STORY OF GREAT CRICKET MATCH—ST. FRANK'S *v.* GRAMMARIANS.

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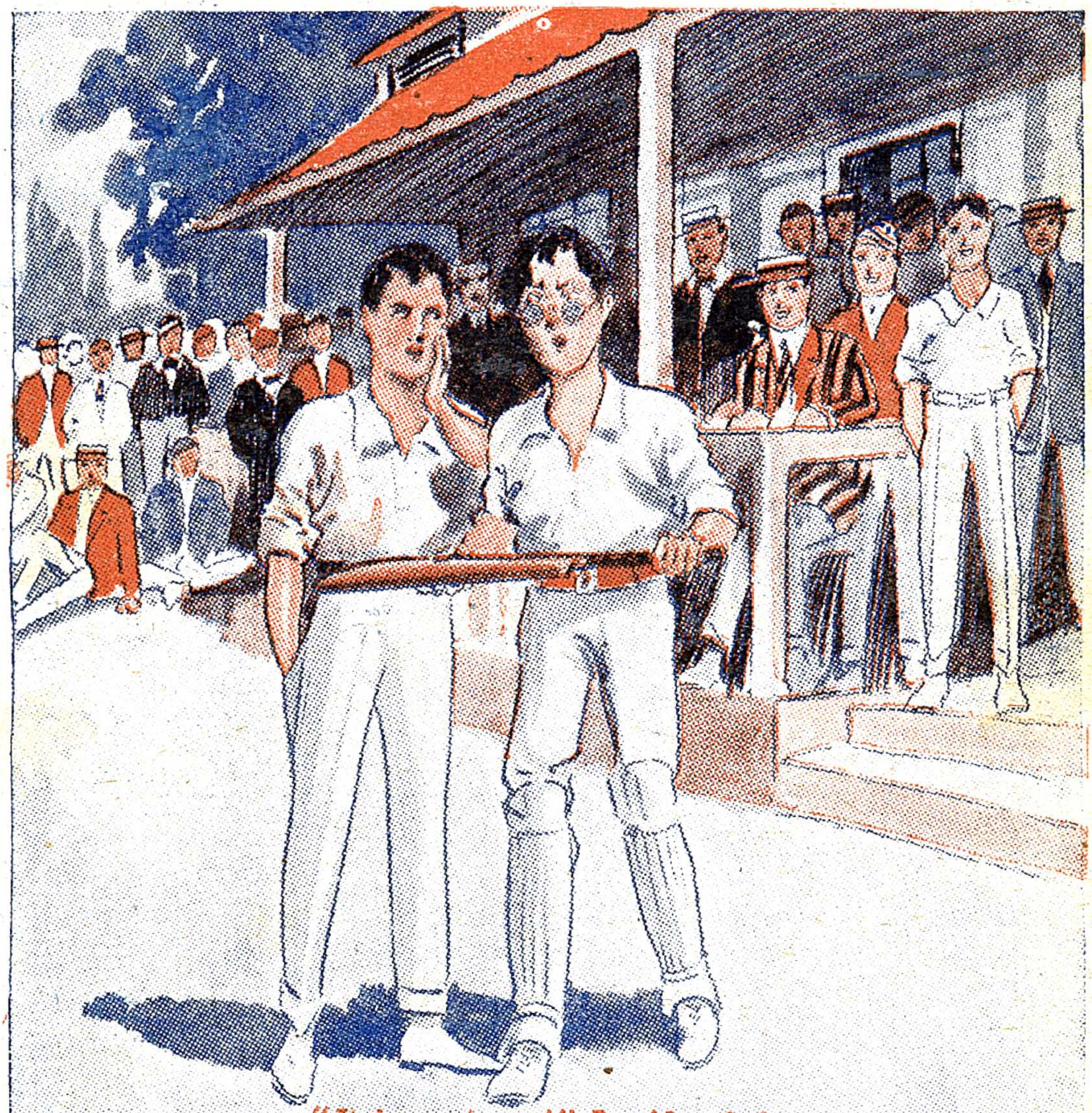

"It is up to us!" I said quietly.

THE DEMON CRICKETER.

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The Demon Cricketer.

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Hounds of the Tagossa," "The Australian Wonder," "The Golden Image," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE MAKES INQUIRIES.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH winked mysteriously.

"Yes, my sons, it's a secret, and you ain't going to get it out of me," he said. "You can ask me until you're blue in the face—but it won't make any difference!"

"We sha'n't ask—we don't care twopence about your silly old secret!" exclaimed Church, with an air of indifference. "What do you say, Clurey?"

"I'm not interested," replied McClure.

The three famous chums of Study D were strolling down Bellton Lane leisurely. A moment before they had emerged from the Triangle at St. Frank's. Tea was just over, and the evening was sunny, but rather windy.

"I believe in keeping secrets," went on Handforth. "This one concerns somebody you know as well as I do—but what that secret is will remain locked up in my breast. That's quite understood."

"Oh, of course!" agreed Church. "But we don't know him."

"Don't know whom?"

"The chap the secret is about."

"Why, you silly ass!" exclaimed Handforth, glaring. "Do you mean to say that you don't know Jerry Dodd?"

"Oh, Jerry!" grinned McClure. "Well, he's a new chap in the Remove, but we haven't had much to do with him. Rather a quiet sort, and fond of brooding over his blessed books, and swotting. He's a frightful duffer at cricket——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Handforth.

Church and McClure came to a stop, and stared.

"What's the cackle for?" asked McClure wonderingly.

Handforth suddenly pulled himself up, and coughed.

"Ahem! Nothing—oh, nothing!" he said hastily. "Something tickled me, that's all."

"You know as well as I do that Dodd can't play cricket," put in Church.

"Of course he can't—didn't we see him make a mess of it?" asked Handforth. "Anyhow, you won't get that secret out of me——"

"The secret about Jerry Dodd, you mean?"

Handforth looked startled.

"Jerry Dodd!" he gasped. "Who—who told you—— I—I mean, what rot! Just as if the secret could be about Jerry Dodd!"

Church and McClure chuckled.

"But you just told us——" began Church.

"I didn't tell you anything!" roared Handforth fiercely. "And if you give me any more of your rot I'll punch your silly noses! If you ask any more questions about this secret—if you try to pump me—I'll slaughter you!"

Handforth marched down the lane, quite

unconscious of the fact that he had nearly let the cat out of the bag. When Handforth kept a secret, he only kept it for a short time—not that he was incapable of being trusted, but because he allowed things to slip out quite unconsciously. He was a frightful ass in that way.

Church and McClure said no more. They didn't want to start any trouble—particularly this evening, as Handforth had received a nice fat remittance from home, and they were even now on the way to the village tuckshop to celebrate the occasion. Church and McClure were nearly stony, and they were hungry. Tea in Study D had been a bit of a farce, for the supplies had been extremely scanty. Church and McClure had no wish to fall foul of their good-natured leader just now.

"Lovely evening!" said Church, deeming it wise to change the subject.

"Oh, rather!" agreed Handforth. "I was just thinking—— Hallo! Look at that kid's balloon on the hedgetop!" he added, pointing. "Must have got blown up there by the breeze, I suppose."

Just a little distance ahead, where the hedge was thick, a perfectly round smooth object projected slightly over the hedge. It was kind of brick-red in colour, and quite glossy.

"We'd better rescue it," said McClure. "These toy balloons are very expensive. This seems to be a good one, too—although I never saw one that colour before. We'll nip up and unhook it——"

"Rot!" put in Handforth. "Do you think we're going to be seen walking down the road carrying a baby's balloon? We've got some pride, I should hope! Just watch me bust the giddy thing!"

Handforth produced a deadly peashooter from his pocket, dropped a pea into the tube, and placed the instrument to his mouth. Church and McClure knew that it was useless to argue. It seemed a pity to them that the pink balloon should be destroyed in this wanton manner. But, after all, they were not anxious to possess it.

"You see it bust first shot!" said Handforth.

He took a deep breath, and operated the peashooter with deadly effect. The tiny missile hit the target with terrific force—although, of course, the juniors could not see this. But they heard quite a lot.

"Yow-yaroooh!" roared a puffing, bellowing voice.

Handforth & Co. came to an abrupt stop, gaping. The toy balloon had not burst. Instead, it jerked upwards, turning round at the same moment. And the startled Removites found themselves staring into an enormously fat face. A fat hand was rubbing the perfectly bald head vigorously.

"Great pip!" panted Handforth. "I—I thought——"

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Church. "Bunk, you asses; bunk!"

"Yes, that's the wheeze!" muttered McClure.

Handforth declined.

"Rats!" he said. "We've got to apologise to this gentleman! You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves, you prize duffers! Telling me that the chap's head was a balloon——"

"Why, you were the first one to speak——"

Church, in the middle of his protestation, found the words failing on his lips. For the owner of the bald head and the fat face came plunging through a gap. And his appearance was such that Handforth & Co. nearly collapsed. The stranger was a tremendously big man, attired in a loud check suit and a red waistcoat. All his clothing seemed too small for him, and he wore a tiny soft hat.

"It—it must have escaped from somewhere!" said Church faintly.

A further surprise awaited the juniors. Happening to glance down, they beheld another human figure appearing through the gap. At first sight it looked like a Second Form fag attired in his father's suit; but, upon careful scrutiny, it turned out to be a fully grown man—a tiny little man with a bird-like face, and a long nose which was an excellent substitute for a beak. All his clothing was too large for him.

"You—you impudent young scoundrels!" puffed the fat man, glaring down at Handforth & Co. ferociously. "How dare you? How dare you deliberately throw stones at me in that ruffianly manner?"

Handforth swallowed hard, and managed to find his voice.

"Sorry, sir; but it was a mistake," he said. "You see, we thought your head was a bladder, or a toy balloon——"

"What?" bellowed the fat gentleman.

Handforth didn't realise that his apology really constituted an insult.

"We saw it over the top of the hedge," he explained. "It looked just like a bladder, and I took a pot-shot at it with my pea-shooter. Awfully sorry, of course, but we weren't to know, were we?"

"Boy!" thundered the stout man. "Not content with injuring me, you make

matters worse by adding a deadly insult! You have the audacity to suggest that my head resembles a bladder!"

"You've put your foot in it, you ass!" muttered Church.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "How was I to know? Doesn't his head look like——"

"You apparently do not realise whom you are addressing!" interrupted the injured one. "Boy, allow me to present my card!"

The little man tugged hard at his huge companion's coat.

"Be cautious, Mr. Podge!" he murmured. "It is not wise, perhaps, to——"

"I know what I am doing, Mr. Midge!" puffed Mr. Podge. "You will kindly allow me to do as I please! There is no reason why our identity should be kept secret. Indeed, we are already well known in the village."

Handforth took the slip of pasteboard which was thrust into his hand. He looked at it curiously, and his eyes opened wide. Church and McClure looked, too. And what they saw rather astounded them.

For this is what was printed on the card:

The Firm That Has Never Failed!
Cash Or Deferred Payments!
Telephone: Central 99999.
Telegrams: Incompetence, London.

PODGE AND MIDGE.
The Deadliest Sleuths on Earth!
Wretland Yard, London, W.

Cases investigated at Shortest Notice. Specialists in Crime. Trails Picked Up In Any Corner of the World. Blood-hounds Superseded! All Kinds of Mysteries Unravelled while You Wait! Special Charges for Overtime. It is Impossible to Dodge Midge & Podge!

"Well I'm blessed!" said Church blankly.

"They—they must have escaped from an asylum!" whispered McClure, in startled tones.

Handforth's hand shook as he held the card.

"You prize asses!" he hissed. "Don't you understand? Can't you read plain English? These chaps are detectives!"

"Eh?"

"Which?"

"Detectives!" repeated Handforth. "My only hat!"

He turned to Messrs. Podge and Midge, and smiled in his best manner. When Handforth liked he could be almost charming.

"Please accept my apologies, sir, for what happened," he said humbly, addressing Mr. Podge. "I'm awfully sorry—but I didn't know that you were important gentlemen like this. It was quite a mistake, sir."

Mr. Podge was somewhat mollified.

"Very well!" he puffed. "I will say no more."

"I—I'm awfully interested in detectives," went on Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I am a bit of one myself.—I've always prided myself on my cleverness in that line. Of course, I can see it all now—I can understand perfectly. And I'd like to congratulate you, gentlemen, on your wonderful disguises!"

"Disguises!" repeated Mr. Podge with dignity.

"Rather! They're ripping!" said Handforth confidentially. "I could see there was something wrong, of course—you and Mr. Midge look awful freaks. But now I understand everything. Your disguises are meant to represent escaped lunatics, ain't they, sir?"

Church and McClure nearly exploded, and Mr. Podge actually did so.

"Boy!" he thundered. "You—you insolent young rascal!"

"But—but——" gasped Handforth.

"We are not disguised!" put in Mr. Midge, in his thin, piping tones. "I am afraid you have made a mistake, young man."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth. "I—I thought——"

"Enough," put in Mr. Podge pompously. "Beware, my young friend—beware! Do not fall foul of me—for I have never been known to forgive an insult—and I have never failed to capture my man. Begone before I lose my temper!"

Handforth & Co. hurried off down the lane—at least, Church and McClure did and they dragged their leader with them. Church and McClure were nearly bursting themselves with laughter.

"Of all the giddy freaks!" grinned Church. "Detectives! Oh, my only aunt! Did you ever see such Fifth of November guys? They must have founded that firm on the first of April!"

"Oh, dry up!" put in Handforth. "That's rot. There's something behind all this—something deep, you know. They're detectives all right, but they didn't want to give the show away. I wonder

what they're doing, hanging about this district?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church. "They can be seen a mile off, anyway—and they've been here for some time, too. It strikes me these are the chaps Teddy Long was speaking about the other day—they came to see Jerry Dodd about something. Have you got that card?"

"Yes!" said Handforth. "I'm going to keep it, too. I mean to have my eyes well open, and I'll find out what these detectives are doing. It's quite likely that I shall join forces with them!"

"Well, that's not a bad idea," said McClure casually. "Messrs. Podge, Midge, and Handforth—the marvellous freak detectives! You'd all take first prizes at a contest for duds!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Steady on—no squabbles!" said Church hastily. "Clurey was only joking, old son. Let's get down to the village and have that tuck!"

Meanwhile, Messrs. Podge and Midge had retired once more behind the hedge. Mr. Podge took good care not to reveal his bald head this time. It may as well be explained at once that they were on the watch for Jerry Dodd, of the Remove. And it was quite likely that they would remain on the watch for some little time.

For Jerry Dodd was, at that every moment, hurrying along the passages in the Ancient House, making his way to Nelson Lee's study. The famous schoolmaster-detective had summoned him a few moments earlier.

Nelson Lee was sitting in his chair, very thoughtful. He had, indeed, quite a lot to think about, for there had been some strange events at St. Frank's recently. Nelson Lee rather liked the Australian junior, but he was greatly puzzled over the mystery which surrounded the lad.

Jerry had only been at St. Frank's a week or so—since the beginning of the summer term, in fact. He had devoted himself almost entirely to study, for his father had given strict instructions to this effect. Jerry was forbidden to participate in the school sports to any great extent, for games occupied too much time.

But this was not the subject which occupied Nelson Lee's mind.

He was thinking of other matters—of the mysterious dream which Jerry Dodd had reported a day or two earlier. Jerry believed it to be a dream, and in it he had been surrounded by Hindoos or Burmese. He had been taken to a cave, where he had inadvertently pocketed a little golden image.

But this had been no dream. The whole affair actually happened, as Nelson Lee well knew. But Jerry had forgotten everything, and he was in total ignorance of the true state of affairs. He remembered nothing of the Indians, and the little golden image had no significance in his eyes.

