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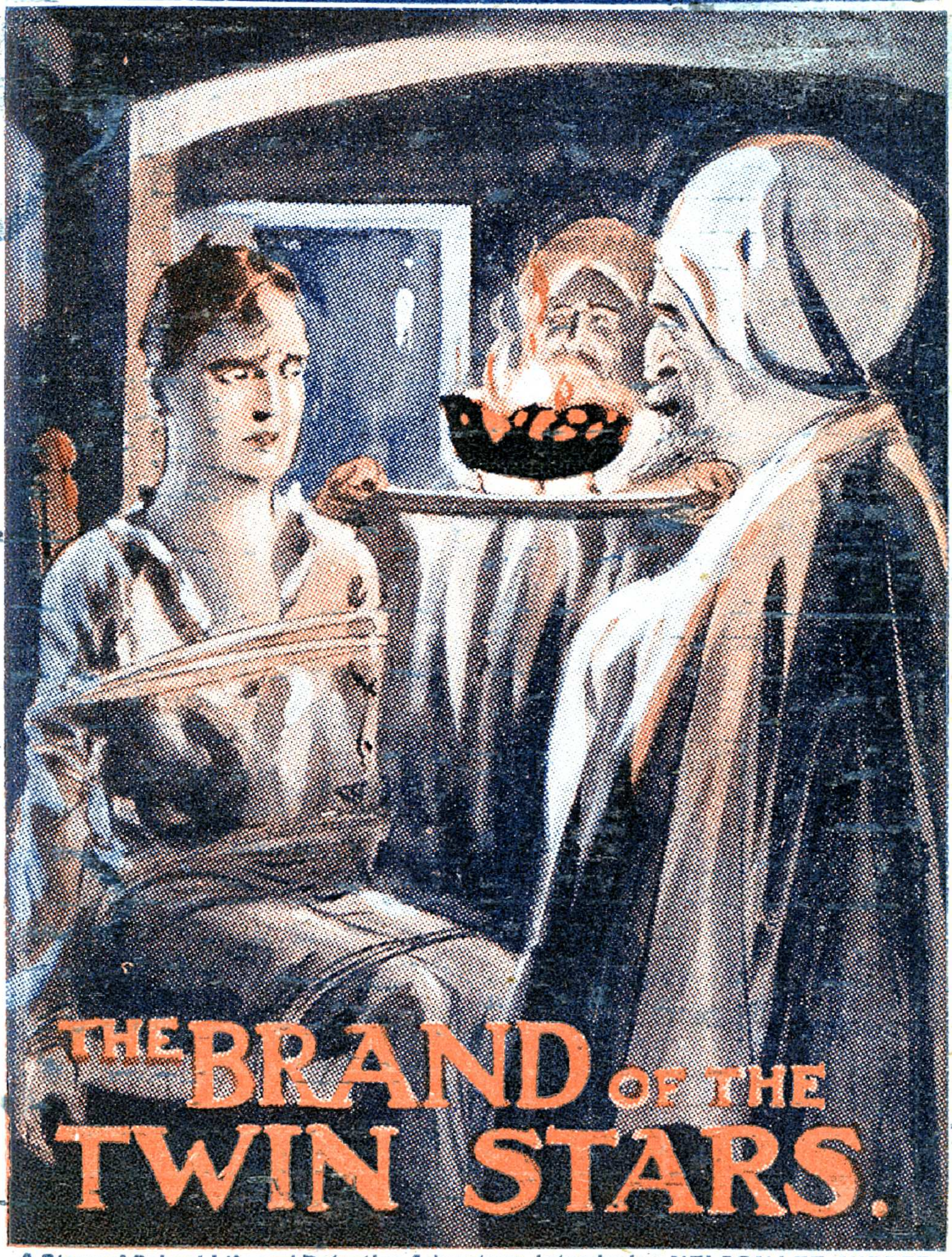

# THE BRAND OF THE TWIN STARS.

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Mystery Men of the East," "The Match of Destiny," "The Fateful Fifteenth," etc.

July 9, 1921.

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## (THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JERRY DODD!

NELSON LEE nodded approvingly.

"We couldn't hope for better weather, Nipper," he remarked. "What is more, there will be a record attendance for this cricket match. As it is to be a charity affair, the more people who pay for admittance to the ground, the better."

"Rather, sir," I agreed. "You can bet a tremendous crowd of St. Frank's fellows will be in the pavilion, and round the ropes. They're all anxious to see what Jerry Dodd will be able to do against the professionals."

The scene was quite a gay one.

Bannington was in gala mood, and the weather was simply perfect. The sun shone down from an almost cloudless sky, and the heat of the summer's day was moderated by a cooling breeze which blew across the fair-ground.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and the occasion was possibly the most important one of the whole year, so far as Bannington was concerned. It was the day of the annual charity fête and flower show.

On this day Bannington let itself loose. Sometimes the weather was rainy and cool, but even these circumstances would not dampen the townspeople's enthusiasm and ardour. To-day, with the weather perfect, the scene was glorious.

Crowds of people, all attired in the lightest of summer clothing, paraded through the streets, over the fair-ground, and round the large enclosure of the Bannington Cricket Club.

And crowds, of course, were interested in the beautiful blooms and plants on show in the great marquee which represented the flower show. This part of the affair was mainly for the more elderly people. The youngsters had a hundred and one amusements to entertain them.

I looked over the scene with a feeling of pleasure.

Men in white flannels, girls in voile and muslin, children in gay colours—they all combined to make a gay picture, with the background of intense green, and with the white canvas tents on all sides.

In the fair itself there were numerous side-shows. There were cocoanut-shies in plenty; swings, roundabouts, and all manner of entertainments of a like nature.

Two bands were playing in different parts of the ground, and the wafts of music came across to me as I stood by Nelson Lee's side. Just at the back of us there was the cricket ground, with the pavilion on the other side. At present there was nothing doing, for the match was not due to commence until two-thirty, and the hour was only just one o'clock.

Needless to say, large numbers of St.

Frank's fellows were among the crowd. It was a half-holiday at the school, and only a comparatively few boys had remained behind for dinner. The bulk had rushed off to Bannington at noon, when morning lessons were over. Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself had been included in the number.

Personally, I was not particularly interested in the fair. I was looking forward, however, to the cricket match which would occupy the afternoon, and probably a considerable part of the evening. It was an annual fixture, this particular match, and the entire proceeds would go to charity.

All the best men of the Bannington and surrounding cricket clubs would form an eleven, and pit their skill against Eastshire County. Naturally, the amateurs would lose—that was taken for granted. This annual fixture between the local clubs and a county eleven always created great interest, and it had been inaugurated over twelve years before. Only on one memorable occasion had the county been beaten, and that, curiously enough, had been the very first match. Since then the professionals had scored overwhelming victories.

But the Bannington people were always hoping against hope that they would be able to register a win, and this year the team was better than it had been for many a day.

And there was something else which roused local interest. Jerry Dodd, of the St. Frank's Remove, was included in the local eleven. Many people considered it to be an absurd experiment, and one which was likely to jeopardise the success of the amateur stalwarts.

Certainly, it was an extraordinary thing for a boy of fifteen to play against professionals. But Jerry Dodd was an exception. He had done wonderful things of late, proving himself to be a cricketer of outstanding merit.

