to ask me a favour," he observed drily. "What is it this time. I happen to be in a good humour—fortunately for you. But that is no guarantee that I shall grant your request."

"Just have a squint at this, sir," I said. "It will explain everything."

"This letter?" said Nelson Lee, taking it. "I will read it, if you wish, but I definitely decline to squint!"

I grinned as the guv'nor glanced through Tinker's note, and I felt rather anxious until Nelson Lee looked up.

"An invitation!" he observed "The informal impudence!"

"Eh?"

"And do you seriously mean to imagine, Nipper, that I should excuse

you?" asked Lee. "Do you think I shall let you and certain other boys leave here to-morrow afternoon, and not return until Thursday morning."

"Yes, sir," I said promptly.

"You think that I shall grant the request?"

"I do, sir."

"And why are you so sublimely confident?"

"Why, because I know you're a good sort, guv'nor," I replied. "And, after all, it's not such a big thing. Tinker will come down for us, and we shall be well looked after. We sha'n't be missing any lessons, because to-morrow's a half-holiday, and we shall be back quite early on Thursday morning. I say, sir, be a sport! It's not often that Tinker can invite us up to town, and it's only for a few hours, after all."

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"And what do you propose to do in London?"

"Why, we're going to this--this--cr--party," I replied.

"Quite so, quite so," said Nelson Lee.

"Well, Nipper, perhaps I shall agree to it. You generally manage to get round me with that smooth tongue of yours. What boys do you propose to take with you?"

"Tregellis-West, Watson, Pitt, De Valerie, and Handforth, Church and McClure," I replied promptly. "And, if possible, three fellows from the College House, although that's nothing to do with you."

"Good gracious!" said Nelson Lee.

"Eight boys! My dear Nipper, I think it's quite impossible——"

"Now, guv'nor, don't make a fuss!" I protested. "What does it matter whether eight of us go or four? We shall be all right. And you're in supreme control here. There's nobody to——"

"I am well aware that you are taking advantage of the fact that Dr. Stafford is away," said Nelson Lee drily. "Well, Nipper, I will be weak as usual, and succumb. But you must be back early on Thursday morning; this is quite essential."

I rushed across the study, grabbed the guv'nor, and hugged him.

"You're a brick, sir!" I exclaimed enthusiastically.

And, a second later, I dashed out, in order to spread the good news.

CHAPTER II.

A STARTLING ADVENTURE.

ERNEST LAWRENCE strolled across the Triangle carelessly, and without any appearance of being hurried. It was Wednesday afternoon—quite early. Dinner had been over only a few minutes, in fact. To all intents and purposes, Lawrence was as unconcerned as ever. He did not appear excited or nervous.

Yet the College House junior was about to leave for London. There were no restrictions in the College House. Lawrence could go where he pleased, and get back when he pleased, and no questions would be asked. For this one occasion Lawrence was finding the new order of things very satisfactory. If he had to answer to the secret tribunal he would not mind, for he had an excellent excuse to offer.

Hardly anybody at St. Frank's had any idea of what was to occur that evening. The few fellows who were in the know did their utmost to conceal the fact, and to appear unconcerned.

Nobody approached Lawrence as he crossed the Triangle and went to the gates. He smiled and nodded at me as I strolled round from the Ancient House. I knew that he was just off. Tinker would arrive with the car later on, for, of course, it was not necessary for us to go early.

Lawrence was going by train, however, since Mr. Rook wanted him to be on the spot quite early in the evening. Lawrence would catch the early afternoon local to Bannington, and then join the express there.

He knew exactly where to go to in London, so he would have no difficulties.

He caught the train comfortably, and arrived at Bannington. Here he strolled about the platform, for there was a wait of fifteen minutes before the express was due to come in. And Lawrence had much to occupy his thoughts.

He knew that he had very strenuous times ahead of him. It would be the stiffest contest he had ever entered into, and, although he was doubtful as to the result, he was determined to put up the fight of his life.

If it was humanly possible, he would win.

He had been training hard, and was

feeling as fit as a fiddle. His muscles were in splendid condition, and he felt capable of any exertion. And he knew quite well that he would require all his strength and reserve of energy for the evening's ordeal. And he was confident.

He had faith in himself and his strength.

He was thinking of these things when, quite suddenly, somebody touched his arm. He looked round quickly, and found himself facing a short man, dressed in the clothing of a chauffeur. The fellow touched his peak cap respectfully.

"Master Lawrence, I think, sir?" he said.

"Yes, that's right," said Lawrence.

"Mr. Rook thought you'd be waiting on the platform for the express, sir, and he sent me here," said the man. "I want you——"

"Mr. Rook!" ejaculated Lawrence. "Is he in Bannington?"

"Yes, sir, at the Grapes."

Lawrence looked astonished.

"But I understood that Mr. Rook would be in London to meet me!" he exclaimed.

"I don't know anything about that, Master Lawrence, but I do know that Mr. Rook is here, and he wants to see you," said the chauffeur respectfully.

"He's got his car here, and I think he means to go to London at once. I dare say you'll come with us!"

"Oh!" said Lawrence. "I see! I'll come at once!"

He was quite pleased with the prospect, but he wished Mr. Rook had told him in advance, for he had bought his ticket to London, and that would be money wasted. However, that was a detail.

He followed the chauffeur off the station, and out through the booking-office. There, in the big station yard, stood a powerful, closed motor-car—a limousine.

"Step in, sir," said the chauffeur. "I'll have you down at the Grapes inside two minutes—it's only just down the road."

He held the door open, and Lawrence jumped briskly into the car. The door closed smartly behind him. Then, for the first time, Lawrence found that the car had two occupants. They were both somewhat flashily dressed individuals, and they smiled amiably as Lawrence looked at them.

"So you're the young gent!" said one of the men. "Pleased to meet you, Master Lawrence—or, I should say, Young Ern. By thunder, you're a real champion!"

The man seized Lawrence's hand, and shook it. The next moment he was seated between the two strangers. Lawrence didn't quite like it, and he wondered why Mr. Rook had acted in this way. He even began to wonder whether Mr. Rook had had any hand in it at all.

To tell the truth, Lawrence was becoming suspicious.

"It's all right, young man, you needn't look scared," said one of the strangers. "Everything is all serene. We shall go up to London in this car, and that'll get you to Kensington quicker than the train. Mr. Rook had a special reason for doing this. You can bet Mr. Rook is all there!"

The limousine was already speeding along the High Street, and as Lawrence glanced out of the window he noticed they were past the Grapes Hotel at quite a rapid speed. This was somewhat strange, considering that the chauffeur had said that Mr. Rook was waiting at the Grapes.

"I say, we've gone past!" exclaimed Lawrence abruptly. "Great Scott! I believe this is a trick! Mr. Rook was not there at all!"

"I'm afraid it's a bit too late, now, young man!" grinned one of his companions.

"Too late!" said the junior. "What do you mean?"

"Why, I mean if you wanted to smell a rat, you ought to have smelt it sooner," said the man. "It's no good smelling a rat now, because you're not in a position to get away, even if you want to. You'd best take things quietly, or it'll be the worse for you."

Lawrence nodded.

"What—what do you mean?" he asked huskily.

"Well, I thought you had more sense," said one of the strangers. "The fact is, young man, you're a prisoner, and you'd better not try any tricks. Understand? You're sitting here, between us, and you can't do anything."

"Good heavens!" gasped Lawrence hoarsely.

For, in a second, he realised the truth. He had been trapped! In the most simple manner possible he had walked into the net which had been spread for

him. What an idiot he had been to fall into the trap so easily!

But what did it mean? Who had done this, and for what reason?

Lawrence was absolutely mystified, and he could think of no plausible, reasonable explanation. But it was quite certain he was a prisoner. Escape was out of the question. At the least attempt he would be seized. He could not even cry for help, for the car was rather a noisy one, and his voice would certainly be drowned.

The junior was beginning to feel rather desperate. The helplessness of his position appalled him. But he did not show much emotion. He sat there, quite still, but with his heart beating rapidly.

"Who paid you to do this?" he demanded angrily.

"If you don't ask those questions, young gent, you won't have no lies," replied one of the men. "We can't tell you anything—strict orders. We've got to carry out our instructions, and that's all."

"But—but there must be some reason for kidnapping me like this!" protested Lawrence, angrily. "It's—it's outrageous! Shameful! I must be in London this evening. Do you understand?"

Both the men grinned.

"I don't reckon you'll be in London this evening, young man," said one of the captors. "In fact, I'm pretty certain you won't be in London. We shall see to that! We've got strict orders that you had to arrive——"

"You won't let me get to London!" gasped Lawrence. "But—but, I must be there, I tell you—I must. I've got an important engagement to keep!"

"Important or not important, it makes not a mite of difference," said the man who had been doing all the talking. "And there's no sense of your jawing like this—it won't do you no sort of good!"

Lawrence suddenly felt dazed.

A prisoner! And he would be unable to get to London to keep his engagement! What did it mean? Who could be responsible for this? What would Mr. Rook think?

All sorts of alarmed ideas and thoughts raced through Lawrence's brain. He could picture Mr. Rook, waiting—and waiting in vain. There would be terrible confusion caused—and probably a great deal of fuss and bother. And Lawrence would be blamed. It would be thought

that he funked the fight, and had been afraid at the last minute! This was what cut the junior to the quick.

And he felt like making a desperate effort to get free. One dash—and he could reach the door. Then he could fling himself out before the men could prevent him. But what would be the use?

The car was travelling at well over thirty miles an hour, and even if Lawrence escaped broken bones—which was doubtful—he would certainly be bruised and sprained and grazed—and quite unfit to meet a man like Kiddy Welsh in the ring.

His best course was to remain quiet and still—apparently submissive. And he would await his opportunity—always hoping that one would come. At all events, there was nothing to be gained by acting now.

After a while, the junior's thoughts were quieter. Try as he would, he could not think who could have organised this abduction—for that is exactly what it was. Certainly not any supporters of Kiddy Welsh—for they were red-hot in favour of their own champion, and were convinced that "Young Ern" would be licked into a pulp. Neither Welsh nor his backers, had any fear of this young almost unknown boxer. And, in any case, they would never have resorted to such methods as this.

Who, then, was the perpetrator?

Lawrence could not imagine. All these men were strangers to him—he had never set eyes on them before. He judged them to be from London—and they were obviously performing the work for somebody else who remained in the background.

The miles sped by. Helmsford was reached, and left behind. Then, some time later, Lawrence realised that the car was passing through Guildford. It was, at all events, making straight for London.

The junior's sole thoughts were occupied with wondering if he could escape—or if he could do anything which would lead to his rescue.

He remembered suddenly, that a number of St. Frank's fellows had arranged to travel to London by road that very afternoon. Their car would, in fact, come along this very highway.

But, after all, how will this fact help him?

Lawrence was almost giving way to

despair when he saw that the chauffeur had turned round, and was tapping on the glass. Evidently he wanted to speak to one of the men within the car. The man on Lawrence's left side lowered the window, and leaned out. What he said to the chauffeur, Lawrence could not catch.

His shoulders were firmly grasped by the other man—evidently as a precaution. The fellow did not mean Lawrence to get too near the window.

The junior, however, was seized with a sudden impulse.

When the window was closed—as it would be within a few seconds—he would have no further chance. It was now or never.

And so, without appearing to move at all, Lawrence grasped his cap—which had been on the cushions next to him, and deftly flung it through the open window. The movement was such a quick one that neither of the men saw it. And the next moment the window was closed. But Lawrence appeared to be as listless and sullen as ever.

But that cap of his lay somewhere on the road—or, perhaps, just on the grass border. It was his College cap—which he had intended changing before reaching London. It was quite likely that it would lay there undisturbed for an hour or so.

And then the car, carrying the St. Frank's juniors, would come along. If anybody in that car spotted the cap, immediately investigations would be made. For the cap would be recognised on the instant—and Lawrence's initials were on the inside.

The fellows would know that the cap was his, and they would immediately ask themselves how that cap came to be on the road. And then, other events might follow. It was a forlorn hope, but Lawrence clung to it. And, anyhow, he had done the only thing possible. Whether it would bear fruit remained to be seen.