While Nelson Lee was waiting for Jerry to appear, he held the tiny idol in his hand, turning it over curiously. It was made of solid gold, and quite heavy for its size. A most repulsive-looking image, with two real sparkling rubies to represent the eyes. On the base there were one or two written characters, incomprehensible to the average man; but Nelson Lee had looked up the subject a great deal.

"Rhoon!" he murmured. "So this is the god of Rhoon? Most interesting, but, at the same time, most puzzling. I have not the least doubt that Dodd's strange Eastern friends are very anxious to get this object back into their possession."

Only the previous night, Nelson Lee himself had had a remarkable adventure. An intruder had broken into the school, a Hindoo or a Burmese with greased, slippery skin, so that he could not be caught. Nelson Lee believed that this man had come with the intention of getting back the golden idol.

Before the detective could think any further, a tap sounded upon the door; and immediately afterwards Jerry Dodd appeared, with his cheerful, good-humoured face and his curly hair. He was looking rather puzzled.

"You sent for me, I reckon, sir?" he said.

"Yes, Dodd, but not to find any faults," smiled Nelson Lee. "Sit down, my boy, and make yourself comfortable. I am very pleased with the way you have been getting on since you came to the school. Your progress has been rapid and highly satisfactory, and I know that this result has only been achieved by hard work and dogged determination on your part. You have stuck to your guns manfully."

Jerry Dodd flushed slightly.

"I—I didn't figure on this, sir," he began.

"No, Dodd; and, as a matter of fact, I had quite another reason for inviting you to my study," said Nelson Lee. "But I thought it just as well to tell

you how I appreciate your very excellent progress."

"Thank you very much, sir!" said Jerry.

"With regard to this little image," went on Nelson Lee, holding it up and revealing it for the junior's inspection, "you found it, I understand, in one of your pockets?"

"Yes, sure, sir," agreed Dodd. "And it's been a puzzle to me ever since. I don't know how the darned thing got there. I figure I must have picked it up somewhere—perhaps when I was thinking hard and absent-minded."

"That, of course, is a possible explanation," agreed Nelson Lee.

He could see that Dodd had no recollection of his "dream," and he did not wish to put the boy into full possession of the truth yet.

"When you first found this little idol, Dodd, I put a few questions to you," went on Lee. "I wish to ask you some more now."

"I'll do my best to answer them, sir," said Jerry Dodd obligingly.

"Well, to begin with, have you ever been to Burmah?"

"Burmah?" repeated the junior wonderingly.

"Yes, in the Indian Empire."

"Oh, I reckon I know where it is sir!" said Jerry. "But the question kind of surprised me at first. I've never seen Burmah, except on a map, and the nearest I've been to it was when the ship brought me from Australia to England."

"And you have never been to India?"

"No, sir."

"Have you travelled at all—before this trip to England?"

"No, sir; I was never out of Australia."

"Well, Dodd, do you know if your father has ever travelled in Burmah?"

Jerry shook his head.

"Not as far as I know, sir," he replied slowly. "As far back as I can remember I was on the ranch, and my dad was always there. I don't think dad's ever travelled at all, and I'm sure he's never been to India."

"Why are you, sure?"

"Well, sir, I should have heard something about it, shouldn't I?" asked Jerry, smiling. "My father wouldn't keep a thing like that to himself; I reckon he would have referred to it at times, but he never did, sir. I've never known him say a word about India or Burmah, or any of those heathen places."

"You must not mind me asking you these questions, Dodd," smiled Nelson Lee. "I have a very good object in doing so, and I shall explain to you when I think it necessary. It is not mere inquisitiveness on my part."

Jerry Dodd was sitting in his chair, and a sudden thoughtful look had come into his eyes. He roused himself and looked across at Nelson Lee.

"I reckon there's one little thing that I ought to mention, sir," he said. "It kind of slipped my mind until just now, but this talk has brought it back. But I don't suppose it means anything."

"Well, let me hear it," said Lee.

"I reckon it was about a month before I came to England, sir; perhaps a little over," said Jerry Dodd. "A stranger came along to my father's ranch. He looked very much like an ordinary gentleman, except that he was dark."

"Dark?"

"Sure, sir, a kind of Indian."

"Oh, indeed!" said Nelson Lee. "Who was this gentleman? And why did he come and see your father?"

"Well, I figure he came on business, sir; that's how I took it, anyway," replied Jerry. "He was a Rangoon merchant, I believe; a native, of course, and a big pot, in his own way. I think he got round the ranch concerning sheep."

"Possibly, but there may have been some other motive," said Nelson Lee slowly. "Trivial as this seems, Dodd, it may be of the utmost importance. This Rangoon gentleman came to visit your father. How long did he stay?"

"Why, not more than a day, sir."

"Did Mr. Dodd expect him?"

"I don't think he did, sir. Anyway, I remember that dad was very quiet after the Rangoon fellow had gone back," said Jerry Dodd. "He was thoughtful and worried, and kind of lost his usual smile; and then, a couple of days after that, he figured that he'd send me to England."

Nelson Lee bent forward suddenly.

"Had there been no previous talk of your coming to England?" he asked.

"Why, no, sir; it took me completely by surprise!" said Jerry. "I was home on vacation from my school in Sydney, and I was due back there. The fellows were anxious to have me, because I was junior cricket captain of the school. I wasn't altogether pleased with the idea of coming over to England, but I reckon I'm pretty content now. I've sort of taken a liking to St. Frank's."

"I am glad to hear that, Dodd," said

Nelson Lee. "What you have told me is quite instructive and most interesting. So there was no talk of your coming to England until after your father had received a visit from this Rangoon merchant."

"I never sort of figured it out that way, sir," said Jerry Dodd thoughtfully. "But I can't see that there's any connection. It don't seem reasonable."

"In any case, Dodd, there is no necessity for us to worry," smiled Nelson Lee. "You must forgive me for asking you these questions. I can assure you that I have an excellent reason for doing so."

A minute or two later the Australian junior left the study, and he went back to the Remove passage in a reflective kind of mood. He knew why Nelson Lee had been making these inquiries: he was almost certain that Lee had been thinking of that mysterious golden image. And Jerry Dodd felt that the matter was not yet done with.

He was certainly right there!

CHAPTER II.

THE HINDOO FORTUNE-TELLER!

TEN minutes later Jerry Dodd sallied out into the Triangle with a bundle of books under his arm. It was his intention to go to a quiet spot, and settle down to some studying. He hated being stewed up in his own study.

Messrs. Podge and Midge were extremely unfortunate. These deadly sleuths—as they called themselves—were on the look-out for Jerry. Unhappily for them, the Colonial boy did not emerge into the lane at all, but went across the playing fields, and so over the meadows towards the River Stowe.

Why Podge and Midge were so anxious to keep their eyes on Jerry was a bit of a mystery; but they had certainly no opportunity of doing so this evening. And they still remained in their place of concealment, waiting for Jerry to appear.

Meanwhile, Jerry Dodd was calmly settling down to his studies in the little hollow against the river. This was a favourite spot of his—a place he had selected after much trouble. It was at a bend of the river, with Bellton on one side, and with many trees dotted about. This little hollow was free from observation.

Here, the junior could settle to his work without fear of being interrupted. And it was far better than being within the enclosed walls of the Ancient House. Under the open sky Jerry felt free to think: his brain was clearer, and he enjoyed the fresh, pure air. The work was distasteful to him, but he set himself to it with a will, and soon forgot all about his dislike.

He had made a regular practice of coming here, and it was while on this same grassy bank that he had fallen asleep—to dream, as he imagined. But something very peculiar had happened on that occasion, something of which Jerry Dodd knew nothing.

He was busy with his studies when he happened to glance up. He had heard no sound, but he seemed to know that he was not alone. But he was certainly not prepared for the sight he actually saw.

He dropped his book, and stared.

It was no ordinary individual who was approaching him, who was already within twenty yards, in fact. The man was attired in nondescript garments, most of them ragged and threadbare. They were ordinary articles of clothing, and in no way Oriental in aspect. In fact, they would not have looked out of place on a scarecrow.

But upon the man's head there rested a quaint turban, and over his shoulder was slung a much-worn wicker basket, in which, no doubt, he kept his wares. For this man was obviously a hawker.

He was an Indian, with brown, wrinkled skin, and deep-set eyes. Jerry Dodd could not help being struck by the fact that this Hindoo should appear, as though from nowhere. After his conversation with Nelson Lee about Indians, it was a strange coincidence that this stray man of the East should come.

Did it mean anything, or was it merely chance?

Jerry Dodd was inclined to the latter view. It was the only reasonable explanation. After all, he told himself, there were plenty of hawkers of this type going up and down the country. No doubt his basket concealed reels of cotton, fancy silks, and so forth. Jerry waited curiously for the man to come up.

He did so, and bowed low before the junior.

"Pardon my intrusion, O young master!" said the Indian, in deep, low tones. "I would beg of thee to give me one moment's attention. Mayhap I have something that thou wouldst be interested in?"

"That's all right," said Jerry. "You are disturbing me a bit, but I don't sup-

pose you'll stay long. What have you got to sell ?"

The Hindoo shook his head.

"Nay, I have nothing to sell, Sahib !" he said. "I am merely a humble teller of fortunes. For a few ponce I will look into the future, and tell thee where thou wilt be, and what thou wilt be doing in years hence."

Jerry Dodd grinned.

"Oh, that's bully !" he said. "It must be rather good to know things of that sort, old chum. A fortune-teller, eh ?"

The junior was rather amused at himself for having had such preposterous ideas concerning this harmless old fellow. He had probably spotted Jerry from the distance, and had thought him a likely customer.

"Thou art right, young master, a teller of fortunes !" said the Hindoo gravely. "But I am serious, there is no swindle. I tell your fortune, and you pay me. It is a bargain ?"

"Hold on !" said Jerry. "What's the charge ?"

The old Indian shrugged his shoulders

"I have no charge," he replied, his face creasing into a smile. "Thou wilt pay what thou thinkest fit, young sahib."

Jerry was not altogether struck by the arrangement, for it seemed to him that the old Indian would take up a lot of his valuable time. However, Jerry did not want to pack the man off without helping him, he seemed so ragged and poor.

"You don't need to get busy on the job," said the junior good naturedly. "Here you are, chum, take this half-crown. It may help you a bit."

The other refused the proffered coin.

"Nay, I am not a beggar !" he replied. "I would take no money unless I give thee value in return. It will take but a short time, young master. Thou hast but to gaze into the crystal, and thou wilt see."

While he was speaking he produced a round ball of glass from his wicker basket. He held it on a piece of shabby velvet. Then he sat down in a squatting position near to Jerry, and held the crystal in his lap.

"Gaze into the crystal, O my son !" he said solemnly. "Thou wilt see wondrous things."

Jerry Dodd gazed, extremely sceptical, and rather amused. The old Indian commenced chanting in a low, monotonous voice. Now and again his voice rose lightly, and the words were indistinguishable. His hands passed continuously over the face of the crystal. And, at last, he looked across at Jerry.

"Thou art gazing, young master ?" he asked softly. "The magic spell is now cast upon the crystal. Thou wilt see many interesting sights if thou wilt use thine eyes. Put all thy mind into this effort, to the exclusion of all else."

Jerry Dodd, just to please the old chap, stared hard into the crystal. He could only see his own distorted reflection, and a curious-looking background of green trees and the river—all ludicrously out of proportion.

"Look, my son, look !" murmured the Hindoo tensely. "What dost thou see ? Thou art there—many years older than thou art at this moment. Canst thou not see ? Thou art attired in clothing that is white, and thou hast a strangely shaped baton of wood in thine hands. Thou art playing a game of some description."

"Oh, cricket, I suppose," said Jerry. "I sort of figure there's something wrong with this crystal. I don't see much, anyway."

"Thine eyes are younger than mine—it may be that thou art not permitted to see into the future," said the Indian. "But I am the seer, O young sahib ! Thou art a tall, fine man, and thou art speaking with an older man—thy father."

Jerry was at once interested.

"I can't see him," he said. "What's he like ?"

"Thy father is a tall, noble man, with bronzed cheeks and hair that is grizzled," replied the Hindoo. "He walks like a mere boy, with spring in his heel, and with shoulders set back. On his face there is a moustache, turning grey."

"By jings !" said Jerry Dodd. "That's a pretty good description of my dad, anyway. Where is this place ?—the spot you can see in the crystal ?"

"It is miles from here," replied the Indian, still speaking in a low, chanting voice. "Ay, my master, it is a great distance from this spot. Miles—hundreds—thousands of miles. It is divided from this land by great seas—by vast stretches of water. The climate is hot, and the sun beats down with great intensity. It is a land where there are wondrous plains, and where sheep abound."

"Australia !" muttered Jerry. "Well, say, that's rather good !"

He was far more interested now. The old Indian didn't seem to be a humbug, after all. He certainly knew a lot about

Jerry's father, and the conditions of the country in Australia.

"Look into the crystal, O my son!" said the Hindoo softly. "Thou art not putting thy mind to the matter, and I can never hope to make thee see unless thou do obey. Watch—look closely!"

Jerry Dodd bent forward, and gazed into the crystal intently. He felt rather sheepish as he did so, for he instinctively knew that he would see nothing.

He could see his own reflection in the crystal, but nothing of the future. The whole thing, of course, was a spoof—a fraud. The Hindoo had been doing it very well, but there was nothing so very remarkable about it, after all.

Jerry's very appearance was an indication to any observant man that he had been brought up in a hot climate. And his speech, no doubt, had told the Indian that Australia had been his home. The description of Jerry's father was accurate in the main, but it would also have applied to many fellows' fathers—a chance shot that had gone home, Jerry told himself.

But he admired the Hindoo's cleverness, and he decided that he would give him five shillings. It was well worth it.

And then, while he was still gazing into the crystal, he felt a sudden sting on the back of the neck. It was like the bite of a mosquito, or a particularly aggressive gnat. Jerry put his hand up, but it collided with the Hindoo's. The latter had been waving his hands about in mystical, sinuous passes.

"Golly! That was a stinger!" said Jerry. "Did you see a fly just now?"

The Hindoo sighed.

"It is useless—thou wilt not assist me by keeping thy mind upon the crystal," he said regretfully. "But thou art young, and possibly thou dost not fully understand. I will trouble thee no longer, O my son!"

Jerry Dodd thoughtfully rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn't actually feel any sting now, but there was a curious tingling sensation beneath his skin. And something had come into his mind—something which rather startled him.

He remembered that occasion when he had fallen asleep on this very same bank. He knew that he had dreamed, for he had told Nelson Lee all about it. The dream had vanished from his mind—every incident of it—but he remembered the other circumstances.

And he knew that he had felt a sudden sting in his neck a short time before he had dozed off. He had believed it to be the bite of an insect, for it certainly felt like that. And this sting now was exactly the same.

Was this merely another coincidence?

Jerry was not quite sure. For, curiously enough, he felt somewhat drowsy. The sensation had crept over him during the last few moments. Or was it imagination? He shook himself lightly, and looked at the Indian.

"Well, it was very decent of you to entertain me," he said good-naturedly. "Thanks very much. Here's something for your trouble. You don't mind if I get on with my work now, do you?"

"Thou art generous, young sahib," exclaimed the Hindoo humbly. "Thou art giving me more silver than I deserve. Allah be praised! Thou wilt have great riches when thou art older, for one of thy noble heart can never be in want. My gratitude is great, O young master! I bid thee farewell."

Jerry nodded, and turned to his books. The Hindoo had replaced the crystal in his basket, and he now shuffled off across the grass, and disappeared in the direction of Bellton Wood. Jerry sat looking after the quaint figure in a thoughtful way. And that same drowsy feeling stole over him. The sun was quite warm, and the air mild. Just a little sleep would be very welcome.