So far he had had no chance against a really big team. It was an enormous jump from junior cricket to county cricket—and this is what the game would actually be. The Eastshire County eleven had been very successful in the county competition, and were at the top of their form.

"This is Jerry's big chance, guv'nor," I remarked. "My hat! If only he can knock up a good number of runs, he'll be a hero. The way he stood up against Fenton of the Sixth was glorious—and Fenny is considered to be as good as many professionals. So it won't be such a farce as people seem to think."

"We must wait and see, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I hope that Dodd will fulfill our expectations; but you can never tell. Sometimes the very best men manage to get themselves bowled during the first over of a match."

"That's right—be cheerful!" I said. "But you were talking to me about Jerry a minute or two ago. Surely he can't be in any danger?"

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"No, I fancy he is quite safe here," he replied slowly. "At the same time, Nipper, we cannot be too careful. To-day, as you know, is the fifteenth, and that is the day which I have been rather afraid of. If any drastic step is to be taken by Dodd's enemies, that step will be taken to-day."

"But what can they do to-day?" I asked, smiling. "Look at this scene, guv'nor! Thousands of people everywhere! The whole place is crowded! In a throng like this, Jerry will be as safe as houses."

"Sometimes a crowd is helpful to people who wish to kidnap a person," said Nelson Lee. "I certainly think that Dodd is quite safe at present. I believe you left him with Handforth and a number of other juniors?"

"Yes, sir; they were waltzing round on one of the roundabouts, and they're probably on the scenic railway by this time. Nothing could happen to Dodd while he's with Handforth and that crowd."

"Perhaps I am somewhat too careful, Nipper," smiled Lee. "But these Indians have shown such audacity on two or three occasions that I must be prepared for any sudden move."

"Well, there's a limit to what they can do, sir," I said. "The fifteenth! That's the day they wanted to brand him, isn't it? Do you remember that time I dressed up as Jerry Dodd? These Indians collared me then, and I discovered that they want Jerry so that they can brand him with their own sign—the Twin Stars. But I don't think they'll get hold of Doddy to-day!"

"Perhaps not, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "And to-morrow they will possibly vanish as mysteriously as they appeared. Having failed in their object

on Jerry's birthday—the fifteenth—there is not much likelihood of their pursuing their mission. I know something of these Indian customs."

"Oh, well, they're probably diddled," I said. "Let's dismiss the subject, guv'nor, and talk about the cricket. Hallo! Church seems to be in a bit of a hurry! I wonder what he wants?"

Church, of the Remove, was rushing up at great speed, and as he approached us it was obvious that he was in a state of considerable excitement. He came to a halt in front of us, red of face, perspiring freely, and breathing hard.

"Well, Church, what is it?" asked Lee sharply.

"Dodd, sir—he's—he's——" gasped Church inarticulately. "Dodd's——"

"Well?" interrupted Lee, grasping the junior's arm.

"What's wrong, you ass?" I demanded.

"Dodd's gone!" blurted out Church.

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir; we can't find him! He—he went!" exclaimed Church, breathing hard, and still looking scared. "He vanished, sir—disappeared right in front of our eyes! Handy told me to come and find you."

"But you promised to look after him!" I shouted, glaring at Church, and feeling inwardly alarmed. "What was the good of me trusting——"

"Steady on, Nipper—steady on!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "Now, Church, let me have the truth of this in as few words as possible. Please explain lucidly, if you can. You say that Dodd has disappeared?"

"Yes, sir."

"But that's rot!" I broke in. "How could he disappear in all this crowd? I suppose you let him wander off on his own?"

"No, of course not!" replied Church. "It—it was that Egyptian!"

"Egyptian?" repeated Lee sharply.

"Oh, it's so jolly mysterious I don't know how to explain, sir," said Church. "It sounds frightfully impossible, but it happened, right in front of our eyes. We never thought for a moment that anything serious could occur!"

"Yes, you duffer; but what did occur?" I demanded.

"Don't fluster him, Nipper—that will not help matters in the slightest degree," said the guv'nor. "Now, Church, keep yourself calm, and tell me the facts. You mentioned something about an Egyptian?"

"That's right, sir—one of these side-shows, you know," said Church. "Near the ruins of the old abbey there are all kinds of shows—the living skeleton, rifle ranges, fortune-tellers, and all that kind of rot. They're all frauds, I expect. This Egyptian chap was a kind of magician. Didn't you see his pitch, Nipper? It stands next to the tent where the fat boy is being shown."

"Blow the fat boy!" I said. "We want to know what's happened to Jerry Dodd. Out with it, for goodness' sake!"

"Well, we were standing round this Egyptian's place, looking on while he did some tricks," said Church. "There was quite a crowd. What's the name, now? Oh, I know—Pharoah, the wonder-worker of Egypt. That's what he calls himself, and we all thought it was spoof. You see, this chap's tent is different to the others; it's only got three sides, so the crowd can look right into it without paying."

"I'm afraid you are long-winded, Church," said Nelson Lee.

"Sorry, sir; I'll cut it short," said the junior. "Well, we looked on while Pharoah started his entertainment. He had a big basket in the middle of a carpet. He shoved his assistant into this basket, closed the lid down, and made some mystic passes over the top. Then, when he opened the lid again, the assistant had vanished."

"Rats!" I said gruffly. "You were spoofed!"

Church stared.

"I know that, you ass!" he grunted. "It was all spoof; but it was jolly clever. I suppose it was an illusion. Anyway, Pharoah's assistant wasn't in the basket. Yet, after it had been closed again and then opened, he walked out as large as life. It's about the cleverest trick I have ever seen."

"But what has happened to Dodd?" asked Nelson Lee patiently.

"I'm coming to that, sir," replied Church. "Pharoah asked somebody in the crowd to come forward and get into the basket. These conjuror chaps generally try that kind of game, sir—I've seen them on the stage. Pharoah wanted somebody to get into the basket; but, of course, nobody offered. The whole crowd was laughing. Then Pharoah pointed to us, and asked Handy to oblige."

"Of course, he refused?" I asked.

"Yes, naturally," said Church. "Then the Egyptian asked Jerry Dodd to get in the basket. He refused, too—at first, anyway; but he agreed at last, and the crowd gave him a cheer as he sat down in the basket and the lid was put down. Pharoah made a few passes, and Jerry vanished!"

"And have you come to me on account of this?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Why, you ass, it's only a giddy trick!" I said, with relief. "There's no need to worry——"

"Hold on—I haven't finished!" broke in Church. "That's not all. Pharoah said that he'd have to take special measures to bring Dodd back. He put his assistant in the basket, and closed the lid down; then, when he opened it again, the assistant had vanished, too. We didn't think anything of it at the time, and the audience was quite interested by now."

"And what was the finish of the affair?" asked Lee.

"Why, sir, Pharoah got into the basket himself, saying that he would have to go and fetch the other two. So he got in, and closed the lid down. Then we waited—until everybody got impatient."

"Well?"

"That's all, sir—at least, nearly," said Church. "Handy got impatient at last, and jumped over the rope, and opened the basket himself. And it was empty! All three of them had vanished! It's a terrific mystery, sir, because there's no place where they could have got to."

"That basket was a spoof one," I put in. "What was it standing on?"