The car continued its journey, until it was somewhere not very far distant from Esher. Lawrence did not know the road thoroughly, but he guessed that he was getting near to the outskirts of London.

And then, unexpectedly, the limousine slowed down, and turned off the main highway into a quiet, muddy side lane. It proceeded up this for some distance—at length coming to a halt at the gateway of an old, tumbled-down farmhouse.

It was deserted, and it had apparently been empty for many years. It was long past repair, for in many places the roof had caved in. In one corner of the building, however, the place appeared to be fairly whole.

There were no human beings within sight. Indeed, this old deserted place seemed to be standing quite by itself, away from all other human habitation. Lawrence wondered why he had been brought here, and he was still rather bewildered.

"Now, then, you've got to come with us!" said one of his captors. "It won't be any good your trying to get away. You'd best take it quietly—"

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to bind the kid's hands behind his back!" put in the other man. "That'll make him safer. He's a bit of a problem, you know—we mustn't forget that he's got fists that can hit pretty hard. And I, for one, don't fancy taking any chances."

The other man grinned. And, a minute or two later, Lawrence's wrists were secured behind his back. It was now quite impossible for him to lash out, if he felt inclined to do so.

He was taken out of the car, and walked between the two men rapidly towards the old house. Even if Lawrence had felt like shouting for help he knew very well that it would merely be a waste of breath. There was nobody to hear—nobody to heed.

He found himself inside the farmhouse. Everything was damp and dismal. The floor was a stone one, and grass was springing up through the crevices. The walls were all falling to pieces with dampness and decay, and there was an unpleasant, earthy smell about the place which assailed the nostrils at once.

Lawrence's captors did not keep him long here. They passed through to a passage, and then made their way up a circular, crazy staircase. Some of the stairs were missing, and others were extremely worn and bent and twisted. But, at last, the trio reached the upper floor. And now it was necessary to go very cautiously. For some of the boards were rotten, others were missing altogether.

One of the men led the way, testing each board before he placed his weight upon it. But it was found that by keeping near the wall there was very little danger. And, at length, a doorway was reached. Lawrence was stuffed through this, and then the door was closed.

Lawrence looked round quickly. He heard a bolt being shot into its socket. he concluded that this bolt was a new one, for it had evidently been placed upon the door for his especial benefit.

A prisoner!

He had been brought to this old tumble-down house, and he was now a captive. And no explanation had been given him. He had not the faintest idea as to why he had been captured, or what the reason could be. Lawrence was in a complete state of mystification.

But this did not last for long.

Hardly five minutes had elapsed before steps were heard by Lawrence out in the passage. The lad had been examining his prison, and he was not very much depressed. The walls were thick, and there was no prospect of his breaking through. There was one window in this attic, but it had been carefully boarded up—heavy planks had been screwed down tightly, making it practically impossible for any daylight to come in. Certainly, it was quite out of the question for Lawrence to think of getting out through the window. It was even impossible for him to shout for help. And the door was strong, although old.

Left completely to himself, Lawrence might have burst the door down. But he could not do so without making a considerable amount of noise. And he was fairly certain that the men were somewhere below, and they would be attracted at once if he commenced an onslaught upon it.

Lawrence stood quite still as he heard the bolt being shot back. Evidently his captors were determined. And Lawrence was curious to know why. The door opened, and a man entered. But it was not a man that Lawrence had seen before during this adventure. But the junior recognised the newcomer at once.

"Mr. Foxe!" he gasped huskily.

"Precisely!" said Mr. Smale Foxe, in a smooth, calm voice. "You hardly expected to see me, Lawrence, I imagine?"

"Do—do you mean to say that you are responsible for this—this affair?" asked Lawrence fiercely. "Did you cause me to be kidnapped like this, brought to this house?"

"It was my idea entirely!" said Mr. Foxe, "and what is more, Lawrence, I have a further plan in view. I am extremely gratified that you fell into the

trap so easily, and so simply. I was quite sure that you would do so."

"It's too bad!" shouted Lawrence. "You've no right to do this, Mr. Foxe! It's—it's scoundrelly. Why have you done it? Why have you brought me here?"

"Surely, you can understand?" said Mr. Foxe. "It ought not to be so very difficult for you to grasp the truth, Lawrence. You have defied me once or twice—but you shall not defy me on this occasion!"

"I—I don't know what you mean!" said Lawrence warmly.

"I rather fancy you do!" replied Mr. Foxe. "Once or twice you have entered boxing rings, and you have obtained quite considerable sums of money. On these occasions you have refused to part with any of that money—and, unfortunately, I have been unable to take action. But this time, my lad, there is a different story to tell!"

Lawrence was breathing hard.

"I can't believe it, Mr. Foxe!" he exclaimed. "I can't believe that you—a Housemaster, should descend to such a thing as this! It's amazing—it's beyond all understanding——"

"My dear boy, I don't want you to talk in that way!" interrupted Mr. Foxe curtly. "There is no misunderstanding between you and I. At the present moment I am not a Housemaster. I am your captor, and I intend to have my way. If on other occasions you have defied me, you will not do so on this. It is quite easy for me to discover that you have arranged to meet a man known as Kiddy Welsh in the ring in London this evening. Well, Lawrence. I made my plans, and I have had you brought here. Can you guess why?"

"I think I can!" said Lawrence grimly. "Blackmail!"

"You put it rather bluntly, my lad," said Mr. Foxe. "But since you choose to speak in that way, I might as well agree. Yes—Blackmail! The word is an ugly one, but that does not matter. We may as well be quite frank with one another. You wish to attend this fight, I presume?"

"I shall attend it!" said Lawrence grimly. "You can't prevent me, Mr. Foxe——"

"I can't!" echoed the Housemaster. "We will see about that young man! If it pleases me, you will not go to London

this evening. And there will be no fight between you and Kiddy Welsh. In that event, you will lose the sum of five hundred pounds!"

"But—but you daren't do it!" gasped Lawrence, suddenly alarmed. "I must have that money—I must——" he paused, and pulled himself together. For he had suddenly been filled with a wild feeling of alarm. If he did not obtain that five hundred pounds, he would not be able to help his father. And it was for this very reason that he had consented to the fight. He had never dreamed that Mr. Smale Foxe would interfere in this way. Such an idea had never occurred to the junior.

"Five hundred pounds is a large sum, Lawrence," said Mr. Foxe. "I am quite certain that you do not require all that money. In any case, you will not get it. Now, I will come to the point. It is not my way to beat about the bush. I want you to sign a document, in which you will promise to pay me the sum of two hundred pounds——"

"I won't do it!" interrupted Lawrence sharply.

"You won't, eh?" said the other. "We will see about that my lad—we will see about that. Until you sign this document, you will not get your liberty. That means that you will be unable to turn up at the West End Sporting Club's Hall this evening. The matter rests entirely with you, Lawrence. Merely sign this paper and you will be released at once."

Lawrence did not reply for a moment. He was thinking hard. This was a terrible blow—an unexpected catastrophe. He needed every penny of that five hundred pounds. He meant to send the whole sum to his father. It was the exact amount his father required to put things straight. Three hundred pounds would be a help—but it would not be sufficient. And the very thought of Mr. Smale Foxe annexing two hundred pounds for himself made Lawrence's blood boil. It was blackmail of the worst type—and here he was, absolutely unable to lift a finger.

His hands were tied behind his back, so it was even impossible to lunge out at Mr. Foxe's evil face. Lawrence had never felt quite so helpless in all his life before.

"Well?" inquired the Housemaster. "You have surely come to a decision, Lawrence? It is not a matter that requires very careful thought. You sign

this document, and you go to the fight, and obtain three hundred pounds. You refuse to sign, and you remain here—and you get nothing. What is your answer?"

"I won't sign!" said Lawrence grimly.

"You infernal young fool! Don't you realise——"

"I realise that you are a scoundrel, and I'm not going to be blackmailed!" shouted Lawrence furiously. "You can do what you like, Mr. Foxe—but I'll never sign. I'd rather give up the fight. If I signed that paper, and you had it in your possession, you would use it against me at other times. And I'm not going to take any risks. If you think you'll be able to persuade me to try it, you've made a mistake. You won't. You've had all your trouble for nothing!"

Mr. Foxe frowned.

"You had better think carefully, Lawrence!" he said curtly. "I will not press you any more now—but I will leave you alone for a period, to think the matter out. When I come back, I fancy your answer will be very different!"

"My answer will be the same!" said Lawrence quietly.

Mr. Foxe did not say any more, but went to the door, passed out, and bolted it behind him. Lawrence was now left alone. And he was feeling furious, helpless, and highly indignant.

But he was grimly determined upon one thing. He would not sign any document that Mr. Foxe presented to him. He would sign nothing. He would rather give up the whole fight. These, at all events were his thoughts at the moment. Perhaps, later on, as Mr. Foxe had suggested, he would change his mind. When he found the time flying by, and escape impossible, he would probably alter his opinion.

He felt terribly helpless as he walked round his prison.

He went to the window, and tried to pull at the boards. But they were fixed firmly, and they hardly shifted as he exerted his pressure. But one little thing did happen.

A hard knot in the wood seemed to be loose, and Lawrence produced his pen-knife, and probed at it. Without much difficulty, he removed the knot, and a fairly large hole appeared. It was now possible for Lawrence to see out, and he stared down eagerly.

He could not see very much. Merely a portion of the wilderness-like grounds

which surrounded the old farmhouse. A man appeared for a moment from behind a clump of trees.

And Lawrence saw that the man glanced up at the attic window. He was a rough-looking fellow attired like a tramp, with a dilapidated slouch hat. He only remained in view for a moment or two, and then disappeared behind the trees. Lawrence smiled rather bitterly.

"Watched!" he muttered. "Even if I succeeded in getting these boards down, it wouldn't be any good. They've got a man on the watch outside. Oh, it's hopeless! I don't know what I shall do—the whole position is terrible!"

And it certainly seemed that Ernest Lawrence was in a corner from which there was no escape.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL.

"**H**ERE we are, as large as life, and twice as natural!"

This remark was made by Tinker as he jumped neatly out of the driving seat, and landed in the Triangle nearly on my toes. I grabbed his hand and shook it warmly.

"By jingo, it's good to see you again, old man!" I exclaimed heartily. "You're a brick!"

"Don't mention it," said Tinker grinning. "You see, the guv'nor is up North somewhere, nosing about. I don't suppose he'll be back until next week, so I'm on my own, with nothing particular to do. I've been kicking my heels at Baker Street for two or three days, and I was rather fed up. This is a bit of a change. Anyhow, it's giving the old car some exercise!"

They were soon the centre of an admiring crowd of juniors. He had just arrived at St. Frank's, and the "old car" which had brought him was in reality a magnificent open touring car of the very latest design. It was a powerful vehicle, and capable of accommodating a dozen, if necessary.

It would be necessary on this occasion. "Well, if you chaps are ready, we'd better be getting off soon," said Tinker. "I'll just run in and have a word or two with Mr. Lee—"

"I don't think you will," I broke in. "The guv'nor's out, old son. He went out directly after dinner."

I was rather pleased, as a matter of fact, because he wouldn't be here to see us off, and to regret his decision.

"Oh, well, we might as well be buzzing off, then," said Tinker. "I got your wire all right, and I reckon we shall be landed up in London by tea-time. I'm going to take you to my place and treat you to some tea before carting you off to the—er—party!"

"Good!" I said. "That's the style!"

It was not long before we were all ready. Handforth, Church and McClure, Pitt, De Valerie, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and myself and Christine, Yorke and Talmadge, of the College House. With Tinker, this made a dozen. We should be quite a merry little party. Christine and Co., of course did not have to ask permission, since they were at liberty to go where they pleased, and as they had been invited by Tinker, it was a special occasion.

"Lucky beggars!" exclaimed Owen major enviously. "I wish I could buzz off to London like this, and spend a giddy night there—and miss morning lessons the next day."

"Rather!" said Hubbard. "Some chaps have all the luck!"

"Well, we can't take everybody," I said, smiling. "We should need a whole fleet of motor cars if we took the whole crowd."