Jerry lay back on the grassy bank, determined not to sleep. He would not give way to the inclination. His hands were clasped behind his head, and he stared up absently into the blue evening sky. He was in a dreamy, lazy, kind of mood, and he had already put the thought of the old Hindoo out of his mind.

He was thinking of St. Frank's. He wondered what Tom Burton was doing at the moment, and whether Study F was empty. He thought of all sorts of trivial and unimportant matters, and his mind was at complete rest.

But, almost subconsciously, he became aware that something was different. He couldn't quite bring certain things to mind. His brow was puckered, and he felt ridiculously absurd. For example, for the moment he had forgotten what the school was called.

He almost smiled at the absurdity of it. He was at school here, and he didn't know —— Then, abruptly, he pulled up. A moment before he had been thinking about a study, and some boys. What study? What boys? Jerry Dodd couldn't get hold of the thought again—it slipped away elusively, in a tantalising, will-o'-the-wisp fashion.

"By jings!" he muttered. "There's something wrong with my darned memory!"

It was too much trouble to sit up, and thoroughly to arouse himself. And so he lay there, still staring up at the sky, still aware that things were slipping away—slipping in the most aggravating manner.

He knew he had been thinking about some big building a minute before, but he couldn't remember what it was now—it had gone! It was really an extraordinary sensation, and Jerry didn't even attempt to explain it.

He only knew that he was very comfortable, and that he didn't want to trouble himself over anything. And then he imagined that he was floating, and that everything was serenely happy and well. Why should he trouble about anything? The floating sensation was most delightful, and Jerry felt that he would give a black eye to anybody who disturbed him.

And, in this contented frame of mind, his eyes closed, and he dozed off. His mind became a blank—everything was dim and far away. Somehow or other he didn't seem actually to sleep, but he was being rocked gently about, to and fro, and there was never any jar. Everything was most glorious.

But at last he seemed to dream. And in his dream he opened his eyes, and found himself in a little forest glade, where the sun shone down through tiny openings in the foliage overhead.

And there, in front of him, stood an Indian—a dark man of the East, attired in rich native robes. And, as Jerry Dodd sat up, the Hindoo salaamed respectfully. He looked suspiciously like the old fortune-teller—but Jerry Dodd had forgotten all about this incident now. In this queer dream of his he knew nothing of actualities.

"Arouse thyself, O Illustrious One!" exclaimed the Hindoo in deep, sonorous tones. "It is I, Rahzin, who would speak with thee. I am thy servant, and it is within thy power to order me as thou wilt!"

Jerry Dodd sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Why, yes!" he said. "I remember you now. We met here—in this same place. But I can't get the hang of things—I don't know what's happened in between!"

The Australian boy's hesitation was peculiar. He didn't know who he was, or anything about himself. He only knew that he had met Rahzin before—but never for a moment did he associate Rahzin with the old fortune-teller by the river bank. He had forgotten all about the river.

He only knew what had happened in that other "dream" of his. It had not been a dream at all, and this was no dream. The events were actually occurring, but Jerry Dodd hardly knew anything. He was in a peculiar state, and living in a world of unrealities and dreaminess.

The Hindoo salaamed again.

"Thou wilt come with me, O my young master!" he said gravely. "I will lead, and thou wilt follow. It is not wise that we should waste time. Come!"

Jerry rose to his feet rather unsteadily. He couldn't quite understand why he should obey this Indian so meekly. But, somehow or other, he couldn't quite prevent himself. His will power was not in its usual state.

"Say, just wait a minute——" he began.

"Come!" interrupted the Hindoo. "It is the wish of Allah!"

Jerry Dodd followed his companion through the wood. Everything seemed to be hazy and unreal to him. He tried to remember events of his past life, but could not do so. It almost seemed as though he were suffering from the effects of some intoxicating spirit. But nothing had passed his lips.

After a while the wood came to an end, and Jerry found himself staring over a wide expanse of grassland—a great plain with patches of gorse and heather here and there. He did not recognise the scene. Certainly he did not know that this was Bannington Moor. It might have been in Egypt for all he knew.

The Hindoo took certain precautions. He discarded his turban and donned a long rain-coat. From a distance he now looked quite an ordinary individual. And he and Jerry Dodd walked across the moor—the junior following Rahzin's lead without question.

Presently they came to a steep path which led downwards. They were, in fact, just on the edge of the old moor quarry, which had been disused and deserted for something like forty or fifty years. Not a soul was about.

"We will go this way, O my son!" said the Hindoo. "Come!

They went down the steep path. Jerry Dodd could remember nothing—except that he had been here before. His ordinary life he forgot—but he could remember the incidents which had occurred in his other "dream."

It seemed for a time that the pair were making for a blank wall of rock. But

when this was reached a little cleft was seen, with a tiny opening just out of sight. Rahzin led the way, and soon had a torch alight. Jerry Dodd followed, being quite indifferent to everything that happened. He was not even curious. His senses and his feelings were strangely and unaccountably numbed.

As on the previous occasion, the rock passage was not a long one. And after a quick turn, a wide cavern opened—it was, in fact, a kind of wide opening in the rock, with two walls of cliff rising up until they met in the darkness overhead.

A curious scene met Jerry Dodd's gaze.

There were two or three Indians here—all richly attired, and seated on soft cushions. The air was heavy with incense, and a charcoal brazier was glowing. There were strange little lamps, too, which gave the cavern a weird, strange light.

"He is here, O Great Master!" said Rahzin.

He addressed the eldest of the other Indians—a man who possessed a flowing grey beard, and whose eyes were deep set and intensely piercing. He was undoubtedly the most important individual present. Jerry looked upon him as the High Priest.

"It is well, O Rahzin!" said the old man. "Thou hast carried out thy orders in a fitting manner. Bring the boy here. It is my will to question him."

Jerry Dodd was taken over, and compelled to stand in front of the bearded Indian.

"No harm will come to thee, O youth!" said the High Priest. "Dost thou remember being here on a previous occasion?"

"Yes," replied Jerry. "But everything else seems kind of vague. I figure that I'm lost—I don't know a darned thing. Where was I before this fellow met me in the wood?"

"It is not for thee to be curious—and thou must ask no questions," replied the High Priest. "It is thy duty to answer. Thou wilt understand many things when thou art older. For the present it is not well for thee to understand."

"But——"

"Be silent!" interrupted the old man. "I wish to question thee with regard to an image—a golden representation of our great god, Rhoon. Hast thou seen this image?"

Jerry Dodd scratched his head.

"Something like that one over there?" he asked, pointing towards a wooden idol which occupied a corner of the cavern—a hideous affair, grossly painted, and with two large glittering red eyes.

"Even so!" replied the High Priest. "It is as the one thou hast indicated—but small, and far more costly. Perchance thou hast seen this idol?"

"No, I've never seen it!" replied Jerry.

He was speaking the truth, as far as he knew. He had no recollection of the image—he did not know that he had found the thing in his pocket, and that he had handed it over to Nelson Lee. That portion of his life was a blank.

"Perhaps I can remind thee," went on the old man. "When thou wert here last, thou didst slip upon one of the mats. Is thy memory good?"

"Why, yes—I sort of recollect that," said Jerry, frowning. "But it's all so blame strange—I don't kind of know what has come over me. It don't seem that I'm really livin'. I feel as though I'm floatin' around, and before long I shall wake up."

"Perchance thou art right," said the High Priest. "But thou dost remember falling?"

"Sure," said Jerry. "I slipped over, and knocked a few things down, too. An' I remember gettin' hold of somethin' heavy—a little brown thing which I didn't rightly see——"

"Ah! Then we are getting at the truth!" said the High Priest, bending forward. "Thou didst have the sacred image in thine hand. Think, O youth. Didst thou put that image away somewhere upon thy person?"

"I—I don't remember," said Jerry. "I had the thing in my hand—I've got that bit all right. But whether I stuffed it in my pocket I can't say. Since you've lost it, I daresay I did."

The brown-skinned men looked at one another, exchanging glances.

"The boy has it, O Great Master!" said Rahzin. "It is well!"

"He shall be searched," said the High Priest.

Jerry Dodd was searched. The Indians did their work thoroughly, but they had no reward. For the search proved futile. There was no sign of the golden image.

"It is useless to keep the boy here," said the High Priest grimly. "He knows nothing—he has placed the image in some spot of safety, no doubt. But he cannot tell us of this—until later. It is thy duty, Rahzin, to obtain the information."

Rahzin was alarmed.

"It shall be done, Great Master!" he said humbly.

Jerry Dodd's arm was seized, and he was led out of the strange cavern. Once more he found himself in the daylight, which was dazzling bright after the gloom of the cavern. The evening was warm and mild, although the sun was hidden behind a bank of fleecy clouds.

It was not long before the pair had crossed the moor, and were once again within the deep recesses of the wood.

They passed through the trees, Rahzin leading the way, and making no sound. And at length they arrived in that tiny glade.

"Thou wilt sit down," said Rahzin. "Rest, my son—rest!"

Jerry Dodd obediently laid down on the grassy bank, and he felt extremely drowsy and peaceful. Somehow or other everything was becoming confused. He couldn't remember things properly. The adventure in the cavern was even becoming vague and indistinct. And, now and again, he had faint glimpses of other figures—schoolboys. He seemed to be passing out of one mood of life into another. It was a curious sensation, and Jerry's brain was not in a very active state just then. He only wanted to lay back and take his ease. Thinking on any subject was too much trouble.

His eyes closed, and he went off into a vague kind of sleep—which was not actually sleep, but rather more like unconsciousness. And everything became dim and black.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF A CLUE.

THE sun shone again, and Jerry Dodd felt its rays warmly beating down upon his outstretched form. He lay quite still, very comfortable, wondering where he was, and what had been happening. Opening his eyes, he saw the clear blue sky, and one or two fleecy clouds. He could also see the upper branches of a willow tree, rustling slightly in the breeze. In his ears there was the gentle rippling of water.

But his mind was filled with strange thoughts—he could picture Hindoos wearing rich robes, a strange cavern with quaint lamps, and a brazier filled with glowing charcoal. Then, suddenly, he woke up.

"By jings!" he muttered blankly. "I must have been dreamin'!"

He felt rather angry with himself, and he had no recollection of that former dream his. This one was exactly similar in all respects, but Jerry did not remember. There was something very curious about all this.

"What was that chap's name—Rahzin, I believe!" he muttered. "Why, yes! What a darned ass I am! It was that old Hindoo fortune-teller—he made me dream like this!"

Even while Jerry was thinking in this way, a figure appeared from behind a clump of trees. A hobbling figure, attired in rags and tatters, with an old basket slung over his shoulders, and with a turban on his head. It was the old Hindoo fortune-teller, and he was approaching Jerry Dodd with weary footsteps.

The junior felt like kicking himself. He remembered his experience before he had slept. He remembered how the old Hindoo had gazed into the crystal. Of course, that business had caused Dodd to fall asleep, and to dream about Indians—there could be no other explanation. Not for a moment did he believe that his recent adventure had been no dream at all.

The old fortune-teller came up, and bowed low.

"I crave your pardon, young sir," he said humbly. "I regret disturbing thee again, but perchance thou might be able to help me in a great difficulty."

Jerry Dodd looked at the man with a frown.

"It's all very well for you to come buzzing round here," he growled. "What about my work? I fell asleep because of you, and I've been dreamin' all sorts of darned silly things."

The Hindoo allowed his face to relax into a smile for a second.

"It is natural for young boys to dream," he replied. "It has done thee no harm, my young master. Thou wert good to me, and I have been bold enough to return, hoping that thou wilt be able to assist me."

"I've already given you five shillings—"

"Nay, I am not asking for money," put in the old fortune-teller quickly. "Thou hast been generous to a degree, O my son. But I am sorely troubled. I have lost something which is of greater value to me than all the money thou hast. I have been unfortunate enough to lose a little image, representing the god of Rhoon—worth much to me."

Jerry Dodd started.

"Oh, that little idol!" he said. "By jings! I was dreamin' about that, too. All sorts of things seem to have got mixed up. I found that idol in my pocket the other day, and I couldn't understand——"

"But thou hast got it?"

"Well, I know where it is," said Jerry.

"Allah be praised!" murmured the old fortune-teller. "The little imago is my property, O young sir. I dropped it three days since, when I was wandering through the fields. If thou wilt return it to me thou wilt do me a wondrous service."

"But even now I can't get the hang of it!" said Jerry Dodd, in a puzzled voice. "How could that idol have got into my pocket without me knowing it? You say you dropped it?"

"It is even as thou sayest," replied the Indian. "And it is not mysterious, as thou would think. Perchance thou picked up the image when thy mind was on other matters. It was slipped into thy pocket unconsciously. Such things are possible."

"Well, I suppose they are," said Jerry, nodding. "And that's about the truth, I figure. I must have picked the thing up and put it in my pocket without knowing. I'll allow I'm a bit absent-minded when I'm thinkin'. An' it stands to reason that the image must be your property. I'll let you have it back."

"Thou wilt be rewarded by a greater power than I," murmured the fortune-teller softly.

Jerry Dodd thought for a moment or two. Of course, it was quite clear to him now. The Hindoo had caused him to dream, and it was not unnatural that the idol should have appeared in the dream, too.

Jerry was greatly relieved, for he had been worrying to a certain extent. The mystery of the image was cleared up now, and he would be able to return it to its rightful owner.

"I didn't know what the thing was, or who it belonged to," went on Jerry. "So I gave it to one of the masters, and he's keepin' it for me. If you like, I'll run up to the school and fetch it."

The Hindoo bowed.

"Thou art generous," he said gravely. "I shall never be able to reward thee for this service, O my son. If thou wilt do as thou sayest, my happiness will be complete. Thou wilt go now?"

"Yes, now at once," replied the Australian boy. "It won't take me long to run back. You just sit here and wait for me—I don't suppose I shall be more than twenty minutes. Anyway, wait till I show up."

And without waiting for the other to reply, Jerry Dodd set off across the meadows in the direction of the playing fields. His dream was still fairly clear in his mind—although, somehow, it seemed to him that it was growing rather dim.

Arriving at the playing fields, he hurried across, rather envious of the fellows who were at cricket practice. In a moment or two he was in the Triangle, and he went into the Ancient House, and made his way straight to Nelson Lee's study.

Fortunately, the detective was there, and he looked up with interest as Jerry entered the room.

"Ah, Dodd, come in—you are always welcome," said Nelson Lee, genially. "You've come to me about some little problem."

"Well, hardly that, sir," said Jerry. "The fact is, I've found out who that image belongs to, and I want you to hand it over, so that I can restore it to the rightful owner. That's all, sir."

Nelson Lee looked at Jerry Dodd curiously.

"And who is the rightful owner?" he enquired.

"A kind of Hindoo fortune-teller, sir," replied Jerry. "The poor chap is starvin', pretty nearly. Goes about in rags and tatters, lookin' like a scarecrow. You know, sir—one of those fake chaps, with a crystal, and all the rest of it."

"A Hindoo!" said Nelson Lee keenly. "You have met this man?"

"Sure, sir. At first I thought it a bit queer," said Jerry. "I remembered that talk of ours about India and Burmah. But I don't figure there's any connection. This fellow is just a harmless fortune-teller."

"That may be so, Dodd, but we must investigate the matter carefully," said Nelson Lee. "In the first place, tell me about this meeting."

"I don't reckon there's much to tell, sir," replied Jerry. "I was sittin' by the river in my usual place, when the guy happened along. I didn't want to be bothered, but he insisted on tellin' my fortune. I gave him five bob, and off he went. Then I reckon I must have fallen asleep. Because I dreamed——"

"Dear me!" interrupted Lee. "You dreamed, eh? On what subject?"