"Simply on a carpet—on the solid ground," said Church. "I've never seen anything so queer in all my life. Where could they have gone? Handy was properly scared, and he sent me rushing after you. And the crowd is excited, too. Anyway, sir, Dodd hasn't been seen since he went into the basket, and Pharoah and his assistant have faded into thin air as well!"

"All having vanished through this basket?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir."

"And the basket stands on solid ground?" I put in.

"Yes."

"But that's tommy-rot!" I said bluntly. "You know as well as I do, Church, that Doddy and those two Egyptians must have gone somewhere, and it stands to reason that there must be a special way out of the basket—the rear, perhaps——"

"But we could see all round it," protested Church. "That's the rummy part of it! It's not as though these chaps were performing on the stage, with a dark background, and all the rest of the tricks. Anything could be done like that, and the audience completely mystified; but it was in broad daylight here, with the sun shining, and without any dark background or anything. It's the strangest thing I've ever seen in all my life, and—and I don't mind admitting I'm a bit scared!"

Nelson Lee's eyes were gleaming.

"Well, there's no sense in remaining here," he said briskly. "What we must do, Nipper, is to go to this spot at once and investigate. Amazing as it may seem, I have a strong suspicion that these so-called Egyptians are really our old friends, the men from Burmah."

I started.

"My only hat!" I exclaimed. "Do—do you think——"

"I think nothing at the moment," interrupted Lee. "It is impossible to form any definite theory. We will go along at once, and have a look at this most remarkable basket, and probably we shall arrive at some explanation."

We strode away, jostling through the gay, laughing crowds. For the moment we had forgotten all about the fair, the flower show, and the coming cricket match.

"It's a pity I didn't stand with Dodd all the time, sir," I said.

"Perhaps so," agreed Lee. "But you might have been taken in, too, Nipper. It is obvious that these Egyptians worked a very clever piece of trickery—in short, they succeeded in taking Dodd away under the eyes of a large crowd of people. If blame can be attached to anybody, I must confess to be the culprit. I brought you away, Nipper, fully believing that Dodd would be safe so long as he remained with a number of junior schoolboys. It was impossible to anticipate that anything of this nature would take place. By the way, why was Dodd so rash as to offer himself for the purpose of this experiment?"

"He was dotty!" I growled.

"Oh, I don't know about that," replied Church. "Dodd couldn't very well

help himself. It was all so simple and easy, sir," he went on. "This Pharoah chap couldn't get anybody to come, so he asked Handforth direct. Of course, Handy refused. Then the Egyptian asked Dodd, who was standing with us. Dodd refused, too. Then the conjuror started taunting him—said that Doddy was afraid, and it wasn't like British boys to show the white feather."

"And, of course, Dodd fell into the trap at once," said Lee. "He consented!"

"Yes, sir; he couldn't very well help it."

"I can't blame him," observed the guv'nor; "neither can I blame the other boys. It was impossible for them to guess that there was any sinister motive in this innocent conjuring trick. It only proves, Nipper, how necessary it is for us to remain constantly on the alert."

"We can't do everything, guv'nor!" I growled. "Dash it all, it's not our fault!"

Not long before we arrived at the fair-ground we could see that something unusual was afoot. A large crowd of people had gathered in one particular spot, and other holiday-makers were hastening to the place from all sides. A small crowd always attracts a large crowd, and a large crowd attracts a multitude.

We had no eyes for the picturesqueness of the scene as we hurried along the slightly rising ground. Above us stood the ivy-covered ruins of Bannington Abbey, a tumble-down building which had been at its prime in the fourteenth century. It was one of the attractions of the fair to go exploring the old ruins.

It was only with great difficulty that we pushed our way through the big crowd. And then we discovered that the police had arrived, too, including Inspector Jameson himself. They had been wondering what all the excitement was about, and had come to investigate.

Nelson Lee was pleased to find that the rope guarding the tent was intact, and that the crowd had not encroached upon the ground. Handforth and McClure and one or two other juniors were within the three-sided tent, standing round the empty basket. The crowd looked on.

Handforth was having an argument with the police officer when we approached him, but he turned at once upon catching sight of Nelson Lee.

"By George!" he shouted. "I'm jolly pleased to see you, sir! Dodd has disappeared, and I'll tell you exactly ——"

"You need not trouble, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Church has already told me the story in full detail."

"The cheeky ass!" snorted Handforth. "I told him to leave that to me!"

Nelson Lee looked down at the big basket, and then he allowed his gaze to rove about over the tent and to the surrounding grassland. While he was doing this, Inspector Jameson came up, and he was evidently somewhat impatient.

"Have you heard this cock-and-bull story, Mr. Lee?" he asked. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it's a joke of some kind; but I'll make the culprits sit up, if I can lay hands on them! It's no laughing matter to collect a crowd like this. Thank goodness it didn't happen in the middle of the afternoon!"

Nelson Lee completed his survey.

"Well, it is quite obvious that there is only one possible way in which these disappearances could have been managed," he said. "The basket must have a false bottom, and it stands to reason that there must be an exit through what appears to be the solid ground itself."

"But how can you make that out, sir?" I asked blankly. "This isn't a stage—there can't be any trap-doors——"

"Two and two always make four, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee grimly. "I have eliminated every other possibility, and this is the only one that remains. It seems ridiculous, I know, but I have no doubt that we shall find quite a simple explanation. By Jove! Those Indians are astute beggars!"

Lee bent down, and, seizing the basket, gave it a good heave. It fell over on its side, revealing the bottom to be thoroughly strong, and there was no indication that it was provided with a trap-door arrangement. And what could be the use of such a device on solid ground?

Nelson Lee hardly gave a glance at the basket. He was staring at the carpet intently, and I allowed my gaze to wander there, too.

The carpet was quite whole—at least, so it seemed to be. The pattern was rather a severe one, being all squares. The colouring was gaudy—brilliant reds and greens and blues; and suddenly Nelson Lee went down on his knees and pulled at a portion of the carpet.

It came up at once, and I uttered an exclamation. The other fellows were just as surprised as I was.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth. "I've been here all this time, and didn't know that there was a cut in the carpet."

"I knew it must be there, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "There was no other possibility to fit in with the facts. As you will see, it has been cunningly contrived. These squares of the pattern concealed the cut edges perfectly, making it well-nigh impossible to distinguish——"

"But—but what's the good of a hole in the carpet, sir?" put in Tommy Watson. "The ground is all solid underneath!"

Tommy stamped up and down, and there was no question of the ground's solidity. I was quite as puzzled as my own chums. The whole business seemed uncanny, and it was certainly extraordinary.

"Have a look at this!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

He swung back the cut portion of the carpet, and then we stared in amazement. For below, in the ground, a wooden trap-door was revealed!

## CHAPTER II.

### THE BRAND OF THE TWIN STARS!

NELSON LEE had come to one conclusion almost as soon as he came within sight of the scene, and this conclusion had turned out to be quite correct. Indeed, there was only one possible way of explaining the mysterious disappearance of Jerry Dodd.

He and the two Egyptians—who, of course, were really Indians—had passed through the bottom of the basket into a cavity in the earth. The ground seemed quite solid, and the idea of any cavity being there seemed a ridiculous one. But since this was the only solution, it was obviously the truth.