"I say, you can find room for me, surely?" inquired Fatty Little anxiously. "There's bound to be a good feed in London, and I'd just love to go. I say, Nipper, be a sport, you know! Great doughnuts! Squeeze me in somewhere!"

Tinker looked at Fatty, and shook his head.

"There's only one way to take you," he said. "Every other chap would have to stay behind. The car is certainly a pretty strong one, but it couldn't stand an elephant for a passenger!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Fatty. "Am I coming or not?"

"Not!" said Tinker briefly.

"Oh, but really—"

"My dear Fatty, it's absolutely impossible," I said. "We'd take you in a minute if there was room, but there isn't. So do be reasonable. All ready, Tinker; we'll be off!"

As a matter of fact, I was anxious to escape. All sorts of fellows were asking to come. And a good many of them were chaps I liked; and it is always hard to refuse anything to a friend. But, of course, there was a limit.

At length, however, we managed to get away; and then, with Tinker at the wheel, we went speeding down the lane towards Bellton. Once through the village Tinker opened the throttle, and we fairly roared along the road to Bannington. I was sitting in front, next to Tinker, and he looked at me and grinned.

"You sly bounder!" he exclaimed, with a chuckle.

"Eh?"

"You wangler!" said Tinker, with a wink. "For sheer, unadulterated nerve, this wheeze of yours is just about the richest I've ever heard of."

I grinned.

"Well, something had to be done," I said; "and this seemed to be about the most effective."

"It wouldn't have been any good, only I happened to be twiddling my thumbs," said Tinker. "Of course, I'm quite delighted to come down, and to lend you a hand. And I rather fancy I shall enjoy this boxing match to-night, too."

"You've got the tickets all right?"

"Rather!" said Tinker. "I attended to that at once. I've got them all together in the front row of the giddy seats."

"First rate! You deserve a medal, old son!"

Of course, that letter from Tinker had been no mere coincidence. I had written to him previously, explaining our difficulty, and asking him if he could think of any way out. In fact, I had suggested that he should write, inviting us to London, to go to a party, although, of course, he wasn't to mention that the party consisted of the boxing match at the West End Sporting Club Hall. It wasn't necessary to go into details of that kind.

I also requested Tinker to secure all the seats we required for the evening. If, by any chance, he didn't want them, if we couldn't come, it would be easy enough to sell the tickets to anybody else.

And Tinker had fallen in with my plans to the letter. He had written exactly as I had requested, and the wheeze had worked. Nelson Lee had

given permission for us to go. Whether the gov'nor knew that we were going to this boxing match I wasn't quite certain. But, somehow or other, I had an idea in the back of my head that Nelson Lee was not quite so ignorant of the truth as he appeared to be.

There wasn't very much that escaped the gov'nor.

"The limit—that's what it is!" said Tinker pleasantly. "You planned the whole thing, and then I get the praise for inviting you all to town. And I don't suppose I should have thought of it if you hadn't written. In fact, I would not have thought of it, because I should not have known anything."

"We sha'n't see Mr. Blake, then?" I asked.

"Considering that he's up in the North of England, I don't see how that's possible," replied Tinker drily. "But it's just as well on the whole. He'd probably jib, if he were there. And he might haul me off on some detective work or other, which would probably put the tin hat on our plans. We can have a fine old time on our own. These pals of yours seem to be decent sorts, Nipper. We'll go straight to Baker Street, then, after a jolly good go of grub, we'll saunter on to Kensington. I rather fancy we're going to have an enjoyable evening. I'll run you all down again in the car to-morrow morning."

"That's the idea," I said. "Well, I can tell you one thing, Tinker. You're going to see a good fight this evening."

"Think so?" said Tinker. "I've seen this fellow, Kiddy Welsh. He's rather hot stuff, too. Your champion must be a bit of a marvel if he can possibly hope to beat Welsh. Personally, I don't see how it can be done. It strikes me as being absolutely impossible for a school-boy to meet a professional in the ring, and to knock him out. I don't think it can be done. So you'd better prepare yourself for a disappointment. This fellow Lawrence is going to be whacked to the wide!"

"Don't you believe it," I said. "It's possible that Lawrence will fail, but he won't be whacked as you suggest. It'll be a near thing, and they'll probably go through the whole twenty rounds, without either of them being knocked out. And if the match has to be settled on points our chap will be the winner. He's absolutely a wonder at boxing—a kind

of wizard. He never keeps to the same style. He's always changing—he always has his man on the jump and guessing."

We had reached Bannington by this time, and we sped swiftly through the town, then on the road to Helmford and London.

Tinker was a good driver, and he made the car fairly roar. If anyone else had been behind the wheel I should have been slightly nervous, but not so with Tinker. He was a speed merchant, but he was not a road hog.

When it was necessary he slowed down to a very sedate pace. He only opened the throttle wide when the road was clear, and when he could see what lay in front.

And, as the time went on, we came nearer and nearer to the spot where Lawrence had flung his cap out of the car. Of course, we knew nothing about it—then. We thought Lawrence was in London by this time. We had no suspicion that he had met with foul play.

But that cap lay in the grass, quite visible to all who passed. It lay there, prominent and conspicuous. And we were destined to pass along the same road, right by the spot.

It seemed that it would hardly be possible for us to go by without noticing the familiar St. Frank's colours.

The miles flew by, and we were only a few hundred yards distant from the spot. There, in the grass, at the side of the road, lay the cap. It was there, waiting to be seen, asking to be recognised.

And then, by some stroke of fate, Tommy Watson pointed to an aeroplane, which was flying rather low over the tree-tops away to the left. Everybody looked in that direction, staring at the aeroplane. Tinker, of course, kept his eyes to the road, for the car was moving fast.

And we shot by the spot where that cap lay without seeing it.

But for the fact that our eyes had been attracted by the aeroplane one of us would undoubtedly have spotted the St. Lawrence colours. That would have meant a halt, and investigations, and we should have guessed at the truth. As it was, we went on our way, sublimely unconscious of the fact that anything had happened to Lawrence. His cap still lay there in the grass, unheeded and forlorn.

Later on we passed the little side road, never giving it a glance. We

should have been rather startled could we have known that Lawrence was there even then—a prisoner up in the attic!

But we knew nothing, and so we could take no action. We went straight on to Esher, through Esher and Surbiton, and then through the back streets of outer London.

At length, at about teatime, Tinker pulled the big car to a standstill in Baker Street, opposite his own door. We all tumbled out, rather glad to get a stretch, for we had been somewhat cramped in the car. It had not been made to accommodate twelve.

"Well, here we are," I said briskly. "No mishaps, and no trouble. I'm jolly hungry, too. I hope you've got a decent tea ordered, Tinker."

"Rather," said Tinker. "I told Mrs. Bardell to get something particularly appetising. You needn't worry about that, my sons."

Tinker led the way in, after opening the door with his latchkey. Then we all trooped upstairs, somewhat noisily. The first thing was a wash, for we were all somewhat grimy after our motor ride. Tinker took us straight into the consulting-room to begin with. And we stopped there while he went and prepared the bathroom for our use.

But before Tinker could get out of the doorway another door opened on the other side of the room, and to our astonishment a well-known figure appeared—the tall, well-built figure of Sexton Blake, the famous criminologist!

"Dear me!" he exclaimed smoothly. "What is the meaning of this, Tinker? What is this invasion?"

Tinker grunted.

"Well, I call this too bad of you, gov'nor," he complained. "It's just about the limit! Who told you to turn up this afternoon?"

Sexton Blake elevated his eyebrows.

"Really, Tinker, I rather fancy I have a right to come into my own place if I want to!" he exclaimed. "My business up North was concluded rather sooner than I had expected. And so I came home fully anticipating that you would be here, on duty. Instead of that, Mrs. Bardell informs me that you have gone gallivanting off in the big touring car to the South Coast, and now turn up, as large as life, bringing with you a whole public school!"

But Sexton Blake was smiling, and

he was in a cheerful mood as he shook hands with us all.

"I was only joking, of course, boys," he said. "I am quite glad to see you all. But you hardly expected to meet me, eh? I really hope that I have not disappointed you. I trust that my presence here will not embarrass you in any way."

"Rather not, sir," I said. "We're jolly glad to see you. But Tinker told us you wouldn't be here——"

"And, strictly speaking, he oughtn't to be here!" put in Tinker. "It's just like the gov'nor to turn up in this way. He's always doing unexpected things. You never know when to be safe. I thought we should have been all serene for this evening—and here he is, butting in and spoiling everything!"

"Really, Tinker. I have no intention of doing anything of the sort," said Sexton Blake. "I should not like to butt in on your amusement—that is, if you have planned anything. I suppose you are thinking of going to a theatre this evening, or some such amusement as that? How on earth you managed to get leave from St. Frank's rather astonishes me. It is quite extraordinary how you youngsters arrange these things."

It did not take us long to explain to Sexton Blake why we had come, and how we had wangled the whole affair.

Sexton Blake was quite amused, and he was rather interested when he learned that we were going to the West End Sporting Club Hall that evening, to witness the fight between Young Ern and Kiddy Welsh.

"And you tell me that this young boxer is really a St. Frank's boy?" he said at last. "Most surprising! Surely he cannot hope to put up much of a fight against a professional."

"You wait until the fight's over, sir," I said. "I shall be surprised if Lawrence doesn't win. He's absolutely a wonder—a living marvel! I only wish you could see him in the ring!"

"I have a mind to come with you boys. I dare say I shall be able to find a seat somewhere. I always enjoy witnessing a good boxing contest; and this promises to be excellent, by all that I can hear."

"Good!" I said. "That's the style, sir! I'd love you to come!"

Sexton Blake decided that he would

come with us, although we were not disappointed when he learned, over the telephone, that he could not obtain a seat immediately adjacent to ours. Not that we did not want Sexton Blake to be with us, but the majority of the fellows declared that they would be more comfortable if we were just by ourselves in a group.

There were one or two minor contests billed to take place before the fight between Young Ern and Kiddy Welsh, and we decided to get there in time to see the whole show. There was no reason why we should not.

We had a very excellent tea, and when we finally left for Kensington we were all feeling fit, and ready for the night's entertainment.

We found the West End Sporting Club Hall to be quite a palatial place. It was large and brilliantly illuminated outside and in. There were crowds of people there already, and every seat in the place had been booked in advance. Sexton Blake had only been able to obtain one because a few stray seats had been returned.

Tinker had booked our seats all in a row—twelve. They were excellent seats, too, for we could obtain a full view of the ring, without any obstruction hindering our view.

They were in the front row of the balcony, and, in my opinion, were much better than the ring-side seats. They were exorbitantly dear and rather too close.

We were not wearing St. Frank's caps, and there was really nothing about us to indicate where we had come from at all. For we were all wearing light overcoats over our Etons, and soft felt hats. But in spite of this, we were soon recognised by one man, at all events.

This individual was Mr. Norman Rook. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed before Mr. Rook came hurrying up to the balcony. He sent an attendant for me, and I lost no time in leaving my place, and going to the spot where Mr. Rook was waiting. I found him looking very anxious and concerned. And there was a light of worry in his eyes which could not be mistaken.

"Good evening, Mr. Rook," I said. "I think I have met you once before——"

"Very possibly, my lad—very possibly!" said Mr. Rook. "To tell you the

truth, I am extremely anxious and worried."

"Yes, you look rather concerned, sir," I said. "Is anything the matter?"

"Good gracious! Is anything the matter?" echoed Mr. Rook. "Where is Lawrence? Can you tell me where he is, my lad?"

"Lawrence!" I echoed. "Why, he's here, isn't he?"

"No—he is not here—I expected him quite early this afternoon," said Mr. Rook. "He promised me that he would leave by the early train, and that he would be in this hall between four and five. It is now nearly seven, and there's no sign of him!"

I looked very astonished.

"But, I can't understand it, sir!" I ejaculated. "Lawrence left almost immediately after dinner. He caught the afternoon train from Bellton, and I can't possibly think how he went wrong. I know he didn't miss the train—because he started with plenty of time to spare."