Jerry Dodd grinned somewhat sheepishly.

"I didn't figure on tellin' you that, sir," he said. "It was a real jumble of nonsense. I saw that fortune-teller in the wood, all dressed up. He took me to a cavern where there were other Hindoos, and incense burning, and the rest of it. There was nothin' in it, sir. Just one of those silly dreams a chap suffers from sometimes."

Nelson Lee did not reply for a moment. He knew well enough that this was no dream—and he was rather surprised to find that Jerry Dodd was quite unsuspicious of the truth.

"Well?" he said at last. "What happened when you awoke?"

"Why, that old Hindoo came back, sir," replied Jerry. "He mentioned the idol, and asked me if I could help him. Of course, I told him about the image, and said I'd deliver it back. He lost it in the fields, and I suppose I must have picked it up."

"Just wait a moment, Dodd," said Nelson Lee. "Tell me some more about this dream."

"Say, there's nothin' much to tell," replied Jerry. "They asked me about this idol in the dream—but there's nothin' in that. I can't quite get the hang of it now—it's sort of slipped away. I don't know how I got to this cavern, although I remember goin' through a forest, and then on to a plain."

Nelson Lee looked keen.

"Through a forest, and on to a plain!" he repeated. "That is quite interesting, Dodd. Now there is one thing I want to ask you. Did this Hindoo give you anything to smell—a bottle of scent, for example."

"Why, no, sir."

"Did he burn any incense?"

"Nothin' like that, sir," replied Jerry, rather surprised.

"Possibly you think it strange that I should ask these questions," went on Lee. "But I have an excellent reason for doing so, Dodd. I don't wish to startle you, but I have every reason to believe that you were drugged in some way."

"Drugged!" gasped Jerry.

"Exactly," said Lee. "Is it natural for you to sleep in broad daylight? Do you usually fall into a doze while you are at your work?"

"No, sir—I've never done it before," said the junior. "At least, there was only one other occasion, and that was when I had the other dream."

"Do you remember that first dream?"

"Not a thing about it?" said Jerry Dodd. "An' it is a bit queer, now you put it like that. It didn't seem like a real sleep, sir—I sort of faded off, if you know what I mean. Everything became dim and strange—not a bit like a real sleep. But there was no mistake about the dream."

"Well, we'll leave that till later," said Nelson Lee. "At the moment I am anxious to arrive at some solution concerning your strange sleep—which I believe, was induced by a drug. You positively assure me that this Hindoo fortune-teller did not drug you?"

"He didn't do anythin'—by jings!" Jerry Dodd suddenly came to a halt, and stared. "There was somethin' I couldn't understand, sir," he went on. "When I was lookin' into that darned crystal I felt a sting on the back of my neck, but I thought it was caused by a fly."

"Ah!" said Lee. "A sting, eh? Was it painful?"

"Well, not exactly, sir—a kind of sharp prick."

"Now, this is very important, Dodd," said Lee, bending forward. "Do you remember receiving a sting of that kind on the previous occasion?"

"Jumpin' kangaroos!" said Jerry, starting. "You're right, sir—dead true on the mark! I do remember a sting like that. But there was nobody near me then—I was absolutely alone."

"A matter of small importance," exclaimed Nelson Lee briskly. "A blow-pipe, no doubt, and a tiny dart. And this evening the Hindoo fortune-teller pricked your neck with his own hand. My boy, you were drugged on both occasions."

"But—but why?" asked the bewildered junior.

"I cannot possibly answer that question—at the moment," said Nelson Lee. "But we are getting nearer to the truth, Dodd. These dreams of yours are more significant than you seem to imagine. Let me look at your neck."

Jerry Dodd was willing enough, and Nelson Lee picked up a small magnifying lens, and closely examined the back of Jerry Dodd's neck. Under the powerful glass he could distinctly find a tiny puncture, the skin being slightly puffy and red in the immediate vicinity. Without the glass the place could hardly be seen. Lee could find no trace of the former puncture.

"I am going to hurt you a trifle, Dodd," said Nelson Lee. "But you must not mind."

The junior wondered what was going to happen. Nelson Lee opened a drawer, and removed a small glittering steel instrument. Jerry Dodd was somewhat startled.

"I figure on gettin' the wind up, sir!" he said uneasily.

"That's all right, Dodd—it will soon be over!" smiled Nelson Lee.

The next moment Jerry felt a sharp

twinge at the back of his neck. It was not half so bad as he had expected. And when he looked round he found that Nelson Lee was gazing at a small piece of clear glass. Upon this glass Jerry could see one or two drops of blood. The blood had just been extracted from his neck.

"I intend to analyse this specimen of your blood, Dodd," said Nelson Lee cheerfully. "It may lead to important developments. I should advise you to say nothing to the other boys—keep this matter to yourself."

"But why was I drugged, sir?" asked Dodd, mystified. "What's the idea of it? I reckon I'm more puzzled than I can say."

"There must be some explanation, and we shall arrive at it sooner or later," said the detective. "You may know nothing of any Indians or Burmese, Dodd, but it is quite clear that they know something about you. I am getting on the track of the mystery now, and I want you to leave the matter in my hands."

"Sure, sir!" said Jerry readily. "But what about the idol? I promised to take it back to the old Hindoo."

"There is not the slightest doubt, Dodd, that you were drugged on this occasion for the express purpose of finding out where the idol was," said Lee. "The fortune-teller is not quite so innocent as you appear to imagine. I suspect that it is merely a pose, assumed for the sole purpose of deceiving you. You will go back to the man and tell him that he is at perfect liberty to have the image, but he must come to the school for it and apply to me personally."

Jerry nodded.

"I've got you, sir," he said. "You want to have a look at the man yourself? But couldn't you come down with me——"

"No; that wouldn't suit my purpose, my boy," interrupted Lee. "I do not suppose for a moment that your Hindoo friend will present himself at the school. Go back to him and tell him, and report to me later. I shall be absent for the next hour or so."

Jerry Dodd went off, and when he arrived at the little hollow by the riverside, he found the Hindoo fortune-teller still there. The man rose to his feet as Jerry approached, and his dark eyes were burning with eagerness.

"My gratitude is overwhelming, O young master!" he murmured. "Thou art a true friend——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Jerry. "I haven't got the thing."

"Thou hast not brought it?" repeated the Hindoo sharply.

"Awfully sorry, chum, but it couldn't be done!" explained Jerry. "Mr. Lee, of the Ancient House, has got the image in his possession, and he says that if you want it, you can go up to the school. He'll let you have it at once."

The fortune-teller stood quite still, his eyes blazing. Then he muttered quickly and fiercely in a language which Jerry did not understand. It was quite obvious that he was giving vent to a few expressions of disappointment.

"It's not my fault," said Jerry. "Mr. Lee wouldn't give me the image, but it doesn't make any difference. You've only to go to the school——"

"Thou hast deceived me!" muttered the Hindoo fiercely. "By the will of Allah, thou shalt suffer!"

He turned on his heel and strode away, leaving Jerry Dodd looking after him wonderingly. The Hindoo did not seem to hobble so much now, and he went off towards the wood; and after he had plunged into the thick trees, a second figure, quite unseen, followed. That figure belonged to Nelson Lee.

He was on the track!

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISE FOR THE REMOVE!

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD scowled.

"Just our rotten luck!" he grunted. "We haven't done anythin' right ever since this bally term commenced!"

"Well, it was your own fancy," said Gulliver. "I distinctly told you to put your money on Golden Blaze, and you scoffed at that. You wouldn't even back him for a place. Instead, you put all your tin on Waterlily."

"Well, Waterlily was favourite!" snapped Fullwood unpleasantly.

"Favourites don't always win," put in Bell. "Just fancy Golden Blaze comin' home first at a hundred to seven! By gad, if we'd have risked ten bob each way on Golden Blaze, we should have got quids an' quids——"

"What's the good of talkin'?" demanded Fullwood harshly. "It's always easy to be wise after the event!"

"Rats! I was wise before the event!" interrupted Gulliver. "Didn't I say Golden Blaze——"

"Then why didn't you back the bally goo-goe?" asked Fullwood.

"Because you said——"

"Oh, hang! Give it a rest!"

The rascally chums of Study A were in an extremely irritable mood. They had been indulging in the doubtful pastime of backing horses—which, of course, was a very severe crime at St. Frank's. But Fullwood & Co. considered themselves to be "gay dogs," and they thought it very sporty to have a little flutter now and again.

Occasionally these flutters were profitable, but in most cases Fullwood & Co. were the losers. They had lost fairly heavily to-day, and their tempers were by no means improved. Their supplies of ready cash had disappeared into the deep pockets of Mr. Porlock, of the White Harp Inn, in Bolton. Mr. Porlock was the landlord, and he also carried on the business of a bookmaker as a side line.

Fullwood & Co. were now on their way to the village, just to make doubly sure that they had really "gone down." It was late evening, and would soon be getting quite dark. Even now it was dim and gloomy in the confined lane, where the high trees overshadowed the road.

Fullwood & Co. marched on sullenly, not caring to speak to one another; for they knew that they would quarrel, and that wouldn't do any good at all. Gulliver was particularly sore, because he had put all his money—at Fullwood's advice—on a horse which he didn't fancy.

Certainly, Fullwood had done his best; but risking money on horse-racing is always an extremely foolish speculation. For every man who wins there are dozens who lose.

As the three juniors were walking along, Fullwood suddenly came to a halt, his eyes glittering. Just ahead, a figure had appeared from a gap in the hedge, and Fullwood instinctively drew his chums back into the shadows.

"What's the game, you ass?"

"Shush!" muttered Fullwood. "It's Dodd, that Australian cad!"

"Oh!"

"I owe him one!" went on Fullwood savagely. "I don't forget the way he made that rotten pony of his grab my shoulder. I feel like hitting somebody now, just to relieve my feelin's. We'll collar this rotter an' half-slaughter him!"

"Good wheeze!" murmured Bell. "We can pay him out an' we can ease off our feelin's at the same time. The three of us ought to be able to do the job thoroughly!"

"We are goin' to do it thoroughly!" said Fullwood grimly. "Get ready!"

They held themselves back, and Jerry Dodd came unconcernedly up the lane, his books under one arm. He had put in some more time at his studies, hoping to forget all about the incident of the Hindoo fortune-teller. He had certainly forgotten the "dream," but not the other part of his adventure.

And now he was coming along with his thoughts far distant from his immediate surroundings. Without warning, three figures sprang out at him, and were on him almost before he knew what had happened.

"Get him down!"

Jerry Dodd found himself lying on his back in the dust within a few seconds. He had had no time to put up any show of resistance. The attack had been unexpected, and Jerry Dodd hardly knew who the three were during the first moments. He had wild visions of Hindoos and men of that type, but the voices of his captors told him the truth.

"By jingo!" he gasped. "What's the game?"

"Now, my fine Australian rabbit, you're going to get it in the neck!" said Fullwood grimly. "We've got you here, and we're going to give you beans!"

"Say, it's Fullwood!" ejaculated Jerry wonderingly. "What's the game? I don't think I've done anythin' to deserve this!"

"I mean to pay you out for the way you treated me the other day!" snapped Fullwood. "Understand? You're a rotten, low down outsider, and you're a disgrace to the whole school! We're going to show you what we think of you!"

"Hear, hear!" said Gulliver.

"I'll tell you what," added Bell. "What's wrong with rolling him in the dust, and then cramming a handful of it down his throat?"

"Good idea!" said Fullwood. "We'll do it!"

"I reckon you're figurin' on doin' a whole heap," said Jerry Dodd calmly. "I don't fancy I'm goin' to be wiped up by three knock-kneed guys like you!"

Jerry Dodd was quite amused now. And as Fullwood and Co. held him tight, they suddenly found themselves dealing with a bunch of springs. The Australian boy became intensely active, and his captors were startled. Gulliver went

flying, and Fullwood and Bell clung desperately to their prisoner. It is practically certain that Jerry Dodd would have flung them off easily. But this was not necessary.

For an interruption came.

At a short distance it seemed that Jerry Dodd was engaged in a life and death struggle with three powerful adversaries. In the gloom it was impossible to see very much. And before the captive could get himself completely free, two forms loomed up out of the dimness.

One was huge and towering, and the other absurdly small.

In fact, Messrs. Podge and Midge had appeared upon the scene. It was Mr. Podge who did all the work. He sailed in like an angry elephant.

Fullwood was grasped from behind. He howled with terror, for he was lifted right off his feet, hurled whirling through the air, to alight on the top of the hedge, where he sprawled momentarily helpless, and with a hundred or so prickles penetrating his clothing.

Bell was caught up in the same way, but he went in a different direction. There was a ditch on the other side of the road, and Bell went flying into it, and landed with a sickly squelch in the bottom.

During the winter months this ditch was a deep one, filled with flowing water. At mid-summer it was quite dry, and choked with weeds. But now, just at the beginning of June, it was in a condition which could scarcely be described as pleasant. Most of the water had drained away, leaving only a tiny trickle. But the mud was there; this had not yet dried up. The bottom of the ditch was filled with thick, sticky mud nearly eighteen inches deep.

Bell sat into this with terrible results He practically disappeared under the oozing, slimy mess. He gasped and spluttered and made vain attempts to get out. But the mud held him down, and the more he tried to lift himself, the muddier he became.

Jerry Dodd stood up, dusty, but quite unhurt.

"Thanks!" he said breathlessly. "I think I could have managed all right, but I guess I'm much obliged."

Mr. Podge looked round him somewhat regretfully. Perhaps he wanted some other victims to deal with—to fling about like ninepins. But Gulliver had fled up the road, thoroughly scared.

"It is our duty!" said Mr. Podge, glaring down at Jerry Dodd. "When you are in trouble, young man, we will be at hand. Remember, Podge and Midge are your friends!"

"Always ready to help you!" put in Mr. Midge nervously.

"But you must beware—you must be on your guard!" said Mr. Podge mysteriously. "Dangers surround you, Dodd, and not for one moment will you be safe."

"I don't reckon I understand!" said Jerry, staring at the world's deadliest sleuths in real astonishment. "Who are you, anyway?"

"That is not a matter that need concern you," puffed Mr. Podge. "But remember, we are your friends, and will keep you from all dangers."

"But you said, a minute ago, that I shouldn't be safe for a moment!"

"Tut, tut!" said Mr. Podge. "A quibble—an absurd quibble! The danger would be deadlier if we were not at hand, but with Mr. Midge and myself near by, you have nothing to fear. We will guard you!"

"With our lives!" said Mr. Midge stoutly.

And, without another word, the extraordinary pair vanished. They burst through a gap in the hedge, and passed out of sight. By this time Fullwood had managed to get down from the hedge, and Bell was just crawling out of the ditch. In their own different ways they presented remarkable appearances.

Fullwood was always noted for his smartness, and this evening he had been particularly neatly attired. He was now a wreck. His clothing was torn in a hundred places, his collar was unbuttoned, and his necktie flying loose. He looked more like a scarecrow than a junior schoolboy.