Nelson Lee had glanced at the ivy-covered ruins of Bannington Abbey. He had received the clue by that glance; he knew the truth.

It was some little distance to the abbey entrance, and here a gentleman sat in a little box with a roll of tickets. And everybody who felt inclined to examine the ruins found it necessary to pay the sum of sixpence.

This price included full permission to wander down into the old vaults and underground passages of the abbey. There was nothing secret about these passages; they had been explored countless times by the youth of Bannington, and every passage and vault was known. There were no undiscovered mysteries.

Nelson Lee himself had been down the vaults on one occasion, and he had been rather interested. And he realised that Pharoah's three-sided tent was pitched on a spot which was decidedly deceptive.

The ground seemed quite solid. As a matter of fact, the vaults of the old abbey extended right to this spot, and they were not deep down, being, in fact, only just below the surface. Great flagstones formed the surface, with grass and weeds growing between them. Nobody could possibly suspect that the ground was not solid.

Parteb Ghan, the Indian, had no doubt seen the possibilities of these old vaults, and he had probably made his plans only the night before, after learning that Jerry Dodd was to play in the charity match.

A great deal had been left to chance.

The whole venture, in fact, had been something of a speculation; but the very fact that it had succeeded proved that the Indian's judgment had not been far wrong. He anticipated that Jerry Dodd, with other juniors, would go through the fair before the match commenced.

And it had been only reasonable to suppose that the boys would be interested in the Egyptian magician. Having got Dodd in the crowd, the rest had been fairly simple. It had only been necessary for the tricksters to use a little cunning, and Jerry was enticed into the basket.

And so this daring act of kidnapping, although so extraordinary at first sight, really proved to be simple upon examination. The Indians had realised that their chances were about even. They would probably have their work for nothing; but, on the other hand, there was an equal chance that the plan would succeed.

The plan had succeeded.

If it had failed, Parteb Ghan had another plan up his sleeve; there was no doubt on this point. It was now quite unnecessary to adopt that alternative plan. Jerry Dodd was a prisoner.

His own sensations in the affair were peculiar.

When he went forward, in response to

Pharoah's invitation, he did so somewhat uncertainly. He wondered what the secret of the strange basket could be, and where he would actually disappear to.

He concluded that there must be an illusion. The space behind the basket, although apparently empty, was probably faked up in some way. This is what Jerry thought as he stepped in.

The possibility of danger never occurred to him.

Never for a second did he connect these showmen—as he took them to be—with the relentless Indians who had been after him for so many weeks. Alert as he was, Jerry suspected nothing. How was it possible to do so? On the fairground, with scores of people looking on, how could any harm come to him?

He crouched low in the basket, and the lid closed. Nothing happened for a second or two; but then a most startling thing took place. Without the slightest warning, the bottom of the basket fell completely away, as though hinged at one side. Jerry found himself shooting down.

He landed in a heap, dazed and bewildered, after falling for a distance of at least twelve feet. The fall did not hurt him, however, since he alighted upon an immense pile of straw.

He rolled over, his mind in a state of chaos. He had never dreamed of anything of this nature. Where on earth had he got to? And how would it be possible for him to get back into the basket?

He seemed to be in total darkness, but after he had scrambled out of the straw he noticed one or two points of flickering light. They were candles, stuck against the old stone walls of the vault, or dungeon.

Two figures came out of the gloom and seized him.

"Make no sound, O son of glory!" murmured a voice.

"Rahzin!" exclaimed Jerry, startled.

"It is even as thou sayest, O my son!" replied the Indian smoothly. "I am Rahzin—thy servant. Thou hast been obstinate; thou hast refused to obey the will of Rhoon. Therefore thou hast been subjected to this treatment. Thou wilt be quiet, for there is no escape."

Jerry Dodd's brain was still in a whirl. He tried to piece things together. He had walked right into the trap, without knowing of it until too late. He knew it now, and he wondered how it was that he could have been so unguarded. Now that he knew the truth, it was difficult for him to realise that all this could have been avoided by the exercise of a little caution.

"By jings!" he exclaimed. "You—you heathen rotters! If you dare to ——"

He got no further, for a big scarf was pulled round his face, muffling him completely. Then his wrists and ankles were bound. He could still see, for his eyes were not covered.

And he watched the events of the next few minutes with great interest.

There was a ladder near by, and this was quickly shifted and put into position. Rahzin's companion mounted this, and swung a heavy wooden trap-door back into place. A great iron bolt was shot home; it went noiselessly into its socket.

Then there was a short wait. A faint rap sounded—so faint that only the Indian on the ladder heard it. This ladder was placed in such a position that it would not foul the trap-door when it opened, or anything that passed through.

The man on the ladder reached over and seized the bolt. With a sudden pull he released it. The trap-door flew open, and a big object shot down, to alight on the floor in a heap. The object arose, and proved to be Mahmed, the Egyptian wizard's assistant. Jerry was filled with wonder, in spite of his predicament. He knew exactly how the trick had been worked.

The trap-door was closed again now, and, of course, the basket in Pharoah's tent was quite empty. It would have been quite easy for Mahmed to get back, if he wanted to. He had only to climb the ladder and wedge himself into the basket, and the false bottom of the trap-door could be closed. But Mahmed had no desire to return.

Indeed, less than a minute later the bolt was again drawn, and this time Pharoah himself came tumbling down, to fall, unhurt, into the straw. Once more the door was closed and bolted.

"Well, I'm darned!" thought Jerry. "What a tricky stunt!"

But his thoughts were bitter. In spite of everything, he had fallen into the hands of his enemies. Portch Ghan had got hold of him, and this time the Indians would make no mistake. It was

the fifteenth of the month, the day of all days.

Jerry was alarmed, too. He knew that the Indians had certain designs upon him, but he was not quite sure of the nature of these. He was quite certain, however, that the result of the adventure would not be a pleasant one.

And the cricket match—there would be no cricket match for Jerry! This thought nearly drove him into a frenzy. After all his hopes, after all his excited eagerness, he would fail to turn up when the match commenced. His chance to play against the professionals would be lost, and never again would he have an opportunity to play county cricket.

And what would everybody think?

What construction would they put upon Jerry's failure to turn out? There was only one obvious conclusion. It would be taken for granted that the boy had shown the white feather at the last moment—that he had funked appearing in this big match. The St. Frank's fellows would understand when he explained, but the Bannington public would scorn him—would look upon him with disdain.

It was a galling thought; but Jerry was helpless. He could do nothing whatever to alter his position—to extricate himself from this predicament. He went red with impotent anger.

Then Rahzin came towards him. There was a great change in the Indian now. Jerry had been so occupied with his thoughts that he had not noticed the actions of the Indians during the last few minutes.

As a matter of fact, they had been changing their attire, and were now dressed in a manner quite new and novel to them. They were wearing rough clothing of a type which reminded Jerry of barges and canals—thick, wide trousers and blue jerseys, with reefer coats over them. With peak caps on their heads, there was nothing in their appearance to excite attention. They looked just like a bunch of Lascars off an old cargo boat.

Walking through the Bannington streets they would excite only passing interest, for it was not uncommon for sailors to be in the town, the little port at Caistowe being near by.

Rahzin bent over Jerry Dodd.