"Dear me! This is most extraordinary!" said Mr. Rook. "I have been waiting for the lad for over two hours, and Heaven only knows what will happen if he doesn't turn up very soon. I shall find it necessary to secure a substitute—and that will be almost impossible. The whole thing will be a fiasco, and I am quite certain there will be trouble. Are you sure, Nipper, that you have no idea where Lawrence could be?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I replied. "He said he'd come up by train, because he wanted to get here early, otherwise he would have come along in the car with us. But he couldn't wait until then."

"Amazing—quite amazing!" said Mr. Rook. "He left, and he ought to have been here before tea! And yet he has not turned up. Can anything have happened to the boy, do you think? Have you heard of any accident, or——"

"There's been no train accident, sir, if that's what you mean," I replied. "At least, I've seen no report of it. And if Lawrence had met with a mishap in London, surely you would have received a telephone message, or something? He's bound to turn up soon, sir."

"I sincerely hope so, my boy—I do, indeed!" said Mr. Rook. "As it is, I'm nearly off my head with worry. The officials are already bothering me, and I do not know what to say. I assured them that my man will turn up soon. That is all I can do. And now I must

wait—wait impatiently until Lawrence appears."

Mr. Rook went off, looking more worried than ever. Now he was puzzled, too. He knew that Lawrence had left by the train that had been arranged. Therefore, something had happened on the road, that was obvious. But what could have happened? What could possibly have delayed Ernest Lawrence for so long?

Where was the lad? And why did he not appear?

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAMP.

MEANWHILE, Lawrence was a prisoner in the old farmhouse.

He was now wild with anxiety and disappointment. Over an hour had elapsed since Mr. Foxe had left him, and there had been no sign of the Housemaster returning. But Lawrence had not changed his mind. He was still firm—he was still determined to refuse all attempts to blackmail. It was against his principles—and he would not consent to it.

And then, at about five o'clock, footsteps sounded out in the landing—the bolt was shot, and the door opened. Mr. Smale Foxe entered.

"If you've come to ask me to sign that paper, you might as well saved yourself the trouble!" said Lawrence grimly. "I won't do it, Mr. Foxe—I'm not going to be blackmailed."

"Don't be in quite such a hurry, my lad," said Mr. Foxe smoothly. "I fear you have not considered this matter fully. Do you realise the consequences? If you accept my terms, you will at least receive three hundred pounds for your own use. If, on the other hand, you remain obstinate, you will receive nothing whatever."

"If I go in for this fight, and I win it, I shall have earned that money!" exclaimed Lawrence passionately. "It doesn't belong to you, Mr. Foxe—you've got no right to demand any at all. It's disgraceful—it's shameful! I want that money for a certain purpose—every penny of it. If you take this two hundred pounds, it will be robbery—absolute robbery!"

"You ought to consider yourself very lucky that you are able to obtain even



"You will walk straight into the house, and do exactly as I command—that's what you'll do, matey!" said the tramp to the bewildered Mr. Foxe.

three hundred," said Mr. Foxe. "You have defied me time after time—but this time you are not in a position to do so. Please understand that fully, Lawrence. I am not inclined to put up with any further nonsense. And I now intend to make you pay for your previous actions."

"And supposing I do sign this document?" asked Lawrence suddenly, "what guarantee will you have that I shall pay the money?"

"I shall have your signature!"

"That's of no value at all," said Lawrence. "I'm a minor, and my signature wouldn't be valid. You know that as well as I do——"

"Quite so; but I know that if you signed this paper, you would keep your word," said Mr. Foxe grimly. "I rather fancy you have a high code of honour, Lawrence, and if you signed, you would keep faith. It is more than I would do, perhaps—but we need not go into that matter. If you sign this paper, you will be compelled to stick to the letter of the bargain. And I strongly advise you to sign it. If you do not, you will not only sacrifice the whole prize—but you will find yourself expelled from St. Frank's. For, by Heaven, I shall make every effort to get you sent away from the school in disgrace!"

Lawrence's lips curled as he looked at the Housemaster.

"Those threats don't have any effect upon me, Mr. Foxe," he said contemptuously. "I'm not going to be frightened by you, anyhow. And I still stick to my original decision. I am not going to be blackmailed."

Mr. Foxe frowned.

"I will give you only twenty minutes longer!" he rapped out. "And, then, Lawrence, if you do not agree to sign this paper—I shall use force. I shall compel you to do so. And my terms will be hardened. Remember—twenty minutes only will you have. Then I shall return, and I shall bring other men with me, and you will regret this obstinate spirit of yours!"

The Housemaster turned on his heel, and strode out of the attic, slamming the door behind him. He was furious, for he had expected that Lawrence would now be submissive. He shot the bolt home, and passed down the corridor. Lawrence remained alone in the attic.

If only he could escape! It would be wonderful if he could disappear before Mr. Foxe returned. But this was quite

out of the question—and Lawrence knew it. There was no escape. He had only succeeded in getting his arms free—and that had not been a very difficult task. He had released his arms before he had taken that knot out of the piece of wood. I rather believe I forgot to mention this at the time. But it comes to the same thing if I mention it now.

Lawrence went over to the window again, and he peered through that knot hole. But now he could see nothing. And the evening was coming on. Unless he escaped very soon, it would be too late altogether—he would arrive at the West End Sporting Club Hall too late for the contest. It was an appalling prospect.

And while Lawrence was thinking in this way, Mr. Foxe had descended to the ground floor. He went outside, into the grounds, pacing up and down angrily. He had just turned a corner of the building, when he came to a halt, for there, in full view stood a somewhat disreputable figure. It was a man attired in old clothes, a ragged old hat, and patched boots. His face was unkempt, for he wore a straggly, wispy beard. His nose was extremely red, and he did not look at all prepossessing. This was the man that Lawrence had thought to be a watcher, on guard, but such evidently was not the case. For Mr. Foxe, frowned angrily as he saw the fellow.

"Get out of here!" he shouted curtly. "Don't you know you're trespassing?"

"What's that guv'nor?" asked the man in a beery voice. "Who is trespassing? This place ain't anybody's property! I can have a doss here if I want to, I suppose, without asking you? The show don't happen to be your property, I suppose!"

"It is my property, and if you don't get off it at once, I'll have you thrown off!" said Mr. Foxe grimly. "Do you hear me?"

"Well I ain't deaf," said the tramp, as he came nearer. "And you'd best understand that I don't take no orders from you. See? As a matter of fact, I've been waiting my chance—and now I've got it!"

"—You've been waiting your chance, you ruffian?" demanded Mr. Foxe. "What do you mean?"

"Them two coves was hanging about," explained the tramp. "They've just gorn—I dare say they've got thirsty, or something, and have gone up the road to 'ave a drink. Any'ow, I've got you to

deal with now—and I don't think it'll be very difficult. Put up your hands!"

Mr. Foxe staggered.

"Why, what—"

"Put up your hands!" said the tramp, in a cold, firm voice.

"You—you infernal rascal!" roared Mr. Foxe, suddenly alarmed and frightened. "If you dare to attack me—"

But, at that moment, Mr. Foxe had caught sight of the revolver which the tramp had produced. It was an extremely wicked-looking article, and Mr. Foxe did not care for its appearance. He further observed that the tramp's finger was on the trigger, and this fact caused Mr. Foxe to raise his hands hurriedly. The Housemaster was bewildered. He could not understand what this meant—he could not realise who this man could be, or why he had taken it into his head to interfere. Robbery could be the only motive.

"By Heaven! You shall pay for this!" snarled Mr. Foxe. "I will—"

"You will walk straight into the house, and do exactly as I command—that's what you'll do, matey!" said the tramp. "And you'd best not give me any back answers—because when I'm irritated my fingers is twitchy. Go on—walk into the house!"

Only for a moment did Mr. Foxe hesitate. Then, with a muttered curse, he commenced walking along the path, and, at length, entered the doorway. He now stood in one of the dilapidated rooms.

"There's a cupboard over in the corner," he said. "Go to that cupboard, open the door, and get inside!"

"I refuse—I absolutely refuse!" shouted Mr. Foxe fiercely. "I will do no such thing—I—I—good gracious."

Mr. Foxe felt the barrel of the revolver pressing into his back, and, with surprising alacrity, he hurried across the room, opened the cupboard, and scrambled inside. The tramp closed the door with a slam, and turned the big rusty key in the lock. Mr. Smale Foxe was now a prisoner—the tables had been turned with a vengeance.

But why had the old tramp interfered? What connection had he with this peculiar case?

Mr. Foxe was a prisoner; but, of course, he would be able to make his escape if he was only allowed time. Ten minutes work would be sufficient—and then he would be able to break the door down, and regain his liberty. Apparently this is what the tramp desired. For

he made no effort to secure the door in a more thorough manner.

Instead, he left the room, and quickly mounted the stairs, and then went to the attic. A moment later, he was within the room, standing face to face with Ernest Lawrence. The junior looked at him fiercely.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Why have you come here?"

"It's all right, young 'un—you needn't be scared!" said the tramp calmly. "I ain't one of them—and as for the Foxey fellow—well, he's fixed up nice and comfortable in one of them cupboards, I reckon you ought to escape, don't you?"

"Escape!" said Lawrence. "I—I—is this a trick?" he added suspiciously.

"Not on your life, young gent!" said the tramp. "There ain't no trickery about me—by my words. You want to escape, and all you've got to do is to walk out. There's a motor-car waiting outside, and we'll take the liberty of getting into it, and driving into Esher. I dare say you'll be able to catch a train from there to London—and maybe you'll be able to keep your appointment after all."

"Do—do you really mean it?" asked Lawrence, husky with relief.

"A course I mean it—what do you take me for?" asked the tramp. "Come along—there ain't any time to waste. We'll get in!"

Lawrence, with his mind in a whirl, followed the tramp down the crazy staircase, and then out into the open. They had heard fierce hammerings from Mr. Foxe's cupboard. And it was clear that the Housemaster had not yet regained his liberty. The tramp's eyes were twinkling as he made his way to the motor-car which was standing just on the road, in a little yard.

"Jump in!" said the tramp briskly.

Lawrence jumped in—for, although he had been suspicious of this man at first, he was suspicious no longer. There was something about him which inspired confidence. And Lawrence instinctively knew that the fellow was on his side. But it seemed strange that he should be able to drive a motor-car. This, however, proved to be the case. A big travelling coat was lying on the driver's seat, and the tramp quickly got into this, and then started up the engine. A moment later they were off, speeding down the lane, towards the main road.

The tables had been turned on Mr. Foxe. The rascally Housemaster's scheme

had come to nothing, after all—and yet, only a few minutes earlier, it had seemed certain of success.

Lawrence was still rather dazed by this sudden turn of fortune, and he had not succeeded in fully collecting his wits when the motor-car pulled up at Esher station.

"Just pop in, and see how the trains go!" said the tramp, as Lawrence opened the door at the rear. "Best not waste any time—there might be a train within two minutes."

Lawrence hurried into the booking office, and, to his joy, he discovered that a train was due in within two minutes. It was a quick train, too, and it would land him in London in excellent time. Lawrence had never felt so light-hearted as he did at that moment.

He searched through his pockets as he hurried out through the station yard—and he mentally decided to give the tramp practically everything he possessed, two pound notes, and some silver, he could really do nothing less—for the tramp's assistance had been of the most wonderful value.

Then Lawrence received a surprise. He hurried out of the booking office, and was just in time to see the rear of the motor-car disappearing in the distance! His strange benefactor had vanished without waiting to be thanked—without waiting to be rewarded!

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Lawrence blankly.

He stared down at the car with absolute bewilderment expressed on his face. He could not possibly understand this.

The tramp had rescued him from Mr. Smale Foxe's clutches—he had even brought him to the station, so that he could catch a quick train to London. And yet the man had gone off without waiting a moment.

Who could he be? And why had he done this? If Lawrence had only known the truth, he might have been somewhat enlightened.

For the tramp's movements, after leaving Esher station, were rather queer. He drove the car up a small side lane, and left it there. And then he wandered away, apparently in an aimless fashion. But, as a matter of fact, the tramp knew precisely what he was doing.

For he was no less a person than—Nelson Lee.