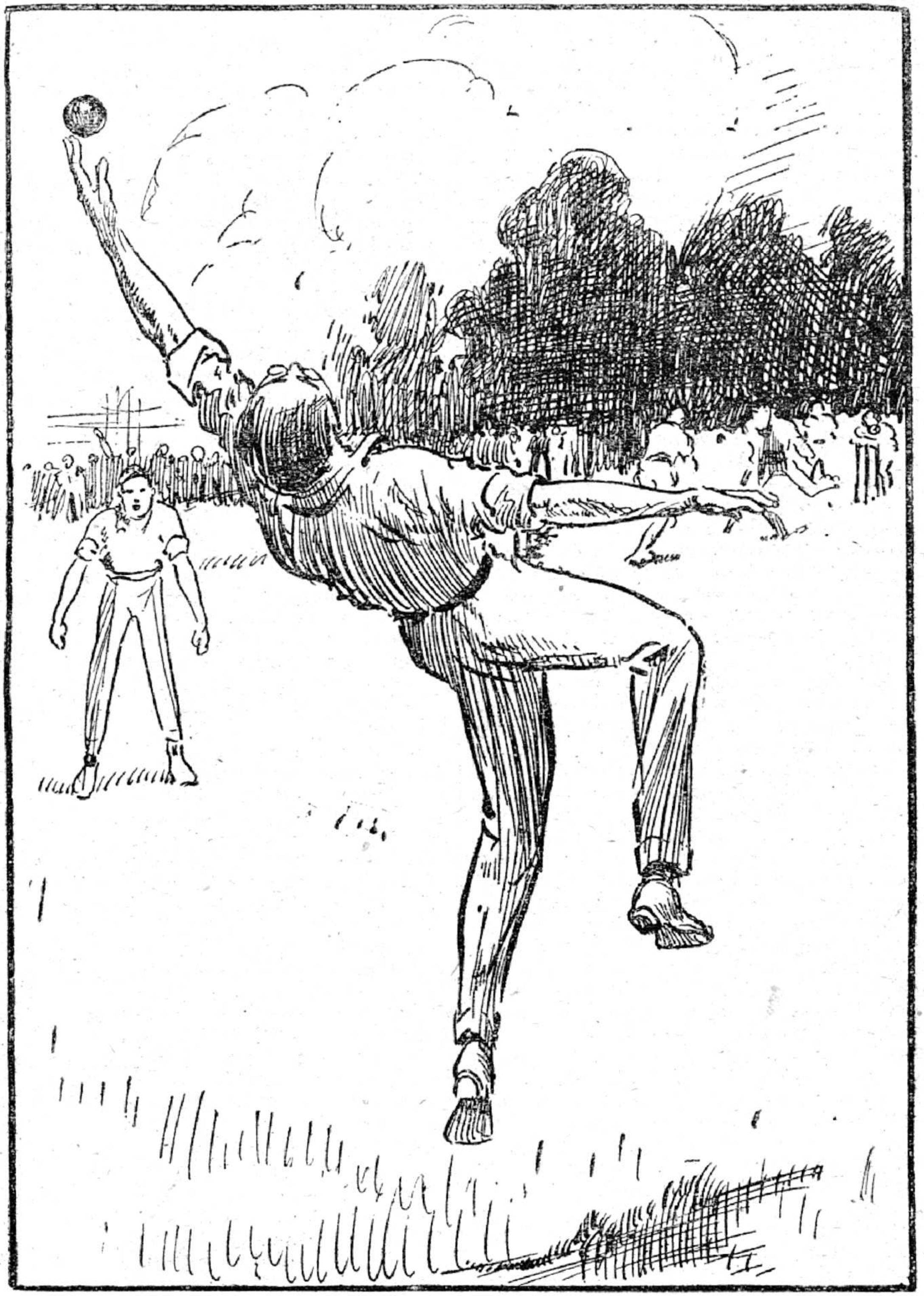
Exactly what Bell resembled would be difficult to state. He had practically disappeared beneath a coating of evil-smelling mud, and as he crawled through the grass he left a slimy trail behind him.

"By gad!" gasped Fullwood. "Who—who were they?"

Nobody answered him. Bell was incapable of doing so, and Jerry Dodd was still staring at the gap in the hedge. And just then Handforth and Church and I appeared. We were coming up from the village, and we looked about us at the scene with wondering eyes.

"Hullo!" said Handforth. "What's happened here?"

"I reckon I'm in a bit of a puzzle over it," said Jerry Dodd. "Fullwood and his two chums fancied they'd get lively, and



Tucker made a tremendous effort, leaped high into the air, and just clutched the leather with the finger-tips of his left hand.

they took me by surprise—fairly got me down. But I don't figure it was my intention to remain down for long."

"Great Scott!" said Church. "Did you do this to 'em? And what's happened to Gulliver—have you murdered him, and concealed the body?"

Jerry Dodd grinned.

"The queerest guys I ever set eyes on lent me a hand," he explained. "They came through the hedge suddenly, and—well, this happened!"

Handforth burst into a roar.

"It jolly well served the cads right!" he declared. "It's just like them to play a dirty trick of that sort—three on to one. They got what they asked for. Fullwood looks just about ready to be stuck in the middle of a cornfield!"

"The—the rotten ruffians!" snarled Fullwood. "I'm going to report this matter to the Head——"

"I don't fancy you will," I interrupted. "Your own part in the affair wouldn't do you much credit, Fullwood. Bell seems to have turned himself into a mud heap, by the look of him. Phew! Keep away from me, for goodness sake! My word! What an aroma!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth faintly.

The unfortunate Bell had come rather close, and the mud which smothered him was certainly not of an exceedingly attractive odour.

"Somebody's going to pay for this!" sputtered Bell, almost in tears. "Oh, my goodness! I'm nearly dead! This frightful stuff will poison me! I shall faint in a minute!"

"Rats!" I grinned. "The best thing you can do is to rush into the Triangle, and duck yourself in the fountain; that suit is ruined, anyway. After you've got the worst of it off, you can go and have a bath."

Bell managed to get to his feet, and he staggered off up the lane. And Ralph Leslie Fullwood, after uttering a few idle threats, followed his example. Jerry Dodd remained with us, rather amused.

"The asses thought they'd best me,' he said. "I think I could have dealt with 'em all right—but then those two men came up—the most amazin' freaks you ever set eyes on."

"What were they like?" I asked curiously.

"Why, one was a big, stout man, and the other a little tiny——"

"Podge and Midge!" said Handforth, eagerly.

"Eh?"

"Who?"

"Podge and Midge, the famous detectives!" said Handforth, pleased at the sensation he was causing. "I know them—I was introduced to them just after tea. In fact, I'm going to help in their investigations—when I find out what they are."

"Podge and Midge!" I repeated blankly "What's the joke? Detectives? I've never heard of any detectives named that—and I think I'm acquainted with most of the guv'nor's rivals. How did you come to meet them?"

Handforth described the incident of the pea-shooter, and we yelled with laughter. And we fairly howled when Handforth showed us the card which Mr. Podge had presented. The hero of study D couldn't quite see the joke.

"What's all the cackling about?" he demanded warmly. "There's nothing funny about that card——"

"My dear chap, it's the funniest thing I've seen for years!" I gasped, holding my sides. "The Deadliest Sleuths on Earth! Oh, my only hat!"

"They ought to do well on the music-halls," grinned Church. "Podge is about as fat as two barrels, and you could put Midge in your giddy pocket! And just look at their address on the card—that's spoof. Wrotland Yard! There ain't such a place."

I grinned.

"I believe there is," I replied. "It's a little mews, somewhere off Oxford Street. To be quite correct, I think it's called Wrotland's Yard, but these prize detectives have altered it for their own purpose, so that it looks like Scotland Yard. Perhaps they've turned one of the stables into an office!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We continued laughing at the card, and at Handforth's description of the wonderful pair. And then we strolled up to the school, and were soon in our respective studies, settling down to prep.

I had a word with Nelson Lee before bedtime, and I found him in a very thoughtful mood. He told me of Jerry Dodd's latest adventure, and hinted that he had made one or two important discoveries, which, however, he kept to himself.

I was certainly interested in Jerry Dodd's peculiar adventures, but I was far more interested in his qualifications as a cricketer. And I had already come to one definite decision.

And when Saturday morning arrived I got hold of Jerry as soon as he came downstairs. He was looking bright and cheerful

as usual, but there were one or two lines about his eyes which told their own story. He had met with no further adventures, but had buried himself in his studies.

"You've been working too hard, my son," I said severely. "That sort of thing won't do—you'll go stale if you keep it up. What you need is some recreation—a jolly good game of cricket, for example."

Jerry's eyes sparkled.

"By jings! That would suit me real proper!" he declared. "But I don't reckon it could be done. It's no good——"

"What you've got to do is to go straight to the headmaster and board him in his den," I said grimly. "Understand? Put it before him in as few words as possible. Say you've been working like a nigger, and you need a change. Tell him any old thing you like, but don't leave his study without permission to play in this afternoon's match."

"I'm afraid it won't work, chum," said Jerry, shaking his head. "And I can't very well play against the Head's orders."

"Well, it wouldn't be a crime if you did," I said. "Buzz along now—he hasn't had breakfast, yet, and he's always in a good temper when he first gets up—the Head's different to most other men in that way."

Jerry Dodd went off, for he, too, was most anxious to play in the match against Bannington Grammar School. He arrived at Dr. Stafford's study, and tapped upon the door. He was invited to enter, and did so. The Head was seated near the open window, glancing over the morning paper.

"Why, my boy, this is an early visit," he exclaimed smoothly. "Come in, Dodd—come over here. I understand from Mr. Lee that you are getting on very well, and that you are more than fulfilling your father's high hopes of you. Your progress has been rapid, and I need not tell you how pleased I am."

"Thanks very much, sir," said Jerry, awkwardly. "I've always been a bit of a duffer at books, but I've kind of taken to it since I came to this school."

"And do you know why, Dodd?" asked the Head. "No? Then I will tell you. Because you have devoted yourself entirely to your studies—because you have not allowed your mind to concentrate its force upon cricket and other outdoor games. It seems very hard to you, perhaps, that cricket should be forbidden in your case. But it is your father's wish—and your father was wise. Do you think you would have advanced in your studies so far, if you had played cricket with the other boys?"

Jerry Dodd was rather taken aback.

"Well, sir, I reckon I should have done better," he stammered.

"Nonsense, my dear boy—that won't do!" smiled the Head, kindly. "You would not have given the time and thought to your studies that you have done. Indeed, it would have been impossible. You must keep it up for the rest of this term, and you will see how you get on."

Dismay was written clearly upon Jerry Dodd's countenance.

"But—but Mr. Crowell told me to take this afternoon off, sir," he said. "I've been doing enough work this week, and Mr. Crowell said I ought to have a rest."

"Exactly—I heartily agree with your Form-master," said the Head. "It is an excellent idea for you to take an easy afternoon to-day, Dodd. It will serve to recuperate your brain, and you will be fit for further serious study on Monday."

"Then—then I can go, sir?" asked Dodd, eagerly.

"Go?" repeated the Head. "Go where?"

"Out this afternoon, sir——"

"Most certainly you can go out this afternoon," said Dr. Stafford pleasantly. "You must take it very quietly, Dodd. You must get hold of a light book, and settle yourself in a shady corner somewhere—or, better still, have a good sleep in the sun. And avoid all strenuous exercise. That will do you more harm than good."

Jerry swallowed rather hard.

"I—I was thinking about cricket, sir," he blurted out. "Nipper kind of figures that he wants me in the team," he went on hurriedly. "Just for this afternoon, sir—the match against Bannington Grammar School. I'd love it, sir. It would do me more good than——"

"Stop!" interrupted the Head, frowning. "I'm very sorry, Dodd, but I positively forbid this. I've already told you that you must only indulge in quiet recreation, and not in the strenuous, hard work of cricket. For cricket is hard work, and if you took part in this match you would be fit for nothing afterwards. I'm sorry, my boy, but I cannot give you my permission."

"But——"

"No, Dodd, it is quite useless for you to argue," said the Head firmly. "You must not play cricket this afternoon—that is final. Possibly it is a disappointment for you but you will soon get over that."

Jerry Dodd walked out of the study disconsolately, and I knew the verdict

at once as soon as he appeared in the lobby. I had half expected it.

"No go?" I asked briskly.

"The Head won't allow me to play," said Jerry, with a long face.

"The old dragon!" I declared. "Well, never mind. I daresay we shall get on all right. I've got the list of follows all made out, and I'll pin it up. There are only ten names, but I'll add the eleventh later on."

I took a sheet of paper out of my pocket, and pinned it to the notice-board.

"Say, chum, you don't seem upset a heap," said Jerry. "I thought you were rather counting on me this afternoon."

"So I was, but it's no good crying over spilt milk," I said calmly. "A cricket captain must be prepared for disappointments. I expect I shall be able to find another fellow who'll help us to win."

Several other juniors came round, and looked at the notice on the board. It was quite a brief one, and ran as follows:

"Return match at Bannington: St. Frank's Juniors against Bannington Grammar School Juniors. The Eleven will consist of: Pitt, De Valerie, Tregellis-West, Watson, Nipper, Handforth, Grey, Christine, Yorke, Oldfield and——"

There was a blank space instead of the eleventh name, for I had been hoping to fill that blank in with "Dodd." Now, of course, it was impossible.

"Who's the eleventh man?" asked Handforth, turning round.

"Not selected yet," I said. "I'll put the name on later"

"What's wrong with me?" asked Owen major. "It's about time I had a chance in the eleven."

"Rats! I can play better than you any day!" shouted Simons.

There was quite an argument in the lobby until the breakfast bell rang. Everybody wanted to know who the eleventh man would be, but I said nothing. As a matter of fact, I was not yet certain as to which name I should put down. After morning lessons, however, I came to a decision.

I strolled into the lobby shortly afterwards, and found a crowd of juniors round the notice-board chuckling hugely.

"Oh, here's Nipper!" shouted Owen major. "I say, Nipper, some silly ass has been messing about with this notice of yours."

"Oh!" I said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Why, look at the last name on the list!" grinned Hubbard. "Some fathead has put down Timothy Tucker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He knows as much about cricket as an elephant knows about flying!"

"Who is the eleventh man, anyway?"

I pushed forward and looked at the notice.

"Well, that's my handwriting, any way," I remarked.

"Oh, don't rot!" said Pitt. "You didn't put Tucker's name down."

"Yes, I did!" I said calmly.

"What?"

"Tucker!"

"That—that silly ass—in the eleven!"

I looked round calmly.

"There's the name, and you can make what you like of it," I said. "I'm cricket skipper, and I've chosen that name to put down. I expected it would cause a bit of a sensation, but I know what I'm doing. Timothy Tucker's a deep beggar, and he knows a lot more than he's given credit for."

Pitt clutched at my sleeve.

"But—but you ain't serious!" he gasped incredulously. "You're not really playing Tucker against Bannington?"

I grinned.

"There's the list, and it won't be altered," I replied.

"My hat! You must be mad!"

"Clean off your rocker!"

I pushed my way through the crowd to avoid further questioning. And the news soon spread through the Ancient House that Timothy Tucker, the lunatic of the Remove, was to play against the Grammar School.

"Why, it's insane!" declared Bob Christine, when he heard. "Tucker doesn't know anything about cricket, he's never even handled a bat! You might just as well play the kitchen cat, and done with it!"

Directly after dinner the eleven got ready for the trip, most of the juniors going on their bicycles; for, of course, a large crowd of supporters would follow us to Bannington. But the eleven could not very well cycle the journey, since there were many ungainly cricket bags to be carried.

We went by the afternoon train, which would land us in Bannington in excellent time. Quite a crowd gathered to see us off, and there were many shouts of astonishment when Timothy Tucker was seen among our number.

"He's there!"

"He's really going—Tucker!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

Timothy Tucker looked round with dignity through his green-tinted spectacles.

"Go away, little boys, go away!" he said, in his high voice. "How dare you insult me? H'm! Quite so!"

I took hold of Tucker's arm.

"Come along, my son," I said cheerfully. "You're going to do wonders for the Eleven this afternoon, and you'll open the eyes of these staring asses!"