"Thou wilt come with us now, O my son," he said softly. "We are thy servants, and thou shalt suffer no harm. Be of good heart."

Jerry couldn't answer, for the simple reason that he was gagged. A moment later he was lifted up by Rahzin and one of the others, and carried across the dungeon to a big packing-case.

He was lowered into this, and the lid was placed down. The whole operation filled Jerry with alarm. He could only arrive at one conclusion. This new prison, the Indians' clothing, Rahzin's words—all pointed to one thing. The whole matter was significant. He was to be taken on board a ship!

What else was there to think?

The packing-case was moved this way and that, and Jerry realised that ropes were being passed round it. This only strengthened his original conviction—to be taken on board ship!

It was a bewildering thought, and opened up startling possibilities. Perhaps he was to be taken to India, or Burmah! Spirited away in this fashion, and forced to travel to the Far East!

And Jerry could do nothing to avert the disaster; escape was impossible. His own chums—Nelson Lee—everybody, in fact, would know nothing of his fate. He would be lost completely, and no trace would be left.

He felt the big case being hoisted up from the floor; then it was carried along. The journey seemed an endless one to Jerry. It was stuffy in that box, and the heat became stifling. He wondered how long it would be before he would lose his senses—before he became suffocated.

Near the top of the box he could see a few small holes, and they were, no doubt, provided for the purpose of ventilation. But they were not very effective. Jerry was streaming with perspiration, and more than once he felt that he would choke.

Then, after hours had passed—according to Jerry's estimation—daylight streamed in through the ventilation holes. As a matter of fact, not more than twenty minutes had elapsed. There was no stoppage; the packing-case was still carried on.

Another long journey, and this time a somewhat bumpy one, for Jerry felt his prison being hoisted up and down in a most peculiar way. It was finally set down with a thump upon some hollow-sounding boards.

The daylight was not so strong here,

being merely a dim glimmer, and this very soon was blotted out, and complete darkness prevailed.

Had the journey come to an end, or was this only a mere pause? It was not long before Jerry found out the actual truth, for the case became active once more, although it was not now being carried. The ropes were being removed.

And then the lid was taken off.

Jerry was hauled out without ceremony, and for a moment or two he could not determine the nature of his new prison—at least, not by sight. But there was a strong smell of tar and stale tobacco in his nostrils. Was it possible that he was on board ship already? How could this be?

Jerry was full of wonder, and he looked about him with a kind of apprehensive interest. Only a couple of candles were burning. There were three Indians, and they looked like dim shadows in the gloom.

The apartment was not big, and its walls consisted of thick, grimy wooden boards. Jerry came to the conclusion that he was certainly in a vessel of some kind. He was aware, too, of a slight motion, and once or twice he thought he heard a faint trickle of water. His feelings were very bitter.

And it seemed amazing that he should have been carried off in this way—spirited away in front of a whole crowd of people, and in such a manner that there was scarcely any possibility of rescue.

He could see now how the whole trick had been worked, and he guessed that his captors had been unable to avoid leaving traces. When an examination of that basket was made, the trap-door would be discovered. But would it be possible to track the Indians to this destination? Jerry was almost certain that there was no hope.

He was not allowed to think further.

"Be of stout heart, O my son!" exclaimed a soft voice near him. "Thou art about to pass through the great ordeal of thy fifteenth birthday—the ordeal of Rhoon. It is a privilege which few can claim."

"Where am I?" demanded Jerry. "Say, what's the idea of all this, anyway? You darned heathens——"

"Violent language does not become thee," interrupted Rahzin. "Be silent!"

The scarf had already been removed from the Australian boy's face. His captors evidently thought that there was no possibility of his crying out and causing a disturbance. Or it was quite likely that this prison was out of earshot of all public ground.

Jerry could hardly think that he was at sea. His calculations were not so far wrong as all that. This vessel must be in the river somewhere, and, in any case, he was not allowed to think on the subject for any length of time.

He found himself sitting in a curious kind of chair, and his hands and ankles were quickly bound to the woodwork, so that it was quite impossible for him to make any movement.

These preparations did not seem to indicate that his captors had peaceful intentions towards him. Inwardly, Jerry was alarmed; but he kept up a bold front, and tried to appear indifferent.

He could now see more distinctly, for his eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom. The place seemed to be a rough cabin, or something of that kind; it was certainly in the interior of a vessel.

But no daylight was admitted. A small door in one of the wooden walls led into a second cabin, and the Indians were constantly passing to and fro, still busy with their mysterious preparations.

It was not long before Jerry knew the truth.

The man who had acted as Pharoah, now shorn of his disguise, came into the cabin carrying a glowing brazier on a tray. There seemed to be something significant in this operation, and Jerry watched with his heart beating faster than ever. He had a premonition that his ordeal would be a dreadful one. But why should he be compelled to suffer? Why were these men from the East taking all this trouble over him—an Australian boy? What connection had they with the son of an Australian sheep farmer?

It was a mystery which Jerry Dodd could not possibly fathom.

The brazier glowed redly, and a filmy haze of smoke arose from the live charcoal. And very soon the smelly apartment became richly scented with the pungent, aromatic fumes of incense. It added a picturesque touch to the drab scene.

And then Rahzin salaamed reverently. Parteb Ghan entered, clothed in rich robes, and with his wrinkled old face set in firm, stern lines. It was obvious

to Jerry that the business, whatever it happened to be, was about to commence.

The leader of the Indians approached Jerry Dodd, bent over him, and examined his face closely. Then he nodded to himself, muttered a few words which Jerry could not understand, and then stood back. He raised a hand.

"Prepare!" he said solemnly. "The ordeal begins. Be brave—no harm come to thee, O son of Rhann!"

"Say, I can't get the hang of all this," exclaimed Jerry impatiently. "What's the idea? Now you've got me, what do you figure on doing? And why in the name of all that's mad should you put me through this fool game?"

"It is not surprising that thou shouldst fail to understand," said Rahzin gently. "And why should we explain? It would not be within thy reasoning, O my son. Thou must submit, and ask no questions."

Jerry grunted.

"Yes, that's about all I can do," he exclaimed bitterly. "Submit! I'm bound up in this chair, and I'm about as much use as a trussed chicken. I guess there'd be a different story if I had the free use of my fists. By jings! I'd like to distribute two or three black eyes round this locality!"

"Foolish talk, O fair youth," said Rahzin. "It helps thee not at all. Thou art the son of Rhann, and to-day is thy fifteenth birthday. In the eyes of the worshippers of Rhoon, thou art of age."

"A man?" asked Jerry, in surprise.

"Nay, not a man, but thou hast reached the years of responsibility," said Rahzin. "Thou art no longer a child. And it is the decree that thou shalt receive the brand of Rhoon—the brand which is written upon the chest of every true son."

"I reckon that's just where you're wrong, and I'm kind of feeble trying to point it out to you," exclaimed the Australian junior. "I don't figure on being a true son of Rhoon. No, sir. Rhoon doesn't interest me one little piece. You've made a kind of mistake, and the sooner you get that into your thinking machines, the better. Before it's too late, I want you to get hold of the idea that I'm not the fellow you want."

Rahzin shook his head.

"Thou art the son of Rhann," he repeated. "It is sufficient. Maybe thou wilt be in a state of puzzlement, I have no doubt, for thou art in ignorance of the truth."