The famous schoolmaster detective had been on the track for quite a long while, and he had seen through Mr. Smale

Foxe's game from the start. And he had been successful in rescuing Ernest Lawrence, and in sending him unharmed on his way. Just at the moment, however, Nelson Lee did not intend taking any action with regard to Mr. Smale Foxe. He thought that it would be better to let the man remain in ignorance of the actual truth. And then, at the right moment, Nelson Lee would pounce.

Lawrence, meanwhile, was hastening towards London. Upon arrival at the terminus, he did not hesitate to charter a taxi. And, in this, he was rushed off to Kensington. And he arrived at the West End Sporting Club Hall just in time to run into the arms of Mr. Rook—who was coming out to see if he could see any signs of the absentee.

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Rook, an expression of infinite relief coming into his eyes. "My dear boy! I am more delighted than I can say to see you. Where have you been? Why did you not turn up? You cannot tell how worried I have been——"

"I'm awfully sorry, sir, but I couldn't help it!" panted Lawrence. "I was kidnapped——"

"Never mind explaining now," said Mr. Rook. "Come inside, into one of the dressing-rooms, and have a chat there, and you can explain everything. Now that you are here I don't mind. There is still just time."

"Thank goodness!" said Lawrence fervently.

He followed Mr. Rook into the building, and before long they were facing one another in a comfortable dressing-room. Lawrence was not quite certain as to what he should tell the boxing promoter. He did not want to invent any story to excuse his lateness, and, at the same time, he had no particular wish to tell Mr. Rook the actual truth. He did not want to relate all the facts connected with Mr. Smale Foxe.

So he compromised.

He told Mr. Rook exactly what had taken place. He explained how he had been lured into the motor-car at Bannington, and how he had been taken to the old deserted farmhouse near Esher.

But Lawrence did not explain that his captor had been Mr. Smale Foxe, the Housomaster of the College House. That was the only point which Mr. Rook remained in ignorance of. And when Lawrence had done, the boxing promoter shook his head gravely.

"Well, my lad, it's a good thing you've turned up now!" he said. "If I didn't know you to be straightforward and truthful, I should be a bit sceptical about this story. It doesn't seem quite convincing."

"I know that, sir," said Lawrence quietly. "I hardly expect you to believe me. But I've told you the absolute truth. If everything had gone all right I should have been here hours and hours ago!"

"And what about this tramp?" asked Mr. Rook. "Who was he?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, sir," said Lawrence truthfully.

"Why did he let you escape—and then go off without any reward?"

"That's been puzzling me all the time," replied Lawrence. "It's so mysterious, Mr. Rook. I can't make head or tail of it."

Mr. Rook looked at Lawrence critically.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Oh, as right as anything."

"No ill effects from your adventure?"

"None at all, sir."

"You feel fit for this fight?"

"Rather!" said Lawrence. "Oh, you needn't worry about that, Mr. Rook. I'm as fit as a fiddle, and I shall go into the ring full of confidence. Of course, I don't expect to win——"

"Because this Kiddy Welsh is a famous boxer?" asked Mr. Rook. "Nonsense! You've got to go into the ring, my boy, with the firm belief that you will be the victor. Don't forget that. You'll have a pretty tough job, but you stand an excellent chance of winning. And now we've got to attend to all the preliminaries. You'll have to be weighed in, and then there are a good many other things to attend to."

Ernest Lawrence was light hearted.

In spite of his adventure with Mr. Smale Foxe he had arrived at the West End Sporting Club Hall in time. And now the big event of the evening would soon begin, and it was to be a grim struggle!

CHAPTER V.

FOR HIS FATHER'S SAKE.

"JOLLY queer about Lawrence!" remarked Church. "I wonder if he's turned up yet?"

"Oh, he's bound to have turned up," said Handforth. "We should have

heard something otherwise. Why, this fight between Young Ern and Kiddy Welsh is the next event on the programme. If Lawrence hadn't turned up the scrap would have been cancelled."

"I can't imagine why he was delayed, in the first place," said Reginald Pitt.

"We know he went by the early train, and he ought to have been in London hours before we arrived. It seems a bit mysterious to my mind. But I suppose we shall hear all the details later—after we get back to St. Frank's. Lawrence will tell us all about it."

"Of course," said Bob Christine. "And don't speak so loud, either, you ass. We don't want to give the game away."

The juniors had taken a good deal of interest in the preliminary bouts. They had been decent, in their way, but, after all, they only filled in the time until the big event of the evening came off.

Everybody in this great hall was waiting to see Kiddy Welsh and the youngster who had sprung so rapidly into prominence. Everyone wanted to see Young Ern battling against the London champion.

As a matter of fact, all the preliminaries were over, the big fight was due to begin almost at once. At least, the combatants would soon be appearing in the ring; and everybody was waiting expectantly.

I sat next to Tinker, and we had been having quite a long chat about things in general. The other fellows were greatly interested in all the proceedings, and they were somewhat critical, too. They declared that too much time was wasted. They wanted to see more for their money.

"Positively disgraceful—that's what it is!" declared Handforth. "Unless they buck up there won't be time for the next fight. They're messing about——"

"Shut up!" whispered Church. "Here they are!"

Quite a stir had manifested itself at the ring side. And then Kiddy Welsh appeared, surrounded by a perfect company of white-sweatered gentlemen who wore canvas shoes, and who carried towels and sponges and similar articles.

Kiddy Welsh needed no introduction to the audience, although this ceremony was gone through as a mere matter of form.

He met with a big reception, a perfect

storm of handclapping and cheering greeting him as he bowed near the ropes.

By what I could see, Welsh was only a small man, quite a young fellow, too. His face bore the marks of many a grim battle, and he was by no means handsome. My private opinion of him was not extremely flattering.

I took rather a dislike to Welsh at the very first. He struck me as being a conceited swaggerer, and there was a look about his eyes which stamped him as a bit of a brute. However, the fight would soon show whether my conclusions were right or wrong.

Kiddy Welsh was attired in a long dressing-gown, and he lounged about the ring in a free-and-easy, careless style. He certainly gave everybody the impression that he was perfectly at his ease, and that he rather regarded the fight as a bit of a farce.

Whether Welsh actually thought this we did not know; he certainly led the audience to believe that such was the case.

And then Young Ern was introduced.

He was brought forward by the referee and presented to the audience. The St. Frank's fellows had a great deal of difficulty in restraining themselves from cheering with all their strength.

They recognised Lawrence at once, and all their natural instincts told them to give him a tremendous welcome. They clapped furiously, and Handforth cheered quite a lot. But, somehow, they managed to refrain from shouting to Lawrence by name.

There were not many people in the audience who followed the example of the St. Frank's fellows, for Young Ern was new to London, these people did not know what he was capable of. They had only heard a few rumours concerning the youngster who had knocked out Mike Connor at Helmford, and many people regarded Young Ern's success, in that bout, as something of a fluke.

The result of this present fight was regarded as a foregone conclusion. Everybody was anticipating an easy victory for Kiddy Welsh. Ninety per cent. of the audience felt convinced that Young Ern would not be able to put up a show. And this conviction was strengthened after the young boxer had been introduced. For he seemed much smaller than Welsh, and he would probably be lucky if he lasted out five or six rounds.

Lawrence's attitude was very different to that of Kiddy Welsh. He walked straight to his corner, and sat down, with his seconds about him. Lawrence had no air of over confidence. He was quiet and calm, and the audience read these signs in one way only. They assumed that Young Ern was nervous of the result—that he was serious and grave, knowing full well that he was in for a defeat.

And there was one man who had a seat at the side of the balcony who seemed extraordinarily interested. He was leaning forward, staring intently at Lawrence. He was an elderly man, well built, and with a rugged but good-humoured face. This face was lined, as though with recent worry. And the man's hair was grey at the temples. There was a startled look in his eyes, and he gazed down with a kind of bewildered amazement in his expression.

"Impossible!" he muttered tensely. "Oh, it's impossible! But—but by—I could swear the figure——"

He hastily pulled out some pince-nez, and he placed them upon his nose. Again he gazed down, but he could not see distinctly. He was a good way from the ring; and just then he noticed that a gentleman near him was using a pair of opera-glasses. He leaned over with almost feverish anxiety.

"Excuse me, sir, but may I borrow your glasses for just a minute?" he asked huskily.

"Certainly—certainly!" said the stranger, glancing round.

He handed over the glasses, and the man with the rugged face seized them. He placed them to his eyes, focused them, and then stared fixedly and intently at Lawrence. Young Ern's features came into sharp prominence, and the man who held the glasses drew in a deep breath.

"Yes, I was right—I was right!" he muttered tensely. "It's Ernest—Ernest himself! Good heavens! What can this mean? What is the boy doing here? Is it possible that he—that he——"

The elderly man broke off, and seemed quite dazed for a moment or two. It will not be revealing a secret to explain that this gentleman was Mr. Ernest Lawrence senior.

Just as the schoolboy boxer had feared, his father was in the hall!

And Mr. Lawrence, at the very first

moment, had recognised his son. It was a blow to him, a tremendous surprise, and even now he could not believe it. Although he knew he had made no mistake, this discovery was altogether too much for him.

His own boy here—in this boxing ring—about to meet Kiddy Welsh, the professional! It seemed too ridiculous to be true. Ernest was at St. Frank's, attending to his lessons—a schoolboy! How was it possible for him to be here, on the point of engaging in a professional prize fight?

Mr. Lawrence was a man of action, and it was not long before he came to a decision. He had dropped into this hall because he wanted some relaxation from his worries, and he hoped he would be able to forget those worries for an hour or so.

And now he discovered one of the principal fighters of the evening was his own son! And not only this. His son was fighting under an assumed name—at least it was a name which gave no clue to his real identity. Mr. Lawrence was determined to find out the truth without any delay.

He knew he had time, the fight would not begin for ten or fifteen minutes yet. And Mr. Lawrence made his way out of the balcony, and quickly descended the stairs. His expression was grim. He remembered how he had told his son never to enter a professional boxing-ring, and now, it appeared, Ernest had deliberately disobeyed him.

But not from his own choice, Mr. Lawrence was sure of that. He had been persuaded somehow—he had been tricked into this business.

And Mr. Lawrence meant to find out the truth.

Arriving in the big vestibule of the hall he had no difficulty in locating an official in evening dress. He went up to this man at once.

"Excuse me, but can you tell me the name of Young Ern's manager?" he asked bluntly.

"Why, yes, sir," said the official. "You want Mr. Rook, don't you?"

"Mr. Rook, eh?" said Mr. Lawrence.

"Yes, that is the gentleman I wish to see."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I don't think you'll be able to see Mr. Rook just now," said the official. "The big fight is about to begin, and I am certain that Mr. Rook cannot be disturbed—"

"Mr. Rook will be disturbed!" interrupted Mr. Lawrence grimly. "You will please take my card to him at once!"

He produced a slip of pasteboard from his pocket, and handed it to the official. The latter glanced at it for a moment, and then, shrugging his shoulders, he turned away.

"I'll do my best," he said. "But I'm afraid it will be no good. Will you please wait here, sir?"

Mr. Lawrence nodded, and he paced up and down while the official was away. At last, after five minutes had elapsed, the man returned.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Lawrence sharply.

"If you will follow me, sir, I will take you to Mr. Rook at once," said the man. "Mr. Rook will be obliged, however, if you will detain him for as short a space of time as possible. You will quite understand that he is very busy just now."

"Yes, I understand," said Mr. Lawrence. "I will get my business over as quickly as possible."

He was taken down several passages until, at length, he found himself in the rear of the hall. And then he was ushered into a little office, where Mr. Norman Rook was waiting, not without feelings of worry; for Mr. Rook knew, now, that Lawrence had been right.

His father was on the premises, and his father had come to find out the truth. Perhaps it was just as well, although Mr. Lawrence could have chosen a more favourable opportunity.

"You are Mr. Rook?" demanded Lawrence's father, as he stepped into the office.