And we passed out of the gateway amid general amusement and astonishment. Many of the fellows were really anxious, for we could afford to take no risks in a game of this sort. The Grammarians were at the top of their form, and they had beaten us on our own ground the previous week. Every fellow in the eleven was determined to do his utmost to avenge the defeat.

And Timothy Tucker, the biggest duffer in the Remove, was included in the St. Frank's Eleven! Everybody concluded that I had taken leave of my senses. But I hadn't.

I knew exactly what I was doing.

CHAPTER V.

SAINTS VERSUS GRAMMARIANS!

THERE was a certain cocksure air about the Grammarians when we walked on to their splendidly-kept cricket ground. They were not exactly rude, but they gave us to understand by their very attitude, that we were in for a terrific licking.

Arthur Grey, the Junior Skipper of the Grammar School, was a thoroughly decent fellow, and he came forward with outstretched hand. He greeted us all in turn, including his own name-sake—Jack Grey, of St. Frank's. The two, of course, were in no way related.

"Glad to see you, you chaps," he said genially. "Of course, we're going to do our best to whack you; that's understood. I see you haven't made many changes," he added, casting his eye over us all.

"One or two," I said. "And I rather fancy that we shall pull the game off. Still, it's not my way to anticipate things, so we'll let it rest."

Arthur Grey chuckled.

"It may interest you to know that we've improved a bit since last week," he observed. "Our batting's better, anyway, and I can give you my word you'll have a pretty stiff task to get our wickets down."

"Oh, we've got some decent bowlers!" I said modestly. "And it's never exactly wise to be too sure of yourself, Grey. I rather fancy we've got a surprise for you to-day."

"A dark horse?" smiled the Bannington skipper.

"Exactly," I replied.

Pitt nudged me.

"I'd like you to point him out to me," he murmured. "There's no dark horse in our team, Nipper, unless you mean Tucker; and he's a bit of a forlorn hope, I imagine. What on earth possessed you to include him is more than I can imagine."

"Well, we'll see," I said cheerfully. "Tucker may not be such a duffer, after all."

It was not long before everything was ready. The afternoon had turned out extremely hot and sunny, and the scene was an alluring one. The Bannington Grammar School ground was surrounded by shady trees, and there were two pavilions, one for the juniors and one for the seniors. As there was no important senior match on to-day, practically all the spectators were gathered upon the lower school ground.

As it happened, Arthur Grey won the toss, and he elected to bat first. There was a good deal of clapping from the Grammarians. Personally, I was not at all sorry; for, after dismissing Grey's eleven, we should know what kind of a task we had to face. It was to be a single innings game, for there was hardly time for two each.

The Grammarian innings was opened by Gordon and Davis, two excellent batsmen, but not the best that our rivals could show. Arthur Grey himself was a terror, and Collins and Gregg were supposed to be as hot as mustard. They would face our bowling later.

The St. Frank's eleven went into the field, and I placed Timothy Tucker at long-stop, where he was rather out of the way. The bowlers were Bob Christine and De Valerie. The latter had been showing up well as a bowler of late.

Gordon received the first ball of the over, delivered by De Valerie; and Gordon started well by sending the leather out into long-field for a three. Davis went one better with the second ball by sending it over to the boundary. The Grammarians applauded with much vigour.

Hitting did not continue at this pace,

of course, but both batsmen knocked the ball about apparently just as they pleased. The score mounted up steadily, and the cricket was of a high order.

The two batsmen were certainly good, but at last, after fifteen minutes' play, Gordon's middle stump was ripped out of the ground by one of De Valerie's fast balls.

"Oh, good!"

"Well-played, Gordon!"

He retired to the pavilion looking quite pleased with himself, and his place was filled by Howell. This junior was a tall, thin fellow who took enormous strides. He opened up well by scoring a two, then a three. He loped up and down the pitch with the greatest of ease.

But his innings was a short one.

He was rather unwary when Bob Christine sent down a slow, easy-looking ball. Howell swiped at it, and it went soaring away into the sky, to drop neatly and accurately into the hands of Reginald Pitt at square-leg.

"Oh, well-caught!"

"Good old Pitt!"

"Hard lines, Howell!"

The next man in was Bates, a short, sturdy junior who looked very business-like. He didn't do much in the scoring line, but kept his wicket intact whilst Davis mounted up the runs. By ones, twos, and threes the score crept up on the board, and now stood at thirty-eight for two wickets.

Davis added another fifteen to the score, and then he fell a victim to De Valerie's bowling. Fellbury, who was the next in, partnered Bates, and the pair of them provided the spectators with fifteen minutes of dull, uninteresting cricket. Neither of them were hard hitters, and for the most part they were content to block the ball or snatch a single run here and there.

The onlookers became impatient.

"Buck up, you slow-coaches!"

"Put some pep into it!"

"You only scored three in two overs!"

Bates replied at once and departed from his usual method. A ball delivered by Christine broke at a convenient angle, and Bates caught it perfectly with his bat. It went soaring away into the sky, and the next second the two batsmen were running as hard as they could go.

It seemed impossible that the ball could be caught, for it was descending in a distant part of the field where no fieldsmen had been placed. I had not expected Bates to make a skier of this sort.

And then it was seen that Timothy Tucker was running desperately, like a hare. The whole field watched, breathless. The sun was in his eyes, and even the best fieldsman on the ground would have found it well-nigh impossible to make that catch.

The ball came shooting down, and Tucker was some feet distant even now. He made a tremendous effort, leapt high into the air, and just clutched the leather with the finger-tips of his left hand.

The ball remained firmly within his grasp.

"Caught, by Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, well-caught, Tucker!"

"Good man!"

It was, indeed, a magnificent catch, one of the finest I'd ever seen. Tucker calmly turned, blinked round, and tossed the ball accurately back to Bob Christine, who was looking rather blank.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "Tucker! And a catch like that, too!"

There was a great deal of clapping, and Bates carried out his bat looking somewhat aggrieved. He had not expected to be caught out so neatly.

Benson, of the Grammar School, was the next man in, and he proceeded to wake things up. He was a hurricane batsman of the type that give a brilliant display for a few minutes before fizzling out. He probably knew that he wouldn't last long, so he made the most of his time. He was a reckless slogger.

He knocked up thirty runs in next to no time, sending the leather to the boundary three or four times in succession. I was bowling now in Christine's place, and I used all my best efforts to dismiss this run-getter.

Benson's recklessness, however, was paying well until he was the cause of disaster to his partner, the slow Fellbury. Benson neatly flicked the ball into the slips, but T. T. fielded the leather with extraordinary swiftness. Fellbury was running, but he was just a shade too late.

The ball left Tucker's hand with wonderful accuracy and sent the wicket crashing to pieces before Fellbury arrived.

"How's that?"

"Out!" said the umpire promptly.

"Well-thrown, Tucker!"

"Good old T. T.!"

The St. Frank's fellows were amazed that Tucker should display such remarkable form.

And when the next batsman came in, a fellow named Green, the visitors were feeling somewhat more hopeful.

At present the score stood at ninety-five for five wickets, and if we could only lower the remaining wickets at the same rate, the Grammarians would probably all be out for something under two hundred. Our own task would not be such a formidable one. But I knew that the best batsmen in the Grammar School Eleven were yet to go in. The Grammarian "tail" was not likely to fall to pieces.

It was impossible for Benson to last long, and I got him out after another five minutes' play, during which time the score had mounted to one hundred and seven. I was not surprised when Arthur Grey, the rival skipper, came out of the pavilion with a bat under his arm. He was the next man in.

And it was not long before he proceeded to show us what he could do. At first he went cautiously, feeling our bowling. Then he launched out, and the score began to mount up by leaps and bounds. Green did very little. He was content to "stone-wall," and to leave the run-getting to his captain.

This went on until the board informed me that the score stood at a hundred and twenty-six. I was not very optimistic. After Green the batsmen would be Gregg, Collins, and Browne—all of them clever batsmen.

Green was soon out, being dismissed by Sir Montie, who made a very neat catch in long field. Then Gregg went in, and things began to hum.

Seven wickets had now been disposed of, and the score stood at one hundred and thirty. The partnership between Arthur Grey and Gregg was an ideal one. The captain was a great batsman, and Gregg practically as good. They proceeded to knock the leather into every corner of the field. It was almost impossible to keep count of the score—the figures were altered constantly.

I was bowling at one end, and Pitt was now at the other. We used every trick we knew. We did our utmost, but it seemed impossible to touch these stalwarts. They toyed with our bowling as though it was of the simplest possible kind. And yet both Pitt and myself were bowling well.

I got quite a shock when I glanced at the scoring-board fifteen minutes later. One hundred and eighty-seven! This was terrible, for it seemed that Gregg and Grey would go on knocking up the runs all the afternoon. They were cool, calm, and deadly. They made no mistakes, and batted brilliantly.

Boundaries were of common occurrence. The fieldsmen were now spread out into the far corners of the ground—not that this made much difference. Catches were impossible, for neither Grey nor Gregg gave the fieldsmen a chance.

And so it went on, the Grammarians delighting their own crowd, and dismaying ours. A roar of cheering broke out when the two hundred mark was passed. And the score quickly crept up by twos, threes, fours—and even an occasional six—until it stood at two hundred and thirty. By this time Gregg had made forty runs off his own bat, and it seemed that he would never be dismissed.

I was feeling rather desperate. Somehow I felt that it would be rather impossible for us to equal this score when we went in after the tea interval. Some of the Grammarians were deadly bowlers.

Two-fifty!

Another burst of applause, and Gregg and Grey were still batting as freshly as ever. More shouts of delight went up when Grey completed his fiftieth run. He seemed perfectly set for a century, and nothing that we could do could stop him making it.

Fifteen minutes later his own score stood at seventy-five, and Gregg had not been idle during this time. Glancing at the board, I saw that the figures were—292. This was terrible, and I felt that all hope was lost.

The ball was tossed to me at the end of an over, and I felt that I would do better this time. I was looking grim and determined. Tucker, who had been fielding well at longstop, passed me on his way across the pitch. He blinked for a moment, and then stopped.

"Things are pretty bad!" I said shortly.

"Er—quite so, Nipper—quite so," said T.T. mildly. "Admitted, my dear sir. I was about to suggest that it would not be unwise, perhaps, to let me try my hand at bowling. It is not my way to push forward——"

"By Jove!" I exclaimed: "You shall bowl, old son! See what you can do!"

Tucker took the ball, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction. I went out to longstop, and I could distinctly hear a murmur of astonishment round the ropes. Timothy Tucker as bowler! It was staggering.

"Nipper must be mad!" snorted Handforth, running up to Tommy Watson. "Do you see what he's done? Tucker's going to bowl——"

"Keep your hair on!" said Watson. "Even Tucker can't do much worse than the others!"

Handforth was obliged to admit the truth of this remark, and he hurried back to his position, just as Tucker was preparing to deliver the first ball of the over. Gregg was facing him, and Gregg looked extremely amused.

He decided that we should pay dearly for this experiment. But, of course, Gregg knew that things were desperate, and that we should attempt any device in order to dismiss him and his partner.

Timothy Tucker took a short run. In spite of T.T.'s usual ungainliness, he seemed to have thrown that aside now. He had a style all his own, and the St Frank's follows watched with anxiety and astonishment. They were quite convinced that matters would now go from bad to worse.

T.T.'s arm went up in an easy swing. But, at the last moment, his wrist shot forward with lightning speed, and the ball fairly whizzed out of his hand like a four-point-seven shell.

Gregg was even more confident than he had been before. Perhaps he was too confident. T.T. looked such a duffer that his bowling must necessarily be easy to deal with, and Gregg was still smiling.

He didn't smile for long.

Whizz!

The ball came down, and Gregg jumped at it, probably intending to send it into the next county. Unfortunately he played slightly too far forward. The ball whipped in, and neatly took the middle stump out of the ground.

"Out!"

"Oh, well bowled!"

"Good old T.T.!"

The St. Frank's juniors round the ropes fairly shrieked with excited delight.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Gregg, in a startled voice.

He gave a rueful look at his wicket, which had a somewhat forlorn aspect. The umpire was busily preparing to set it to rights. The unexpected had happened; one of the lightning batsmen had been dismissed.

The spell was broken!

"Good old Tucker!" I grinned. "What an ass I was not to tell you to bowl before!"

Gregg carried out his bat, and he was given a warm and enthusiastic reception. He had done well, but all his own supporters considered that he had lost his wicket through carelessness. That ball of Tucker's had been a fluke, and by swiping carelessly, Gregg had allowed it to slip under his bat.

The next man in was Collins, another of the Grammarian stalwarts. He was considered to be a better batsman than Gregg, and Arthur Grey was not at all disconsolate. With Collins at the opposite end, he reckoned they could make another hundred runs with ease. And even then, there was Browne as last man.

Collins was jaunty, for his chums sent him out with a rousing cheer. They expected great things of him, and he knew it. At the same time, he felt that he was capable of knocking up a century. He felt in form.

Timothy Tucker delivered the second ball of the over. It was a very easy ball to play, and Collins gathered himself together as he waited for the leather to break. It would come right on to his bat, and he would hit the boundary.

But somehow things went wrong. The ball broke at an angle, Collins missed it altogether, and he gave a startled jump as he heard a crash behind him. He gazed round in utter dismay, and found that his wicket was a wreck.

"Out!"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good for you, T.T.!"

The St. Frank's crowd roared—as much with amazement as enthusiasm.

The astounding Tucker had dismissed two of the best Grammarian batsmen in succession—Tucker, the prize duffer! It was certainly staggering.

Arthur Grey was now looking more serious. The last man was just coming in—Browne. If his wicket fell, the school would remain at 292—a respectable score, but not what Grey had anticipated. But, of course, it was ridiculous, Browne would never be dismissed at once, and Grey himself would have plenty of chances of obtaining further runs.

Browne was not looking very cocksure as he walked out of the pavilion. He had seen what had occurred to his two predecessors, and he was beginning to dimly realise that Tucker was not such a hopeless ass as he looked. There had been no fluke about that second ball, it had been a tricky affair which had beaten Collins to the wide.

Browne reached the crease, prepared himself, and down came the third ball of the over. Browne almost grinned. It

wasn't fast at all, and was going hopelessly wide. It was a good chance to open the innings in a spectacular fashion. Browne just lifted his bat, his intention being to flick the leather into the slips.

He could never account for it afterwards, but the ball, somehow or other, slid round his bat, curled in, and the next second Browne's leg-stump was lying over at an acute angle. The umpire's verdict came at once.

"Out!"

"Hurrah!"

The St. Frank's crowd fairly yelled themselves hoarse.

"Bravo, Tucker!"

"The hat trick, by Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

It was the end of the innings, and Arthur Grey could hardly believe it. Just when he had become set, just when he was reckoning to show us all what cricket really was, his three best men had been bowled out by the hopeless-looking Tucker. It was a considerable shock. But Arthur Grey was a sportsman.

"Hard lines!" he said, crossing over to me. "I thought we were going to touch four hundred this afternoon; we looked like it. Still, I'm not grumbling. I reckon you fellows will have your work cut out to knock up 293 runs."

"Yes, you've probably got us whacked," I said candidly.

T.T. was a modest youth. He evaded the fellows who wanted to crowd round him, and bunked for the pavilion, where he locked himself away in seclusion. He did not reappear until the tea interval was nearly over.

Then he came out, blinking through his green-tinted spectacles, and submitted to one or two hearty thumps on the back.

"Well, you've given us one or two surprises to-day, old son!" exclaimed Handforth heartily. "You're a giddy marvel! Why, even I couldn't have done any better."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tucker accepted the words of praise modestly, and for once he was reticent. As a rule, he was only too willing to talk at great length. But to-day he said as little as possible, and merely looked amiable.