"What truth?"

"It is not for thee to ask questions——"

"I think it is!" snapped Jerry. "I've a right to know——"

"Be thou silent, O my son, for thy words are unheeded," said Rahzin. "It is ordained that thou shalt receive the brand. There can be no escape, and thou must submit, even though thy feelings towards us will be akin to hatred. But we wish thee no harm. In our own country our people come to receive the brand of their own free will—ay, and submit without a murmur. Thou shalt do the same."

"We'll see about that," growled Jerry. "If you're going to play any tricks with me, I shall do something more drastic than murmur. By jings! I never thought it possible that anything of this sort could happen."

Parteb Ghan waved a hand.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "There must be no delay."

Jerry was still greatly puzzled, and why these Indians were taking all this trouble over him was a matter which left him still guessing. Not only trouble, but Parteb Ghan and his associates had gone to considerable expense—and all this for the one purpose of getting Jerry Dodd into their clutches!

And all they needed, it seemed, was to brand him. What could it mean? Why should they want to do anything of such an extraordinary nature?

Rahzin went over to the brazier, and thrust into the glowing charcoal embers an instrument which filled Jerry with interest. It was made of iron, with a wooden handle, and the part which was in the fire resembled a kind of seal, with a quaint design upon it—a design which consisted of two stars, set side by side.

"Let me repeat, O my son, that thou must be brave," said Rahzin. "There will be pain for thee—of that thou must be warned. But thou wilt come to no harm, and it will be a good test of thy courage. If thou cause an outcry it will prove that thou art a weakling, with the blood of a coward running through thy veins; but if thou pass through the ordeal with fixed jaw and set lips, it will prove that thou art of high courage. It is a test."

Jerry didn't say anything. He was watching the brazier with grim, intent interest. The iron which Rahzin had thrust in was now glowing. It was becoming hotter and hotter, and Jerry Dodd felt his skin tingling, and his hair bristling at the roots.

A ghastly thought had come to him.

Was it possible that this branding process consisted of burning his very flesh? Was this red-hot iron to be pressed against his chest until the brand of the Twin Stars was seared into his very skin? It seemed too horrible for contemplation, and Jerry almost choked as he thought.

Rahzin went to the brazier, and removed the iron.

"Say, what—what are you going to do?" shouted Jerry hoarsely.

"Thou wilt see!"

"If you touch me with that red-hot thing, I'll—I'll——" Jerry paused, and controlled himself. "You are going to do it," he went on hoarsely. "By jings! You fiends! You inhuman demons! You—you heathen barbarians! You torturers!"

"Thou art using strong words, O my son!" said Rahzin gravely. "And thou art wrong. Maybe thou wilt feel pain. But what is that? What is thy suffering compared to the sacred orders of Rhoon? What has to be will be!"

Jerry breathed hard.

"You daren't do it!" he panted. "We're not in India, or Burmah! You'll be arrested, and put in prison, and——"

He got no further, for two of the Indians came forward with the thick scarf, and once more Jerry's mouth was bound, so that he could utter no sound.

And then Rahzin, with the red-hot iron in his hand, advanced slowly to Jerry's chair. The metal was glowing strangely—two livid stars.

With one deft movement an Indian ripped open Jerry's waistcoat and shirt, laying bare his fair-skinned chest, and then, inch by inch, the red-hot iron came nearer. Jerry closed his eyes, and clenched his teeth. Whatever happened, he wouldn't be a coward; he would show these torturers that he could stand the ordeal bravely.

He could feel the heat of the iron already, for it was close against his skin, and his brain almost reeled as the heat became more scorching.

## CHAPTER III.

### IN THE NICK OF TIME!

"GREAT Scott!"

I uttered the ejaculation as I stared down at the wooden trap-door in the ground. The earth here seemed to be absolutely solid, and for a trap-door to exist was astounding.

We were standing within the three-sided tent of Pharoah, the Egyptian wonder-worker. Nelson Lee was quite calm and grim. He was not in the least surprised to see this trap-door, for the simple reason that he knew it must be there. There was no other explanation of Jerry Dodd's startling disappearance.

The crowd, fortunately, was being held back by the police, so there was no rush. Handforth scratched his head, and opened his eyes wide.

"A giddy trap-door!" he exclaimed. "What an ass I was not to think of this before! It stands to reason that Doddy must have vanished through a hole in the ground. But where can it lead to?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church. "Everything is solid here; we're standing on firm earth——"

"By Jove!" I interrupted. "Are we, though?"

"Eh?"

"Are we standing on solid earth?" I asked. "Now I come to think of it, I'm not so sure. Just behind us are the ruins of Bannington Abbey, and, underneath, there are all kinds of dungeons and vaults. I wonder if one of these dungeons comes out to here? This trap-door may lead down into a vault, or a cellar!"

"You have hit the nail on the head, Nipper," said Nelson Lee briskly. "There is nothing very remarkable in that, since there was no other nail to hit. You ought to have known at a single glance that this trick could only have been worked in one possible way. The ground beneath us is by no means solid; it is, in fact, honeycombed with the ancient dungeons of the abbey. There is nothing secret about these dungeons and stone passages; their existence has been known for centuries, and the public is quite at liberty to explore them. Our Indian friends have performed a very clever piece of work—we must give them credit for that."

"And what shall we do now, sir?" I asked.

"Well, we shall certainly waste no time here," replied Lee promptly. "It would obviously be absurd to smash this trap-door down, since we can reach the vaults quite easily by the ordinary means. In any case, it would be a difficult task to smash this trap-door, for it is heavily made, and strongly bolted."

"But why haven't people seen it before, sir?" asked Church.

"My dear boy, the thing was not in existence until last night!" replied the guv'nor. "You can surely see what has been done? A small flagstone has been completely removed, and this wooden trap-door substituted. Those responsible must have been working throughout the night, and probably into the forenoon of to-day. Within this tent they were private, for they probably fixed up a fourth side to the tent."

Never for a moment had Nelson Lee been at a loss. From the very first he had divined the truth, and now he was active. He knew, better than anybody else, how necessary it was to rescue Jerry Dodd at the earliest possible moment. Even now he was in the hands of the strange Indians, and they would lose no time in putting their plans into operation. Nelson Lee knew what these plans were, and he was anxious.

After a word with Inspector Jameson, Nelson Lee set off briskly through the crowds. I went with him, and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West came, too. Naturally, Handforth and Co. were equally anxious to be on the scene; but Nelson Lee pointed out that it was impossible for everybody to accompany him.

It was not long before we arrived at the Abbey ruins. They were nearly deserted, for the crowds would not be on the fair-ground until the afternoon; and, in any case, not many people were keen upon exploring the vaults on such a lovely afternoon as this.

Several eager youths offered to act as our guides, but we did not avail ourselves of their assistance. The ruins were open to one and all, and it was not necessary to obtain permission to descend the vaults.

Both Nelson Lee and I had our electric torches, and after we had descended the long, circular stone staircase—a staircase with many steps broken and crumbled away—we found ourselves within a wide, low-arched passage. It was somewhat damp and chill, but not at all unwelcome after the heat of the day on the surface.