"That is my name, sir," said Mr. Rook. "I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Lawrence. I have an idea that you have come here with the object of—"

"My object is to discover why you have brought my son to this place!" interrupted Mr. Lawrence grimly. "I don't want any fabrications, sir, and I don't want any excuses. Young Ern is my son—"

"Please keep your temper, Mr. Lawrence—"

"I insist upon an explanation!" interrupted the other angrily. "My son is supposed to be at school—at St. Frank's, in Sussex. Why is he here? Why is he about to meet Kiddy Welsh in the professional prize ring? It is absolutely against all my wishes, and I will not

permit this fight to take place. Do you understand that, Mr. Rook? Under no circumstances will I allow my son to meet this man Welsh!"

Mr. Rook looked grim.

"I am afraid it is too late for you to say that now, sir," he exclaimed. "Young Ern will meet Kiddy Welsh almost at once, and nothing you can say or do will stop the fight. It is too late for any objection to be made now. Apparently you do not appreciate the position——"

"I know well enough that my son did not willingly agree to this fight!" interrupted Mr. Lawrence hotly. "He has been tricked into it—or forced into it. I do not know which. When I came to the hall I had no suspicion of the actual truth, but now that I do know I have come to a positive and irrevocable decision. My son shall not fight Kiddy Welsh in the ring this evening!"

Mr. Norman looked very grim.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed. "It is no wish of mine to have a quarrel with you, Mr. Lawrence, but I can assure you that this fight will take place——"

"And I say it shall not!" roared Mr. Lawrence. "This boy is my son, and I have a perfect right to take him away if I wish to do so. I do wish to do so. I fully intend taking this course. And, furthermore, Mr. Rook, I demand an immediate explanation on your part. How is it that you have got my boy here? I am convinced that he would not have agreed to this of his own free will——"

"One moment, Mr. Lawrence!" interrupted the boxing promoter. "Since you wish to know the truth I shall tell you, and I rather fancy that it will come as something of a surprise. In the first place, your son agreed to this of his own free will——"

"I don't believe you!" snapped Mr. Lawrence.

"You are trying my patience rather severely, sir," said Mr. Rook grimly. "I repeat that your son agreed to this fight of his own free will. He had been hoping that it would be kept from your ears. But he feared that you might be here this evening, and, at first, he refused to appear in this hall. However, after due consideration, he decided to risk it, and there is now nothing to be gained by keeping the truth back. I may as well explain that your son has been perfectly frank with me. He has

told me the exact truth, and you must not be offended, Mr. Lawrence, if I repeat——"

"You are at liberty to say exactly what you please," interrupted Mr. Lawrence. "I insist upon a full explanation. You must realise, Mr. Rook, that I am amazed. I had assumed that my son was at St. Frank's school, attending to his lessons, and now I discover him here, about to engage in a professional prize-fight with Kiddy Welsh! Surely you must see that it is a staggering surprise for me?"

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Lawrence, that the whole affair must seem extraordinary from your point of view," said Mr. Rook quietly. "However, if you will only listen for a few moments, you will understand the full position. I first met your son quite by accident, in Bannington, which is near St. Frank's. It was at a small boxing-booth, and your son had just given a sound thrashing to a young fellow who went by the name of 'Lightning Left' Ned. The proprietor had offered the sum of twenty pounds to anybody who could beat Ned within so many rounds. Well, Young Lawrence earned that reward, and I believe he sent the money direct to you."

"Direct to me!" echoed Mr. Lawrence, starting.

"That is what I believe," said Mr. Rook. "Since then, Lawrence has fought two contests at Helmford, and he has been successful in both. He received large sums of money—eighty pounds in the first instance, and something over one hundred pounds in the second. To the best of my knowledge, the lad sent all this money to you, although I rather fancy he did so anonymously. He did not want you to know the exact truth. He explained your position to me—he told me how you had lost all your money in the crash of Scarbrooke's Bank—and young Lawrence was very anxious to help you in some way; and this was the only method in which he could obtain money. It is against all his own wishes and inclinations to appear in the prize-ring, but he is doing it for your sake, Mr. Lawrence, and for your sake only!"

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Lawrence, staring straight before him.

"To-night your son will receive the sum of five hundred pounds," went on Mr. Rook. "You may be quite sure that this five hundred pounds will be

sent to you at the first opportunity. Young Lawrence is particularly keen, for I understand that such a sum will be very useful to you at this particular time. But, after all, Mr. Lawrence, this is none of my business, and I warned you beforehand that I did not wish to discuss it. I merely wish to put the boy right in your eyes. What he is doing he is doing for your sake only, and not from any motive of his own. Indeed, he does not care for this prize-fighting, and he would never do it for personal gain. His one and only object is to obtain money so that he can send it to you."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Lawrence huskily. "For me—for my sake! And he will get five hundred pounds!"

"As a matter of fact, he has already got it," said Mr. Rook. "He was promised that sum whether he won the fight or whether he lost it. I may as well tell you, Mr. Lawrence, that I have wagered somewhat heavily on this fight. I have received quite remarkable odds, and while I do not stand to lose so very much, I stand to gain a very great deal—if your son wins. All the experts are convinced that Welsh will beat his opponent within a few rounds, but my own opinion is quite the opposite. I know your son to be a marvellous boxer, and I believe that he will win. By gad, sir, if he does win he will receive another two hundred from me, and I shall give it willingly and gladly! And you must allow me to compliment you most heartily for the manner in which you have trained your boy."

Mr. Lawrence was still rather thunderstruck.

"You needn't do that, Mr. Rook," he said, shaking his head. "I certainly trained Ernest, but his ability is natural. I agree with you when you say that the lad is a wonder. And he has been doing this for my sake! Good gracious, I might have guessed! And to think that I came round here for the purpose of creating a disturbance! I apologise, Mr. Rook, and I trust that you will forgive me!"

The promoter smiled.

"My dear sir, please say no more about it," he said. "And now I must ask you to excuse me, for the fight is just about to commence. Do you intend going back to your seat?"

"I do!" said Mr. Lawrence, his eyes shining. "I wouldn't miss this contest

for all I possess! For something tells me that I shall see my boy win! But whether he wins or loses, it makes no difference. When the battle is over I shall rush to him and take his hand, for he is as true as a die!"

Mr. Norman Rook nodded.

"By gad, you're right there!" he said heartily.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOXING MARVEL.

"SECONDS out! Time!"

The big audience in the West End Sporting Club Hall seemed to heave one sigh in unison. It was a sigh of anticipation—expectation. The big fight of the evening was about to commence, and everything was ready.

The referee, in his spotless evening-dress, stood in the ring, and Kiddy Welsh and Ernest Lawrence emerged from their respective quarters. It was the opening moment of the contest. Everybody in that big hall felt strangely stirred, but fully ninety-five per cent of the audience felt rather sorry for the clean-cut, white-limbed figure of "Young Ern." It was assumed by nearly all that he would be vanquished.

Tinker, who sat next to me, was greatly interested. He had even forgotten to look once in the direction where Sexton Blake was sitting; he had overlooked the fact that his gov'nor was present.

Handforth and Co., Pitt, and the rest, were leaning forward in their seats, excited, eager and intense. They, too, were just a little doubtful. But, at same time, they were filled with a great hope that Lawrence would be able to acquit himself well. To be knocked out in the first or second round would be disastrous.

"Oh, he'll do it all right!" said De Valerie. "He'll put up a decent show, you mark my words! And if he loses, he'll lose honourably. It won't be a walk-over for Kiddy Welsh."

Tinker shook his head.

"I'm afraid your man has taken on a bit more than he can chew this trip," he remarked. "Why, he's inches smaller than Welsh, and lighter, too. He doesn't stand a chance. It'll be absolutely a romp home for the professional."

"Think so?" I said. "Don't be too sure!"

We did not talk any more, for all our attention was centred upon the white light that shone down on the ring—we gazed at those two lithe figures who went forward to face one another in battle.

There was nothing particularly startling about the first round. Like the first round in nearly all important contests, it was a quiet, somewhat tame affair. The two opponents were attempting to gauge one another's capabilities. Kiddy Welsh was obviously full of confidence, as he made one or two tentative thrusts, which were easily meant to test his opponent's defence.

Lawrence seemed rather clumsy and slow, and he did not give a good exhibition. And the effect upon Kiddy Welsh was quite marked. He went back to his corner at the end of the round smiling openly. He came to the conclusion that he was on a soft job, and he was quite convinced that he could bring the fight to a conclusion just whenever he pleased. But, of course, it would be necessary to play about with Young Ern for several rounds, in order to give the crowd value for their money.

The second round was somewhat more lively. The combatants circled round one another, sparring for openings. They leapt in and out, exchanging a blow now and again, but doing no great damage.

I gave great attention to the footwork, and it did not take me long to decide that Lawrence was far cleverer than his opponent. Towards the end of the round he was feeling his way better; he was gaining confidence, and he did not give Welsh a single opportunity of delivering a really telling thrust.

There was not the slightest doubt that Kiddy Welsh was a clever boxer. He was swift and dangerous, and it appeared to be his method to attack all the time—to fight continuously, and he used both his fists with equal dexterity.

"Time!"

The second round came to an end as uneventfully as the first. From the spectators' point of view the fight, so far, had been a tame business. But it is nearly always this way. A good few rounds have to be fought out before the boxers become really grim—before the actual fighting commences.

Curiously enough, it was Lawrence

who delivered the first really severe blow, and everybody had been expecting quite the opposite. After being driven back for a pace or two by a grim attack on Welsh's part, Lawrence suddenly countered. His action was as swift as a flash of lightning, and totally unexpected.

Slam!

His fist went home with terrific force on Welsh's neck. It was really a long-range blow, but it had enormous sting behind it. Welsh himself was more amazed than anybody—amazed that Young Ern should possess such a long reach. He fell back, so surprised that for a second or two he dropped his guard.

But Lawrence did not take advantage of this, and then Welsh bunched himself up and came charging in furiously. It was his idea to repay that blow with interest. But somehow he found it impossible to discover the whereabouts of Young Ern's face, and his body seemed equally inaccessible.

Every thrust was guarded with an ease and coolness which quite took the breath out of many of the spectators. It was a fierce attack, but Lawrence did not turn a hair. He dealt with it calmly, coolly, and with perfect sangfroid.

For what seemed to be a long time the boxers were engaged in a sharp mix-up. They moved across the ring in a stirring battle which set their pulses beating, and which sent a wave of excitement through the audience.

And then the gong sounded, and the fighters immediately broke away and went to their own corners. A stirring round of applause sounded, and I knew that a great deal of that applause was meant for Lawrence. He was showing his mettle already; he was revealing to the Londoners what kind of stuff he was made of. And Kiddy Welsh was not smiling quite so confidently now.

"Oh, good!" muttered Tinker. "I'm blessed if that chap isn't putting up a ripping fight, after all! He's a good man. Nipper, if you like!"

"You wait until later on!" I said confidently. "He hasn't surprised anybody yet, not properly. He'll cause a sensation before long."

"Time!"

There was something about Lawrence's attitude as he came forward that positively inspired confidence. As

one looked at him it seemed impossible that Young Ern could be beaten. He possessed a kind of magnetic personality, and even Kiddy Welsh was affected. Inwardly the professional was almost startled. He could deal with men who blustered, and who forced the pace; but this lithe youngster was different. He did not seem to care. He wore the same calm expression of quite equanimity and confidence, and there was just a touch of grim relentlessness in his bearing.

Kiddy Welsh clenched his fists hard, and determined to show the spectators something worth seeing in this round. He was tired of free-and-easy tactics; he would change his method altogether, and get to grim business.

In-fighting was not in Welsh's line, and now he strove to give the audience a sample of something which would be very spectacular, and which would result in Welsh receiving a hearty round of applause. His plan was to deliver a series of rapid lunges and hooks, leaping in and out constantly, and bewildering his opponent.

He succeeded in doing this for a moment or two, for Lawrence had not been quite prepared for the sudden change of tactics. But then suddenly Kiddy Welsh discovered that his new scheme was not working properly.

Welsh dodged in with a straight left which would have knocked Lawrence completely over if that blow had gone home. But the junior was now fairly on the alert, and the amazing rapidity with which he dodged the blow was a joy to witness. He gave a sudden swift leap, crouching low at the same time, and it took him right beneath the outstretched arm, and he delivered a return hook which had behind it an enormous force.