And then the game was resumed, and the St. Frank's batting commenced. We had a heavy task before us, and only something like a miracle could save us from defeat.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF TIMOTHY TUCKER!

DISASTER marked the opening of the St. Frank's innings.

I sent in Reginald Pitt and De Valerie to commence the scoring. They were both good batsmen, and I expected much of them.

But the first ball of the innings conquered De Valerie's wicket, and he walked back to the pavilion, looking glum and disappointed. It was only by a piece of ill-luck that he had been bowled.

"Hard cheese," said Handforth. "I'm next man in, I suppose? I'll show you what ought to be done—— Hallo, Montie, where are you off to?"

"The wicket, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West smoothly.

Montie was next man in, and I watched him anxiously as he faced the fast bowling of Bates, who was one of the chief men to be feared. He was not particularly brilliant with the bat, but deadly with the ball.

He delivered the leather in a hurry, and Sir Montie was taking no chances. He merely blocked it. The next ball was of just the same variety, and Montie gave it a slight tap, returning it to the bowler.

Then when Bates delivered his next Montie felt that he could launch out somewhat. It was an inviting ball, and it fell neatly on to Sir Montie's bat. Clack! The ball went soaring away—upwards.

A breathless moment, a quickly running figure, and——

"Oh, well caught, Collins!"

"Out by gad!"

Sir Montie looked round in dismay.

"Begad!" he murmured. "What a frightful misfortune!"

It was—two wickets down for nil!

The next man in was Tommy Watson, and he was looking rather grim and somewhat nervous. Watson was not a hard hitter, and he never gave a brilliant display. He considered he had done very well if he knocked up ten or fifteen runs before being dismissed. He was an excellent partner for a hard hitter, for he could "stonewall" his wicket until further orders.

The rest of the over was uneventful, and then Pitt had the bowling. This was now in the hands of Davis. Davis was considered to be the best bowler in the Grammarian Eleven, and I knew from experience that he was hot stuff.

However, he didn't succeed in taking a wicket during the over. Pitt, on the other

hand, knocked up two twos, a four, and a three. And Watson added a modest one. By the time Bates had the bowling again, the scoring-board showed the gratifying score of 12 runs for two wickets.

Tommy Watson met with trouble shortly afterwards. He added four more to the score, and then was unfortunate enough to be run out. He thought he could get another run, hesitated, and was too late to get back to his crease.

Handforth was next man, and he assured me, just before leaving the pavilion, that everything was quite all right. There was no need to worry at all. It was his firm intention to make nothing under eighty, and probably a century. Handforth, in fact, kindly promised me that he would win the match off his own bat.

"All right—go ahead and do it!" I said. "We want runs, Handy—not hot air!"

"You—you silly ass!" snorted Handforth. "Just you wait and see!"

He hadn't been actually boasting, but he was supremely confident. He always reckoned that he could do wonders—and it is only fair to say that generally he knocked up a decent score. He was a hurricane batsman—a deadly slogger who accepted everything that came, and who put all his energy into the batting. He took risks which no careful fellow would dream of, and they frequently came off.

Luckily for us, he did fairly well this afternoon. He opened with a four, followed it up by a two, and then a three. This was the end of the over, so he received the batting again after the change.

He proceeded to knock the leather all over the surrounding country, and for a brief burst he did wonders. Three boundaries in succession, then a pair of twos and then a three to finish the over. He still had the bowling, and he had already scored twenty-eight off his own bat.

He was dismissed during the next over, and he was quite astounded when he realised that his wicket had fallen. He had only made thirty-two, bringing the total score up to fifty-three for four wickets.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth "What rot! I'm not out!"

"Well, your middle stump is!" grinned the umpire.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth would not be convinced that he was out, and it was only after a little argument that he left the pitch.

His place was taken by Jack Grey, who did fairly well for about fifteen minutes, batting steadily, and partnering Pitt in an admirable manner. Between the pair of them they knocked up an additional forty-five runs, making the total look more respectable.

A big round of applause was forthcoming when a three scored by Pitt brought the total up to a hundred and one. This, taking everything into consideration, was excellent, and if only we could keep up the pace, we should be able to put up a good performance.

Pitt and Grey were study-mates, and the best of chums. They knew one another's form, and worked together like a machine. The bowlers could do nothing with them for a time, and before long the 125 mark had been passed.

Then at last Pitt's wicket fell. He was clean bowled, and he received a great ovation when he carried his bat in.

"Not so bad," I said critically. "One-twenty-five for five wickets is pretty decent. But we shall have to do better. Christine, old son, it's your turn now."

Bob Christine was soon fixed up, and he sallied out to the wicket. His innings was a brief one, but quite brilliant. In less than ten minutes he added thirty to the score, batting with tremendous vigour and force. Then he was caught out, and his place was taken by Yorke.

All the St. Frank's onlookers were now feeling highly elated. Matters were not half so bad as they had feared.

"Why, we're all serene!" declared De Valerie. "Grey's good for a long while yet, and Nipper and Oldfield are bound to make a tremendous score. Oldfield's rather a quiet chap, but as a batsman he's terrific. What's the score? Hundred-and-sixty-five for six! Not at all dusty!"

Optimism was general, but it did not last long.

For a period of awful disaster set in for St. Frank's. Before another run was made, Grey was declared out, leg before wicket, Oldfield took his place, and immediately after that Yorke was surprised to find his leg-stump out of the ground.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Pitt. "This won't do!"

"We'll try and pull the fat out of the fire," I said grimly. "I'm going in next, and Tucker will be the last man.

"Oh!"

"Help!" said De Valerie. "If Oldfield loses his wicket now, we're done. For goodness sake, Nipper, make a terrific effort. Oldfield and you ought to make a stand, and knock up a hundred between you. As soon as Oldy comes out the game

will be all over. We can't count Tucker at all."

"Well, he didn't do so bad at bowling," said Pitt.

"Jolly good, in fact," said De Valerie, nodding. "That's why he can't be much good at batting. In any case, I think we're in for a whacking."

I went out to the wicket, scored a three with my first ball, and then Oldfield sent up the leather in such a graceful way that it dropped neatly into the waiting palm of Gordon, in long field. Oldfield was out!

"Oh, my goodness!"

Groans came from the St. Frank's onlookers. Nine wickets down, and the score only stood at one-hundred-and-sixty-eight. The end of the game was inevitable—we should lose. There was only one man to follow Oldfield, and that man was Timothy Tucker.

It was the finish. The St. Frank's "tail" had cracked up completely, and nothing could now save the game. This is the way the juniors looked at it.

"Why, we might as well give up at once," said Handforth disgustedly. "What is the good of going on? T.T. will be out first ball, and that's the end of the game. Whacked by a hundred-and-twenty-four! Oh, my only topper!"

Tucker carried his bat out into the field and he removed his green-tinted spectacles He passed quite close to me, and I gave him a grim look.

"It's up to us!" I said quietly.

But I felt sure, even while I was speaking, that nothing could be done. There was a deficit of 124 to make up, and if one of our wickets fell it would be all over. Our chances looked very slim.

Tucker received the bowling from Davis, and it was the latter's genial intention to smash the wicket to atoms. He would take his revenge for the way T.T. had dealt with the Grammarian wickets.

Davis took a curious run—a kind of mixture between a hop and a jump. His arm went round like a streak of lightning, and the ball flew down the pitch, making a direct line for Tucker's middle stump.

T.T. seemed reckless. He raised his bat in the most cool manner, then swung it round with enormous force. Clack! It was a magnificent hit, and the leather went soaring away, right over the pavilion into an adjoining meadow. There was no need to run.

"Six!" I grinned. "How's that?"

The spectators were tremendously astonished, and they cheered—supporters and rivals alike. It had been a glorious hit. A moment before the Grammarians had been grinning at the freakish-looking batsman. And even now the home supporters felt pretty certain that it was only a flash in the pan, and that Tucker would not keep it up.

The ball was soon recovered, and Davis sent it down again—with the same terrific force. Tucker scored a boundary, and followed this up by a brilliant hit which was smartly fielded, and only resulted in two. Another boundary followed. T.T. rested on his bat, and blinked round at the field of play with quiet satisfaction.

"Well I'm hanged!" said Pitt. "Who would think the ass could play like this? He's a giddy marvel—he's as hot as cayenne pepper!"

"Well played, Tucker!"

"Good man!"

T.T. had now changed his attitude completely, and he looked business-like and tremendously alert. He continued his amazing innings. And it must not be imagined that I was idle. Between the pair of us we sent the Grammarians leather hunting in a way which filled them with dismay.

Every ball was sent shooting away. Both Tucker and myself took everything that came, and the runs were piled up with astonishing rapidity. We were not idle for a moment. Other bowlers were tried, but to no avail. We knocked the leather into every corner of the field.

Tucker was the best man—I am compelled to admit that. My hits were mainly twos and threes. Tucker scored boundary after boundary. He was like a fellow possessed, working at fever pitch. The strength behind his hits made the onlookers stare.

Two hundred—two-twenty-five—two-forty—two-sixty——

The numbers on the scoring board changed with miraculous rapidity. Already Tucker had obtained sixty-five runs off his own bat, and I had contributed over thirty. I added three more, and then Tucker brought the score up to two-seventy five.

The excitement was now intense, for it was believed that we should be able to beat the Grammarians. Another burst on my part, and the score reached 282. Ten to draw—eleven to win!

The Grammarian bowlers were desperate. They used every trick they knew, but it was useless. Tucker scored all the rest. He was like a fellow possessed of miraculous powers. He hit with precision and terrific force. And he was still as fresh as paint, and ready for another century.

"Hurrah!" shouted Handferth. "Two-ninety! Good old T.T.!"

It was the last ball of the over—and, as it turned out, the last ball of the game. Tucker caught it fully, and it went soaring away like a bullet, right beyond the ground into an adjoining garden. A faint tinkle of glass sounded. The match was won—and Timothy Tucker was the fellow who had brought about this miracle.

He came running towards me, his face gleaming. I winked, and T.T. understood. At the same moment a great crowd of fellows came charging on to the pitch, in order to seize Tucker and to chair him.

But Tucker vanished. He streaked across the green, vanished into a dense little wood, and the excited juniors followed. They found no sign of Tucker, and they were disappointed and exasperated.

"The modest ass!" said Christine warmly. "We were going to give him the reception he deserves!"

They were still searching among the trees. Jerry Dodd strolled up, looking somewhat flustered and hot. His hands were in his pockets, and he attempted to look at his ease.

"By jingo!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea, chums?"

"You've just come, I suppose?" said Pitt. "We didn't see you here before, anyway, Doddy. What do you think of Tucker?"

"He's a wonderful feller—sure thing!" grinned Jerry Dodd.

A moment later he came face to face with me, and we gripped hands.

"Good man!" I murmured. "I'll tell you what I think of you later!"

The Australian junior merely grinned.

The other fellows noticed nothing, and were greatly mystified as to the strange disappearance of T.T. But the match was won, and everything was all right.

Later on, when St. Frank's was reached, the fellows were even more astonished. For Tucker was found all right—accorded a tremendous ovation, much to his amazement. He declared that he had been butterfly hunting all the afternoon. And at last the truth dawned upon St. Frank's. The amazing cricketer at Barnington had not been Tucker at all, but somebody in disguise. They questioned me, but I was mum.

But the identity of the demon cricketer would easily have been known to the juniors if they had used their wits. That evening Jerry Dodd was very elated.

As for the mystery which surrounded him, there were to be some remarkable developments before long—but I must record these in the correct place. There is a time for everything.

THE END.

To My Readers.

No doubt many of my chums were somewhat surprised to see Timothy Tucker's name included in the Saints' eleven. After his brilliant catch in mid-field, I am inclined to think that few readers did not suspect that this freak of St. Frank's was none other than Jerry Dodd in disguise. Though I cannot bring myself to agree with this evasion of the Head's orders, I think it is very rough, both on Dodd and the school, that he should be forbidden to play in the cricket eleven. As to how this ban is eventually removed and Jerry wins his spurs in county and test matches, will be told in forthcoming stories. Next week's story will be entitled: "THE MYSTERY MEN OF THE EAST!"

THE EDITOR.

BEYOND THE DESERT.

By REID WHITLEY.

AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE.

(Concluding Chapters.)

'Gators and Gunn'ng.

"SHE'S a couple of miles off," he said. "You can move, but don't stand up. Better keep still as we can for a while yet. That was a dashed close call. They had men at the gun on her fore-deck. If they had spotted us we'd have been smothered with shrapnel. They mean to get us."

They lay still for an hour longer, by which time the submarine had dwindled to a speck and disappeared. Then they arose and resumed their march, with eyes and ears intent for the first sight or sound of the enemy. But night came without further alarm. They had to camp without a fire, but this was no inconvenience.

Early next day they set out again and marched till the heat drove them again to the water. Still there was no sign of the submarine. They hoped that they had seen the last of her. But now they had another anxiety, for the water, of which they had brought as much as they could carry, was beginning to give out.

Sooner or later they would come to another stream running into the sea, but how much further they would have to go to find it they had no means of telling, for they had no maps of the coast. All the country behind was covered with dense scrub in which it would have been hopeless to search for a waterhole. There was nothing for it but to push on at speed and trust to luck.

But it seemed that luck would favour them, for late in the afternoon, they saw a dark patch in the face of the cliffs, or, rather, sand-bluffs, and before they halted at dark had made certain that it meant a river mouth.

"A couple of hours in the morning will bring us there," said Professor Maxwell. "Then we can take it easy."

"Hold on!" put in Anson. "Perhaps it may not be so easy as we hope. That hound Braun presumably knows this coast. Now, since he has missed us so far, what would be simpler than to lie in wait for us at the river? He would know that we'd have to get water. We're all pretty tired, but I think it would be best to march on in the dark and spy out a bit. We could lie in the bush, y'know. How about it?"

Weary though they were, the others agreed to the wisdom of this, so, after a rest, they got going again. The night was still and dark, though the blazing stars gave light enough to show where they were treading. It still wanted an hour to midnight, when at last they came to the edge of a mud flat and saw beyond the channels of the river running into the sea.

"Keep on the sand. We mustn't show tracks," whispered Anson, who had gone a little in advance. "D'you smell anything?"

They sniffed and sniffed again. There was no mistaking the savoury odour. Not very far off, some gourmand was frying bacon

In that desolate place the whiffs from the cook's fire were like an alarm call. The submarine, or, at least, some of her crew, must be close at hand. With caution they might outwit their enemies, but only stealth could help them. They would have to go up stream, since to try crossing the river over the flats would have been tempting providence. Alligators roamed the flats o' nights, and, besides, if anyone was on watch they would be easily seen again from the sea.

Anson leading, they turned inland, but they had not gone far before he halted and pointed to a rosy glow waxing and waning amongst the bushes ahead. A murmur of voices came to them.

"We must get round them. Follow close and don't make a sound as you love your lives," whispered Anson, and with infinite caution, stole into the bush which was here not so dense.

They quickly discovered the reason of this. It grew softer under foot. The ground was marshy. Behind the low line of sand hummocks it sloped down to a swamp. Leaving the fire—which seemed to be built on the last of the firm ground—on their left, they turned away in the direction from which they had come, skirting slimy pools from which rose a fetid smell.

"We're leaving a trail that a blind man could follow," muttered Anson. "But it can't be helped. This isn't going to be a picnic. Hark to that!"

Out of the swamp, disconcertingly near at hand, came a rumbling bellow. Another answered it.

"'Gators! They've scented us! Who's got the lantern? We'll have to risk lighting up. A light may keep them off, and I think we may not be seen by those fellows at the fire. Quick! Don't you smell the brutes?"