"This is all very well, guv'nor, but what can we do now?" I asked. "How do we know which direction to take? There are all sorts of passages and dungeons here, and we might waste a lot of time——"

"I don't think we shall do that, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I came down these vaults about a year or two ago with my friend, Dr. Brett. There was only one very high-roofed vault, and that, I remember, admitted one or two tiny streaks of daylight, which entered between minute cracks from above, where the flagstones forming the roof failed to meet. That is the only spot possible. There is no other vault or dungeon down here where similar conditions exist."

I looked at the guv'nor admiringly.

"By Jingo, sir, you've got a ripping memory!" I said. "And it doesn't take you long to put two and two together. I reckon you must be right. But how do we get to this vault with the high roof?".

"It is some little way down this passage, I believe," said Nelson Lee, indicating a dark opening on his left. "Yes, this is the one—and we must hurry, boys."

We did hurry, but before very long our progress was brought to a full-stop. For our electric torches revealed the fact that the tunnel was completely blocked up, making further progress impossible.

"My hat!" I said. "What's all this?"

"It looks like an avalanche, begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "How frightfully awkward, dear old fellows! I'm afraid we're dished!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"H'm! It's not altogether unexpected," he said. "I half anticipated something of the sort. Our coloured friends thought it wise, no doubt, to block up this tunnel, so that any curious members of the general public could not interrupt their little game. Some such precaution was necessary."

"Of all the nerve!" said Tommy Watson. "This is about the limit!"

Nelson Lee went closer, examining the

rock passage closely with his torch. The obstruction consisted of a large number of stone slabs, uneven boulders, and so forth. Examined casually, it would seem that the roof had fallen in. Any exploring party coming in this direction would at once turn back, under ordinary circumstances.

But the present circumstances were far from ordinary.

And Nelson Lee could see that this was no collapse of the roof, but a carefully built barricade. There was only one thing to be done—the obstruction had to be removed. It would not be such a hard task as it appeared to be.

"Come, boys, we must set to," he said crisply. "Only a few of these boulders need be removed in order to make a space sufficiently large for the passage of our bodies, and the sooner we are through, the better."

We set to energetically, and before long the topmost stones and rocks had been removed. We were then able to scramble over the rest, and to alight in the other part of the tunnel. It stretched darkly before us.

We had not progressed for more than a hundred yards when we suddenly emerged into a big vault, with an enormously high roof—a roof which went up to a point. At this point one or two streaks of daylight came through—just a spot here and there. The top was covered by two stone slabs, and something else—a newly constructed trap-door of wood. Upon the floor, immediately underneath, lay a great, heaped-up pile of straw. Nelson Lee nodded comprehensively.

"Yes—just as I thought!" he murmured. "This is really the only way in which the trick could have been performed. After Dodd got into that basket, the trap-door was opened, and he was precipitated down on to this pile of straw, where, of course, he alighted without injury."

"What a cute dodge!" said Tommy Watson.

Lee flashed his light upwards.

"As you see, that was the only slab that could have been removed," he said. "It was taken completely away, and a wooden door fitted in its place—rather a formidable task; but these men were determined, and they had the whole night at their disposal."

"But how did they know that they would be able to get hold of Jerry Dodd?" I asked.

"They didn't know," replied Lee. "They probably learned that Jerry would be coming to the fair, and they faked up this whole arrangement on the off-chance—as a last desperate expedient to gain their ends. As we know, it came off, and Jerry is now in the hands of the Indians."

"But he's not here, sir!" said Watson, looking round.

"No, obviously not," replied Lee. "He has been taken off by his captors—and there is only one way in which they could have gone. In any case, the trail is quite clearly marked upon the floor."

Out of this cavern there were several passages, but only one showed distinct traces of footmarks, and along this Nelson Lee led the way. It was a fairly wide stone passage, with a low, circular roof, and with a floor so uneven that it was impossible to progress at any speed.

After a while the walls became damp, and even wet. Moisture dripped down from the roof, big drops of water splashing into puddles in great numbers.

And then we came upon a board which was fixed to the wall in such a way that it could not escape the attention of all who came up. It bore the following words.

"Danger! Visitors will proceed beyond this spot at their own risk. By order. B.U.D.C."

"Oh! This looks rather lively," I said. "So the Bannington Urban District Council advise all visitors to retreat at this spot. What can the danger consist of?"

"The roof is probably weak and liable to fall in," replied Nelson Lee. "Yes, I fancy this tunnel leads out into a tiny, ivy-grown ruin near the river—a college at one time, no doubt, and the passage was probably used in the old days as an aid to smuggling. Having its exit so near the river it was peculiarly adapted to such a purpose."

"Well, let's get on, sir," I said.

"I don't know whether I ought to allow you to come——"

"Begad! You don't mean that, sir," put in Sir Montie. "If those Indian rotters could come this way in safety, why can't we go, too?"

Nelson Lee agreed after a moment, and we all went forward. The reason for the warning notice was soon

obvious. The floor of the tunnel was full of potholes—deep treacherous clefts filled with mud and water. But for our electric torches we should have floundered in them helplessly. As it was, we could pick our way with comparative ease.

And the walls were in a terrible condition. Many stones were missing, and great jagged cracks extended in all directions. In many parts it seemed that a dangerous fall might occur at any moment. It was impossible to prevent a slight feeling of apprehension creeping over us as we passed along.

At length, after two or three hundred yards of this sort of thing, the tunnel became dry again, and here another board, facing the opposite direction, bore the same legend. We had passed the danger zone. And it was not long before we arrived at the exit.

We found ourselves within a tiny stone ruin. The passage, indeed, came out on the very ground level—we had no steps to climb.

And we were now close to the river bank, with many shady willows and other trees obscuring most of the view. The ground level here was much lower, since a hillside stretched up towards the old abbey.

We were quite beyond sight of the fair and flower show, for all this was hidden by the thick trees.

But now and again we detected a glimpse of the river through the thick foliage—it was only twenty yards or so away.

"And now, I suppose, we're done?" muttered Tommy Watson.

"Leave it to the guv'nor," I said confidently.

Nelson Lee was already walking out of the ruins, with his gaze fixed intently upon the ground. It was not easy to follow any trail, for everything was dry and hard. I certainly couldn't see much, but Nelson Lee walked onwards, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

"Very faint, Nipper—very faint!" he exclaimed. "But I think we can manage to get on the track—— One moment."

He broke off, looking up, and then took quite a different direction. Instead of going through the trees, he went straight towards the river bank, and now he paid no attention to the ground. Arriving at the bank he looked up and down intently.

I was by his side, and the view which we obtained was a charming one. The river wound round in a picturesque style, and just over the tree-tops in the distance the outskirts of Bannington could be seen. And in the other direction lay the open country, with an old water mill chugging and grinding away leisurely.

Somewhat nearer were some locks, and moored close to these lay an old river barge. A coil of smoke was lazily ascending from a small stove pipe, and a gentleman in blue trousers and a jersey was seated on deck, enjoying his pipe.

Nelson Lee looked in this direction keenly.

"You observe, Nipper, that these trees along the bank continue without interruption to the spot where the barge is moored," he said. "A number of men could easily leave the old tunnel, pass through the trees, and board the barge without attracting any notice—and perhaps without being observed."

I stared.

"Yes, sir, but what——"

"Jerry Dodd is at present on the barge," interrupted Nelson Lee coolly.

"What?"