This, combined with the surprise attack, proved absolutely staggering. Lawrence's gloved hand landed upon Welsh's jaw—which had been left entirely unguarded—with such appalling force that the professional went backwards with a low, gurgling grunt.

He staggered, and nearly fell, and now there was a bewildered expression in his eyes. He was sluggish for a second, and did not properly drop into his guard. Lawrence did not wait—he seized the advantage which his own attack had given him.

Thud! Smash! Crash!

Three powerful body punches hit Kiddy Welsh in rapid, awful succession. The professional went back, utterly at Lawrence's mercy. He was dizzy, and dazed, quite incapable of defending himself during those brief, fleeting seconds.

He fell against the ropes—and then, more by a piece of luck than anything else, he recovered himself in a partial degree. And with something which sounded like a snarl, he attempted to make a fierce, vicious hook at his opponent.

But, of course, it was a wild blow, and Lawrence had no difficulty in avoiding it. He dodged with the greatest of ease, and fetched round a left which struck Welsh on the cheek. Then came another terrific swing.

Welsh went swaying from side to side as the junior pressed his attack. And he was absolutely outclassed—and his one lucid thought was a longing for the gong to sound. Unless it did sound almost at once, he would be beaten—beaten by this youngster.

Clang!

The round was at an end, and Kiddy Welsh staggered back to his corner, as nearly scared as he had ever been in his life. That sound of the gong clang had been the most welcome note that had ever come to his ears. And he gritted his teeth as he heard the enormous roar of cheering which arose from the audience.

Those cheers were for Young Ern.

Lawrence was surprising the natives, with a vengeance. Everybody had fully expected to see him wiped up. And—instead of that, he was doing all the wiping up that seemed to be necessary. And Lawrence was now feeling quietly confident. His experience in the last round had told him that Kiddy Welsh was not to be particularly feared. So long as he—Lawrence—kept his eyes well open, and did not relax his guard, he would have nothing to fear from Welsh's modes of attack.

On the other hand, Lawrence felt assured that he would be able to give his rival a great deal of trouble before the contest came to an end. A few more bouts such as had occurred in the previous round, and Welsh would be done. But it was not likely that the professional would give Lawrence any more opportunities of that nature. He had been taught a lesson which he would not speedily forget.

Welsh's seconds were working with a will, taking advantage of the brief breathing space—and when the gong

sounded for the next round. Kiddy walked into the centre of the ring with a firm, springy step. He appeared to be as fresh as ever, and quite recovered from the effects of Lawrence's blows.

The next three rounds were exciting, but not particularly spectacular. Blows were exchanged freely, but Lawrence was not severely marked. Indeed, Welsh found it very difficult to deliver his blows with the force he desired. And Lawrence, for his part, was content to let matters go fairly evenly. Welsh was tiring himself out by his energetic methods—and the pace of the contest was telling more upon him than upon Lawrence. The junior was still as fresh as ever.

But there was one striking difference which was noticeable to all the onlookers. At first Welsh had been almost contemptuously confident—he had tried to play with his man. But now his tactics were totally different. To a large extent he limited himself to defence—and when a man does that it means that he has begun to lose confidence in himself.

During those next few rounds, Ernest Lawrence worked hard—steadily. He did not actually deliver many blows, but, on points he was unquestionably the better of the two.

He was doing nearly all the attacking, and when one of his blows did happen to go home, there was no mistake about it. It went home—hard.

"He's wearing him down—slowly, but surely!" said De Valerie. "That's the game—and before long we shall see something worth looking at. They can't keep on like this until the end of the contest. There'll be a mix up soon!"

And De Valerie was right.

In the very next round there was some excitement which stirred the audience through and through. When the round started, both boxers entered into the battle with tremendous vim, and the spectators looked on tensely, hardly daring to make a sound.

Indeed, the scraping of the combatant's feet, the thud of the gloves upon bare limbs, the splutter of the arc lamps—these sounds were audible above all else.

And then, half-way through the round, the excitement started. Lawrence sent home a left hook—a punch which thudded against Welsh's head, as the latter turned aside in order to avoid the blow.

But it was a stunning thrust, nevertheless, and Kiddy staggered back for a moment. Lawrence closed with him, and

he succeeded with quiet ease in avoiding a counter swing. There followed a series of rapid half-arm punches—the majority of which thudded upon Welsh's chest and ribs.

To the spectators these blows did not seem particularly forceful—but Kiddy Welsh apparently thought differently. For he grunted audibly as Lawrence's fists struck him again and again.

The professional fell into a clinch, attempting to press his opponent's arms down.

"Break away!" rapped out the referee.

Welsh loosened his grip at once, and stepped out to distance. And as Lawrence dropped into his guard, Kiddy made a swift powerful lunge—a savage attack, in fact. Before Lawrence knew it, he was giving ground, backing away before that hail of blows.

But, with amazing skill, he countered, and not for one second did he lose his head. His brain was as cool as ever, and he was waiting—waiting for an opportunity to bring this attack to a close.

Welsh was fighting with both hands—fighting with all the skill and knowledge he knew. And he thought he saw a good opportunity of bringing the fight to a dramatic finish. He was anxious for it to finish now, because he had an idea that if it was prolonged, he would get the worst of it.

And, without fully realising Lawrence's skill, he made a sudden, panther-like attack. But it was hastily planned, and met with a fate which Welsh had never anticipated.

Instead of backing before the attack, Lawrence literally smashed through it, giving blow for blow. His right crashed upon Welsh's face with a power that brought the professional up with a jerk.

And then, before he could cover, Lawrence landed two more telling blows on the body—blows which drove the champion back step by step.

It was a change which nobody had expected—which had not been anticipated at that moment. It sent a tremor through the audience.

"Oh, good man!" muttered Handforth, clenching his fists, and working his arms unconsciously. "That's the style—now your left—like that—"

"Steady on, you ass!" gasped McClure. "Mind what you're doing with your silly fists!"

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth.

For Lawrence was fighting like a fel-

low possessed. Welsh had given him his opportunity, and he seized it with both hands. He smashed into Welsh again and again, forcing him round the ring, and the thud-thud of his blows could be heard distinctly above all other sounds.

Lawrence was simply taking advantage of his opponent's momentary confusion—and it spelt disaster for the London champion.

The pace was terrible—but Lawrence kept it up—and seemingly without effort. Every one of his blows went home, and Kiddy Welsh was so confused that he could hardly guard himself. It was a whirlwind—a hurricane.

Swift as light, Lawrence feinted with his left fist, causing Kiddy Welsh to swing round. And then, putting every ounce of strength into the punch, the junior brought his right fist round with the strength and power of a battering ram.

Crash!

The right went home full on the point of Welsh's jaw. The professional went down with a thud, rolled over, attempted to rise, and then fell back away. He lay there like a limp rag, with no sign of movement.

And now confusion reigned.

The audience was on its feet, yelling and shouting. Lawrence stood by panting heavily from his great exertions—but quite ready for a renewal of the battle, if necessary. And the count was being taken.

"Three—four—five—six——"

Kiddy Welsh did not move—that last blow had knocked him out.

"Nine—out!"

Everybody was staggered. The fight had come to an end so unexpectedly—so dramatically. Nobody had believed that the battle would finish so early as this. And there was no question of luck about it. Ernest Lawrence had won because he deserved to win—because he was by far the better man of the two. It had been the stiffest fight of his experience.

The schoolboy boxer hardly knew anything until he found himself in the dress-

ing-room—hot, flustered, and overwhelmed by the excitement of it all. And then he found himself face to face with his father. The sight of Mr. Lawrence standing there was like a cold douche. Abruptly—suddenly—Ernest Lawrence came to himself.

"Dad!" he gasped faintly.

"My boy, it was wonderful—positively wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence, seizing his son's hand, and grasping it firmly. "I knew you'd win all along—but you acquitted yourself in an amazing manner!"

Lawrence stared in fresh astonishment.

"But—but dad!" he exclaimed.

"Aren't—aren't you cross?"

"Cross!" shouted his father. "Good gracious, Ernest, why on earth should you think that? I am proud of you—more proud than I can say! Mr. Rook has told me everything, and I know the absolute truth."

"Oh, dad!" said Lawrence happily.

"This is—just splendid!"

And then he looked up, right into his father's face.

"And—and is everything all right?" he whispered.

Mr. Lawrence nodded.

"Yes, my boy—everything is all right!" he replied quietly.

And the junior knew exactly what he meant.

.

As for Mr. Smale Foxe—that questionable gentleman was foiled. Owing to the intervention of Nelson Lee, he had been unable to carry out his project. And the time was slipping away—and Mr. Foxe had been unable to gain the ends he so much desired.

But in Mr. Foxe's cunning mind, a new scheme was being evolved—a scheme, which, if successful, would mean disgrace for St. Frank's.

It was a last attempt—a final throw.

Whether it would succeed or not, remained to be seen.

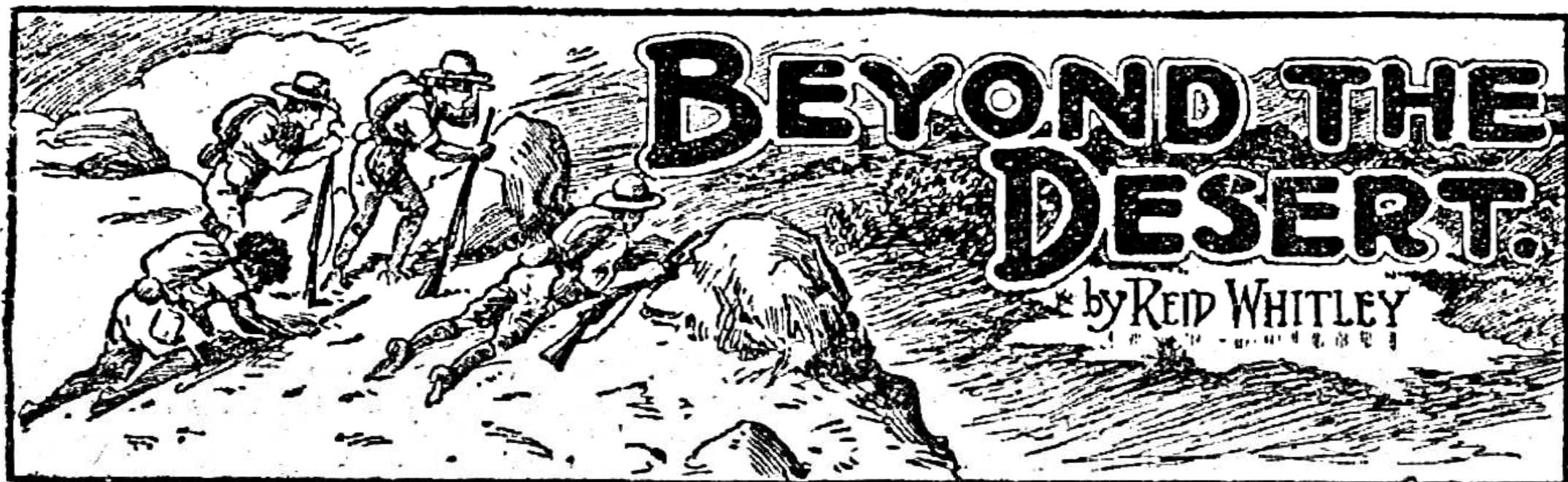
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AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE BY AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding have come to settle in Australia from the Old Country. They go to Cairns, where Jack has an uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been absent in the interior for some months, the young Englishmen decide to try and find him. They are joined by Tom Anson, an Australian, with whom they have struck up a friendship. Accompanied by Snapus, a black tracker, they start off across the desert until they come to a dried up water-hole. Here they find a message from Jack's uncle, directing them to the Secret Valley, some of the wonders of which you will read in the ensuing chapter.

(Now read on.)

Bunyips and Tail-men.

L YING flat upon the ledge, they peered between the boulders that strewed it, at something which now emerged from the cover of a bed of reeds growing in shallow water at the point of a promontory about a mile away. The water was shadowed, and for a little they could not distinguish what the thing might be.