A sickening, musky odour assailed their nostrils. Harding scratched a match and lit the lantern. As its light fell across the mud beside them something stirred and slid out of sight. He had been in time.

They got on a little better after that, but though they bore steadily away from where they thought the river lay, they could not find firmer ground. Oozing slime, criss-crossed with logs and interspersed with islands only a little above the level of the mud, were on every side of them. Stunted mangroves thrust tangling roots in their path, yet offered little support; and, worst of all, the alligators seemed to be growing bolder.

The air was foul with the reek of them, their bellows sounded on all sides. The lantern light was reflected from moving shapes that bobbed up on half-submerged logs and sank again into the seething water.

"Over there!" cried Jack Maxwell. "It's higher. Show a light this way!"

He moved forward as he spoke—and a huge alligator heaved itself up out of the water almost at his feet and dashed at him!

Anson had said once that he was quick on the draw, and now he proved his boast, for, with a movement too swift to follow, his hand slid to his holster jerked out his pistol and fired three shots in quick succession. The bullets thudded home, the alligator reared itself up on its tail with a hoarse roar, and fell back into the water with a splash that drenched Jack from head to heel.

"That's torn it!" he exclaimed. "Come on! Hear those fellows?"

From the distance came a loud shouting, then half a dozen rifles cracked and several bullets hummed through the air overhead. The party were not slow to move. Almost as the alligator fell back they were struggling over logs and grass hummocks to the place Jack had pointed out, and, hauling themselves up, breathed more freely to find themselves on solid ground.

More shots followed the first discharge, but evidently they were fired at random, for no bullets came that way. At some little distance water and mud foamed and bubbled as the alligators threw themselves upon their disabled brother and tore him to pieces. For a little the party were left in peace to consider their situation.

It was desperate enough. The island on which they found themselves was barely big enough to hold them, they were surrounded by ravening brutes whose hunger would be whetted but not appeased by the meal they were making, and in the morning—if they could manage to survive so long—the enemy would easily hunt them down.

The shouts and random shots continued. They began to draw nearer. Evidently the Huns were beating the ground near them. Would they venture to follow up the trail if they found it?

The fugitives could see lights moving about at no great distance, for the swamp itself afforded little cover. Then, of a sudden, there came a long finger of brilliant white light cutting the darkness like an incandescent sword, which swung to and fro across the dismal swamp.

Before it touched them they could see the tumbling alligators silhouetted against it as they plunged into the depths, then they had to shield their eyes as the blinding glare smote them.

"The sub.'s searchlight!" gasped Harding. "She's in the river. There must be a deep water channel that we couldn't see. Wow! Look there! That's our way."

He pointed. On the further side of their refuge easily accessible, was a sort of spit or peninsula of firm ground leading to dense bush beyond. They leapt up and reached it with a long jump, but as they moved, wild shouts told that they had been seen, and a volley whistled about their ears as they dashed at the brush, forcing a passage.

A redder flash drove across the searchlight's beam. There was a rush and a shriek behind them, followed by a terrific crash almost overhead. The swamp echoed, the trees of the bush beyond swayed, and a shower of shrapnel spattered down, but luckily well ahead of the fugitives.

And now they were through the belt of scrub that bordered the swamp, and stumbling across more open ground under tall trees. Again came the roar and rattle of a shell burst, but now they were out of line and though a tree swayed and fell, smashing, it dropped clear of them.

The searchlight which had nearly been their destroyer had proved their preserver. Its light guided them still as they ran on to come presently to the banks of the river—a narrow but deep stream. They did not pause but hurried on, until at last it seemed safe to halt and draw breath. The searchlight beams no longer reached them, though an occasional flicker told that it was still playing.

They could hear scattered shots, but no more shells were fired. No sound disturbed the stillness of the bush near them.

"We came well out of that," said Anson. "Those ghastly brutes in the swamp gave me a grue."

"Thanks for potting that beast. He'd have had me if you hadn't been dashed sharp," said Jack, and shook his head. "Now what's the next move? Shall we go higher up stream?"

"I think it would be advisable to get as far from those scoundrels as possible," murmured the professor. "My nerves have not been attuned to shells as yours have. They disturb me. Let us move on."

They moved on. Dawn began to brighten the sky to their surprise, for the night had been so very full of incident that they had lost all count of time. Hunger asserted itself, and they halted to eat, scanning the river as far as they could see in hope of

espying a tree which had fallen across stream.

They could see none, nor were there any of growth large enough to span it growing close to the banks.

"We'll have to hoof it further up," began Jack, then paused, for clear and distinct in the stillness came the regular splash of oars.

In a moment they had taken cover behind a clump of bushes, rifles ready for what should come. The sound drew nearer. Then a harsh voice commanded silence in tones that rang along the banks and brought a smile to the faces of the four men crouching on the bank.

The regular beat became a slow paddle, and round the nearest bend appeared the submarine's boat. Four men were in her. Two rowed, the others scanned the banks with rifles at the ready.

"We'll hold them up," whispered Jack. "Now! Hands up, my beautifuls!"

Perhaps the four Huns had been indulging in some lovely dream of finding four worn-out wanderers who could be hunted down and shot at ease. If so their awakening must have been unpleasant, for there were the four in a line on the bank above them, each covering his man with a rifle held implacably steady.

Four mouths opened and swore as one, two rifles were dropped in the bottom of the boat, and four pairs of hands shot aloft.

"You in the bow, paddle ashore," continued Jack.

The man obeyed his gesture with nervous eagerness. The boat grounded.

"Get out and stand over there," continued Jack. "Step lively!"

They did as he bade them, growling under their breath. Anson stepped down, drew the boat up, threw the rifles away into mid-stream, then relieved two of the men of their pistols which he sent to the same safe deposit.

"Shooting will make too much noise," said he, winking at the professor. "Shall we shove them in and make 'em swim home?"

"That murder would be!" cried one man, the fellow who had been second in command on the submarine. "Alligators most plentiful are."

"We discovered that last night, Cocky," laughed Anson. "Well, shall we tie them up, Jack? I can fix them so that they will take hours to get loose. Take your choice, Fritz. You're not to be trusted with a boat so we're going to take it. Swim or be tied up."

"We to be tied up do prefer," replied the man sullenly. "You will for this suffer death."

"Oh, we're used to that by this time," said Jack sweetly. "Come along and be trussed."

One by one they were tied up and led some little way from the bank where Anson made each fast to a tree.

"We shall here die of thirst," complained the chief. "This is barbarous!"

"You have nothing to complain of," said the professor severely. "You are pirates, outside the laws of nations, and if we were doing our duty we should hang you."

"Don't worry. They'll chew themselves loose soon. Now, we'll be off up river. I'm sick of the coast!" put in Jack, in a loud voice.

They got aboard the boat and rowed away noisily up stream for some way, then, lying on their oars, floated back on the current, landing some way below the place where four sets of guaranteed German teeth were at work on their bonds. Landing on the opposite bank, they scuttled the boat and dived into the bush.

They made towards the shore. As they did not know exactly where they were, they had to keep in touch with the sea—their only guide. Soon they were threading the bush which, on this side of the river, did not grow so thickly.

All day they marched, halting only for a short rest at mid-day. Surely their pursuers would now give up the attempt to catch them? But the more Jack Maxwell thought of it the more convinced he was that they would not desist till they were compelled. Once the news that a submarine was on the coast leaked out, there would be racing and chasing, the under-sea boat would be hunted, and since she would sooner or later exhaust her fuel, she must be captured.

He felt that there was some scheme at which he could not guess behind everything. Perhaps these desperate men intended to prey on commerce, to turn pirates.

They would certainly try to ensure their safety for a little longer by murdering the only men who knew their secret.

The party reached the fringe of bush overhanging the shore late in the afternoon. They scanned the beach and the sea, but saw nothing.

"We'll rest till midnight, then go on. We'll travel by night as much as we can," said Jack; and since they were all very weary and there was but little chance that they would be traced, they all slept.

It must have been close on midnight when Anson roused himself and sat up, listening. Then he woke Jack.

"Listen!" said he.

And from somewhere out to sea, faint but quite recognisable, came the thrum and throb of the submarine's engines.

Soon the noise died away, nor could they determine which way the vessel had been travelling. However, they were effectually aroused, so, shaking up Harding and the professor, they started again, tramping along the beach.

Morning came, and as the sun rose, the first rays fell on something which glittered far away on the end of a low promontory. They saw it together, and together uttered a cry of relief and joy.

"Blessed be corrugated-iron!" cried Professor Maxwell. "That roof is as good as a heliograph winking a message of hope. There are several of them, I think?"

"And masts! It's a port! Not very much of one perhaps, but there will be a telegraph-station—perhaps a wireless. We can make things hot for Jerry!" said Harding.

"Humph! We're a good ten or twelve miles away, by the beach," put in Anson dryly. "There is still time for Jerry to make things precious hot for us. I think that we had better lie up for the day."

The others protested. They were tired, but they felt that with a goal in sight they could make the journey.

"And every minute is of value if we want to put the authorities on the track of these blighters," said Jack. "They may be holding up some ship even now, and, judging by the way they treated us there will be little mercy for any on board. Let's go on."

Anson shrugged and gave in. They moved on. As the sun grew hotter they lost sight of the distant townlet in the dancing heat haze, but knowledge that it was really there spurred them on. Yet nature was not to be defied.

They had had little real rest for some days, and the strain had told on them. The pace grew slower and slower, till at last the professor could endure no more. He stumbled, fell, and when they would have lifted him, protested feebly.

"Is thy servant an iron dog that he should do this thing?" he said. "I cannot go further. Let us rest here till the evening."

So in a little hollow of the sand, deep enough to shelter them from possible observation from the sea, they lay down. Three fell asleep at once. Harding, the fourth, lit his pipe, and lay staring up at the incandescent blue of a cloudless sky.

And from behind a little group of rocks two miles further along the beach, three puffs of white smoke ascended into the air while half a dozen crouching figures begun to move cautiously along the beach towards the unwary four.

The Last Flutter.

HARDING'S pipe did not draw well. For a while he bore with it, but it bothered him. He looked about for a grass straw, but saw none in the hollow. With a weary yawn he debated whether he wanted a smoke enough to make it worth while to rise and search about for a pipe-cleaner. Laziness came near triumphing If it had, the lives and adventures of the whole party would have ended abruptly shortly after.

But the desire for tobacco conquered. Harding got upon his legs and began to ascend the slope of the hollow. An instinct of caution made him halt and fall flat as he came to the rim, and there, peeping between two grass tussocks he looked out along the shore.

Four or five hundred yards away, strung at regular intervals across the beach, were six men with rifles, advancing towards their refuge. It needed but a glance to tell Harding who they were and what they were at.

Braun had been shrewd. When he discovered that the fugitives had again outwitted him, as he did some three hours after the men tied up in the bush had managed to free themselves, he made up his mind. Taking his whole crew on board, he had put to sea.

But he had bad luck. The submarine grounded on a mud bank at the river mouth, and much time was consumed in getting her off. But at last she was at sea, and making down the coast, he had landed six men, then put out to lie awash at a safe distance from the shore.

The six had spied the fugitives and moved forward to surprise them when they lay down to sleep. Now they were about to close and finish the matter with a volley at close range.

Harding took in the situation at a glance. The hollow was some distance from the bush overhanging the shore. Should he and his friends try to gain that shelter they would almost inevitably be picked off before reaching it.

"This is our last ditch. We've got to fight it out here," muttered Harding, and, slipping down, roused his companions.

They awoke grumbling, but at his first words grew silent and attentive. Anson and Jack Maxwell crept up the slope to view the enemy, who had come closer.

"We'll open the ball," decided Jack. "They're quite close enough. Come up and take your stations. Now, each pick his man. Are you ready? Then fire!"

The volley rang out, but even as they drew trigger the enemy seemed to realise their danger, and threw themselves down, so that though two rolled over dead—or mortally wounded—the others escaped.

Instantly came a reply, but since the four lay behind tufts of grass, they gave no target, and the bullets went wide.

And because the four surviving Jerries had wriggled down into the sand, they, too, were invisible. For a minute neither party gave any signs of life.

"Professor, crawl back, then put your hat on your rifle and shove it up cautiously as though it was on your head," said Anson. "Jerry won't be able to resist temptation. Be ready, you chaps!"

The ruse succeeded. As the crown of the hat appeared, four pale flashes darted from the sands and four bullets plugged into the sand on either side of the hat, though none actually hit it. At the same moment the three young men fired at the nearest flash and scored. Up leapt a dark figure, wavered a moment on its feet, then fell forward on its face.

"Three!" said Jack, with dreadful calm. "If they do get us, Anson, they'll have paid somewhat dearly for the pleasure. Ah, naughty!"

A bullet had whizzed past his head. He replied. There was a lively interchange of

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shots. Sand flew, bullets ricochetted and whined away into the everywhere. The Huns shooting was good, but not quite good enough. Another man was winged. They saw him heave up from the sand, drop back, and then——

"Well I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Jack. "Of all the cold-drawn cheek I ever saw, this takes the biscuit!"

For the wounded man had risen to his full height, holding his sound arm above his head in token of surrender, while the other dangled helpless at his side. He moved away from his comrades, and presently sat down on a hummock, evidently quite assured that he would not be potted.

Anson raved and called him everything he could think of, while Jack and Harding were almost helpless from laughter.

"Oh, the blighter! He's counting on our sense of decency, and all the while they would down us under the same conditions. Oh, why can't I drill him?"

Yet he could not. His sporting instincts forbade him—forbade them all—to shoot an unarmed and wounded man. The two survivors had crept further away while this was going on. They reached a sort of trough in the sand, and, feeling that they had done their part, wriggled themselves along it till they had reached some rocks a good half mile away. From there they fired another round or two, and snuggled down to await developments.

Nor had they to wait long. From the sea came the throb of the submarine's engines. The vessel was returning. The four could see her conning-tower rising above the swell as she moved in, see her rising to the surface till her whole length was visible.

They ran up the shore, disregarding the shots fired at them from the rocks, and were close to the first of the low-growing scrub when, with a howl and a roar, a shell flew over their heads and burst a short way in front of them. A second spattered the sand close behind them.

They found a steep bank held together by matted roots, and crouched beneath it while several more shells burst in their vicinity. There was a pause, then another exploded at some distance. After that there was no more firing. Jack and Anson crept back to the edge of the cover and looked out.

The submarine was heaving on the swell, as near as she dared venture to the shore. Her gun was being housed in, and a man was signalling the shore with a flag. The two survivors of the landing party were hurrying along the beach, carrying something between them.

"It's a collapsible boat!" exclaimed Anson. "By Jingo, it's the only boat the beggars have got now. They can't land without it for they can't bring the ship nearer—and there goes Johnny Shark! It's a long shot, but if we can only perforate that craft I believe we'll be all right. Harding!"

Harding, who had been helping the professor bind up his wound, came at the run.

"Try 'em at eleven hundred," snapped Jack, sliding up his sights. "Give it 'em lively! Now then!"

"We've holed her! She's sinking!" yelled Harding exultantly, while he shoved another clip of cartridges into the magazine. "Oh, Jiminy, Johnny's on the job!"

There was a pause. On the submarine the men halted as though horror had frozen them. The three could see Braun on the bridge scanning the shore through his glasses. Then he appeared to realise that the game was up, that all his efforts to keep the secret of his presence on the coast had been in vain.

Evening was falling when at last, weary but triumphant, the adventurous four drew near the tiny township built on the bluff overlooking a small harbour.

"A bath, a clean shirt, and a long, cool drink, and then we'll make the wires hot and set the hounds on Jerry's trail," said Jack Maxwell.

They turned towards the hotel. The adventure was over. They had solved the secret of the desert. Would they ever find a solution to the mystery of the submarine?

THE END.

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