"It's like a millwheel," said Anson. "It's rolling towards us. There are men behind it. Well, I'm hanged!"

The thing had swerved so that they saw it broadside on.

"A hollow wheel—like the wheel of a squirrel's cage," exclaimed Harding—"with floats. And the sides are fenced in, as it were. By Jove, I can see men walking round and round inside—just like squirrels running in their wheel—and they're driving it along! What an amazing contraption! What in the name of wonder are they going to do?"

Snapus, who had been peering open-mouthed, supplied the answer.

"Them fellow black-fellow same along o'

this fellow," he announced. "Them fellow fish."

And this proved to be true. The wheel had ceased to move round and now drifted slowly before the evening breeze that had sprung up, coming gradually nearer to the hidden watchers. From either side lines were thrown out between the openings in the gratings of bamboos that took the place of spokes, and hardly had they been flung than they were hauled in again, each with a silver fish struggling at its end.

For some ten minutes the fishing continued at a fast and furious rate. Then Anson stirred and pointed.

"D'you see that ripple?" he asked. "What in thunder can be making it?"

Evidently one of the fishers had spied it also, for there was a shrill outcry, the lines were drawn in, and a bristle of spears took their place. The ripple circled around the wheel, drawing near it, and of a sudden a snakelike head attached to a long neck shot up from the water, and darted like a spear at the grating of the wheel.

The spears of the men within sprang to meet it, and it whisked back, only to gather itself together and attack again, heaving a great barrel body and short flat tail half out of the water as it hurled itself at the wheel.

The thing rocked perilously, as though it were about to topple over on its side; the men inside yelled like fiends, and thrust furiously, while the creature, its neck pierced by several wounds, recoiled once more, baffled, but not daunted.

At that the men began their treadmill work again with frantic energy. The wheel rolled forward, straight towards the upper end of the lake, where was a broad stretch of shoal covered with reeds.

"They're making for the shallow water. The beggar can't move so easily there," muttered Maxwell. "They'll be close to us in a minute, and we may be seen. The question is what shall we do? Lie low or cut in and help them? They'll find out we are here sooner or later, and it seems to me that now is a good chance to make friends by lending a hand?"

"I think so," agreed Harding.

"So long as we keep our eyes open for treachery, it may be the best course," said Anson.

Only Snaplus appeared doubtful.

"Them fellow bad fellow!" he grunted. "Too much fellow spear belonga them."

But the white men disregarded him.

"We'll cut in at the first opening," said Maxwell. "Aim at the brute's body. We can't afford to waste shots. Ah! Here he comes!"

The wheel had reached the outer fringe of reeds, and checked a little as it took the ground. The water beast seemed to feel that its prey would quickly be out of reach. It ceased its futile circling, and dashed in, sending the water flying in showers from powerful flippers that urged it smashing through the reeds.

The wheel stopped again as the men inside it ceased treadmilling and thrust out their spears. There was a crash of splintering bamboo, a fearful yell, and the snaky head flung back, dragging a small, sooty-black man through the opening the battering-ram thrust had made.

"Fire!" called Maxwell, and himself let drive.

The three shots rang out together; three bullets thudded into the glistening, flabby black body of the thing, and penetrated deep into its vitals. With a hoarse, snorting bellow, it dropped its prey. Its head swung to the wounds in its flanks, from which blood flowed freely; its flailing flappers beat up spouts of water and liquid mud almost to the feet of its slayers, as, with a last effort, it flung itself against the wheel.

It did not reach it. Three more shots echoed along the rocky canyon, and the creature slumped down, writhed its neck straight up in the air, then let it fall with a splash. It was dead.

The three men on the ledge stood with their smoking weapons in their hands, looking down on their work, while Snaplus, lying full length, peeped over the edge. His face was grey with fear. At last he had seen what his people had so often whispered about camp-fires, and, strange to say, he still lived, though by all rules and regulations he should be dead.

"Heap big fellow bunyip!" he whispered. "You croak big fellow bunyip!"

Up till then he had regarded the three whites with secret scorn. They could not read tracks that were plain as print to his eyes, and they made a terrible fuss if they had to go short of water, while their attempts with the boomerang were pitiful. But from the moment of slaying the water-beast he treated them altogether differently. As bunyip-slayers they deserved the utmost respect.

For a full minute after the last echo of the final volley had died away the men in the wheel seemed too paralysed to stir, while Maxwell and his companions waited for them to make the first move. Then a black head poked out through the opening the bun-

yip had made, and two keen eyes stared unblinkingly up at the wondrous strangers who had saved one of them at least from a dreadful death.

Maxwell extended a hand and beckoned, at which the head was withdrawn. A burst of chattering, then more heads appeared. A door in the grating was opened, and two came out, little men, scarcely more than four feet high, jet black, and shining with oil, so that they resembled polished ebony.

They wore nothing except a scanty loin-cloth and belt, from which hung pouch and hatchet, the head of the latter made of the same green obsidian that had furnished the head of the spear found in the dead tapir.

But it was not these particulars that rivetted the attention of the four aloft. They had seen men nearly as small, quite as black, and certainly quite as oily, time and again before. But never in all their lives had they seen men with tails! Even the unemotional Snaplus gasped as he saw these charming appendages wagging unashamed.

The two waded to where the man the bunyip had seized lay upon a clump of reeds, and aided him to rise. Supporting him, they moved back to the wheel, and hoisted him in. Then they turned and stared at their deliverers. Again Maxwell beckoned, and very slowly, like dogs who are uncertain of their welcome, the two splashed to the shore and came nearer the foot of the rock. There they halted, staring open-mouthed. A mere glance at Snaplus sufficed. He was too like themselves to hold their attention; but their eyes travelled over the white men, taking in every slightest detail.

Behind, the rest of the crew peeped and jabbered, but did not leave the shelter of the wheel, until their curiosity sated for the time, the two beneath the rock turned and ran back. They had made no sign that they were grateful for the service done them, neither had they shown awe or worship as Maxwell and the others had half-expected they would. Only that dumb staring suggested that such a happening was at all out of the usual run of things in that happy valley.

"I tell you what it is!" said Harding. "They are hardly human at all. They are a little higher than the apes, but not so very much. They're survivals from the earlier days, and haven't intelligence enough to understand and be thankful to us. What

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puzzles me is how they should have had brains enough to make that wheel affair.

"Well, at all events, they don't seem disposed to interfere with us. Ugh! They're rather beastly!" exclaimed Anson.

The little blacks had fallen upon the carcass of the water-beast with stone knives and hatchets, hacking off slabs of the reeking flesh and devouring it eagerly. For several minutes they fed like wolves. Then having satisfied themselves, chopped a number of larger pieces, which they bore to their strange craft.

One long, final stare, and all got aboard or into the thing; they began to tread, and away it rolled out into the lake. No sinister ripple appeared to threaten its progress, and shortly it had disappeared beyond the bend.

"Well, I'm hanged!" cried Maxwell. "What a tame ending. I expected that they would either worship us as gods or attack us because we were devils. But they treated us very much as they would a rock which had happened to fall at the right moment. They're nearly animals, and yet their weapons and that treadmill wheel are the work of people of some intelligence. I can't believe that they are made by those little tailed brutes."

"Perhaps there are other people, a higher race, here," suggested Harding. "If that were so——"

"Oh, it's no use speculating! Let's get some sleep, and move away from here early in the morning," said Anson. "I vote that we go along the valley till we can find some cave where we can lie up in safety till we find out all about this place. It's too open here for my taste."

The others agreed, and since Snaplus was not sleepy, he took the first watch. It was somewhere about midnight when he awakened Maxwell for his turn.

"Seen anything?" asked Maxwell, as the black piled wood on the fire and snuggled himself into his blanket beside it.

"Two fellow bunyip," grunted Snaplus, and at once fell asleep.

Maxwell paced softly to the end of the ledge, and looked out over the lake. The moon had risen, and the smooth waters, touched here and there by a faint breeze, shimmered like pale grey satin. Not far away the even surface was suddenly broken. What looked like a spray of diamonds shot into the air and fell splashing. Immediately after a long, wicked-looking head at the end of a serpentine neck stabbed up, there was a commotion, then the creature dived again. It was one of the same species of water animal or reptile that had attacked the black men's wheel.

"Um! Bathing would be very mixed hereabouts!" grunted Maxwell, and fell into thought.

Though he was no learned biologist, he could at least make a guess at the conditions which had brought about the strange survivals in this valley. Ages before, in the far-away times when Australia was con-

nected with the mainland of Asia by what is now a string of a thousand islands, the valley had been connected with the outer world.

The creatures of the time, the strange reptiles, the semi-human ancestors of man, had gone freely in and out. Then came some vast convulsion a terrible earthquake perhaps, which had closed the valley, so that none but winged things could escape.

After that other changes occurred in the outer world. The forests that had perhaps once clothed the country round died off, probably because the earthquake had diverted the streams that once watered it. Most likely they had gone underground; some certainly fed the lake in the valley. The country became desert. The animals that had roamed there died for lack of food, or migrated. Only in the valley itself did things remain as they had been.

Watered by the drainage of the high ground all round it, sheltered from invasion by the desert, animals and vegetation altered very slowly, if at all. Doubtless many species had died out, but those that remained differed very little from their far-off ancestors, because the conditions under which they lived had changed but slightly.

So it came about that the valley held a number of creatures that had been extinct in the outer world for many thousands of years. Maxwell shivered a little as he reflected that the way out would be exceedingly difficult even if it were not impossible. Then it occurred to him that the inhabitants of the valley had not wished to leave. Why should they?

But he and his friends were neither animals nor animal-men. They had brain and knowledge. Assuredly they would find a way. He began to dream about balloons, ladders, water-bags of animal hides; and how, if they could only find the means of transport, the bones of some of these creatures alone would be a rich harvest.

A faint noise from the cliff behind him interrupted the building of these cloud castles. He awoke to realities, and gripped Anson's gun. Something was coming down the rocks.

(To be continued.)

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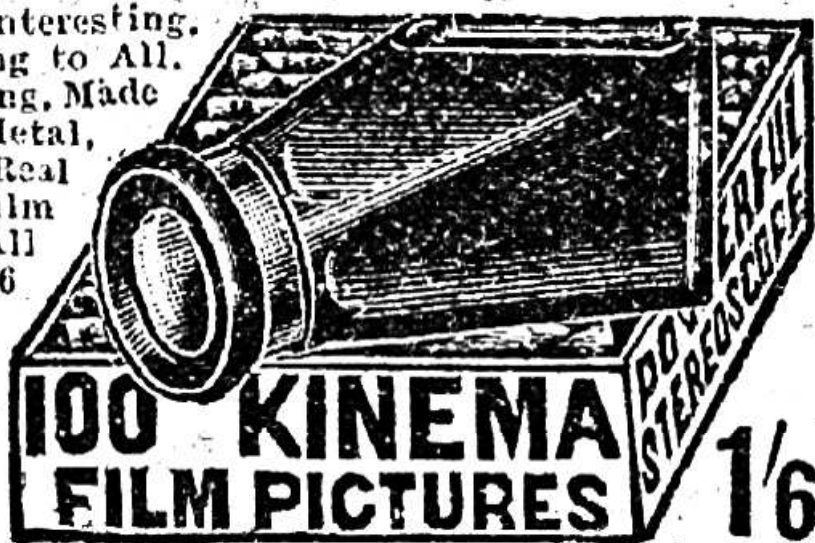
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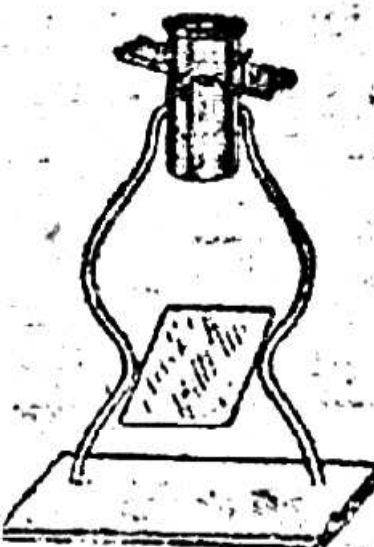
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