"Begad!"

"My goodness!"

We all stared at the guv'nor in astonishment.

"But—but how can you know, sir?" I asked blankly.

"My dear Nipper, it is absolutely impossible for Dodd to be elsewhere," said Lee. "It is simply a matter of logic—of putting two and two together. We know for a fact that Jerry was brought through the tunnel, and we further know, from the tracks outside the old ruins, that the Indians took the direction of the barge. It would be a mere waste of time to search for tracks any longer."

"But Jerry may have been taken down the river on a boat, sir——"

"I hardly think so, Nipper," put in Lee. "He was either rendered unconscious by means of drugs, bound and gagged, or—and this is most probable—he was placed inside some receptacle, such as a basket or a box. I found distinct traces of a large square object several times in the passage. These Indians would not risk being seen on

the open river in broad daylight with their prisoner. It stands to reason, therefore, that there is only one place where Jerry can be concealed. It is in this immediate vicinity, and the barge presents the most likely possibility. We will investigate that at once."

After a moment's thought I could see that Nelson Lee's assumption was probably correct. If not on the barge, where could Jerry Dodd be? It was about the only spot where he could have been taken to in broad daylight without exciting interest and inquiry.

Nelson Lee scribbled something on one of his cards, and turned to Tommy Watson.

"By running up the hill you can arrive on the fair ground within a few minutes, Watson," he said briskly. "Take this card to Inspector Jameson and tell him to lose no time."

"Right, sir!" said Watson eagerly.

He was only too glad to make himself useful, and he rushed straight off. I turned to Nelson Lee with a look of inquiry.

"I have requested Jameson to come along with half a dozen men at once," said the guv'nor, before I could speak. "I further told him to be on the spot within twelve or fifteen minutes."

"And shall we wait until they come, sir?"

"Not necessarily, Nipper, we want to be as quick as possible," said Nelson Lee.

We went back to the little ruin, and from there made our way through the trees parallel with the river bank. At frequent intervals, Nelson Lee would pause and examine the ground.

"Yes, we are following the right trail, Nipper," he murmured.

It was not long before we nearly overshot our mark. Happening to glance to the left, I could just catch a glimpse of the barge lying close to the river bank. I touched Nelson Lee's arm.

"Hold on, sir," I said. "We're going right past."

But Nelson Lee knew what he was doing. His plan was to see whether the Indians had gone straight on. They had not, and when some clear footprints were seen on a damp spot of ground leading towards the barge, all further doubts were set at rest.

We emerged upon the river bank. And there, lying peacefully at rest, was the barge. The gentleman in the blue jersey was still seated upon the hatchway, and he looked up casually as we appeared.

He was an old bargee of the usual type, with a fringe of grey whiskers, and a clay pipe sticking out of the corner of his mouth. He nodded and touched his forelock.

"Mornin', gents," he said amiably. "Nice day!"

Nelson Lee stepped on board, and we followed.

"Yes, quite so," said the guv'nor. "I wish to ask you a few questions, and it is my way to be direct. Do you know anything of a party of Indians—Hindoos? I have every reason to believe that they are on board this barge at the present moment."

The man stared, removed his pipe, and shook his head.

"Injuns?" he repeated slowly. "By hokey! What should I know about Injuns? I ain't set eyes on one not for months."

"I asked you for the truth, my friend," said Nelson Lee grimly.

The bargee spat overside.

"Oh, so you'd call me a liar, would you?" he demanded. "Me—Bill Adams, wot's known on this 'ere river from Caistowe to——"

"You can't bluff me, Adams, so it's no good attempting to do so," interrupted Lee curtly. "And why should you let your temper get the better of you? I want certain information—you can give it. Perhaps you do not know that these Indians are being searched for by the police, and that they have deliberately kidnapped a schoolboy. I don't suspect you of any wrong doing, Adams, and if you know nothing at all. I advise you to be truthful. I suspect that the Indians gave you so much money for the use of the barge. Is that so?"

Bill Adams removed his peak cap and scratched his grey hair.

"Well, I'm durned if you don't know more than I do," he exclaimed. "Wanted by the police, are they? The slimy whelps! If I'd ha' known this, they wouldn't have had my barge—no, not for no money! I'm a respectable man, I am!"

"In that case, Mr. Adams, I am sure you will fall in with my suggestions," said Nelson Lee. "These

Indians brought the boy on to your barge——"

"They never did no such thing!" protested the owner. "I've been here the whole time, and there wasn't no schoolboy brought on board. I reckon you must have made a mistake."

"In all probability the boy was enclosed in a basket, or a box," said Lee.

"By hookey! A box!" said the bargee. "They did take a box down the for'rard hold, but I never thought there was anybody inside. And who may you be, sir, anyway?"

Nelson Lee soon introduced himself, and Mr. Adams was certainly impressed. He was still more impressed when a small party was seen rapidly approaching from the direction of the fair ground.

It was headed by Inspector Jameson, and consisted of the inspector, three constables, and Tommy Watson—to say nothing of a crowd of other juniors who followed at a respectable distance.

"Well, darn my skin!" ejaculated Mr. Adams. "This 'ere's a fine go, and no bloomin' mistake! The fust time I've ever 'ad any trouble with the police—me, with as clean a record as any man on the river! By hokey! It makes a man think twice afore obliging strangers! No more heathen Injuns for me!"

He was indignant and somewhat alarmed, and he went on to explain that the Indians had paid him the sum of ten pounds for the use of his barge for two or three hours. He had thought it a very excellent deal, and had believed the Indians when they told him that they only required the barge for the purpose of holding a harmless religious service—something peculiar to their own sect.

Mr. Adams was certainly a harmless old fellow with no suspicions of the real truth. And Nelson Lee promised him that he would not suffer.

"Are we going to wait for the police to come, sir?" I asked, looking at the approaching crowd.

"No Nipper—we shall waste no time," replied Nelson Lee briskly. "Come, my lad, you and I will investigate now. Take no risks, for reinforcements will be at hand almost as soon as we enter. But I do not wish to be too late—enough time has been wasted already."

Without delay we passed along the deck of the barge until we came to the companion. The hatchway of this was tightly closed and locked on the inside. Nelson Lee had tried it very cautiously, and now he looked at me.

"No, we won't risk knocking," he said. "Such a move might only precipitate matters for Jerry. The forward hold, Adams said, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we will make an entry by that means."

The hatch was tightly closed over the forward hold, but it did not take the guv'nor long to make an alteration. Then he drew out his revolver and got ready. He and I intended wasting no time.

"Now, Nipper!" muttered the guv'nor grimly.

Together we heaved over the hatch, letting a flood of daylight into the dim interior. We found ourselves staring into a deep well—quite a large apartment, in fact. And at the moment it was filled with various figures.

The surprise had been swift and dramatic, and the Indians received no warning that we were on the spot. It had happened so abruptly that Parteo Chan and his associates were taken off their guard.

But I did not pay much attention to the dark skinned men from the East. I stared straight at another figure—the figure of Jerry Dodd.

He was bound to a chair, and his mouth was completely gagged by means of a huge scarf. The Australian junior's breast was bared, and he was streaming with perspiration.

And I had caught one brief glimpse of something which made me feel rather bad for the moment. At the very second of our throwing the hatch covering back I had seen one of the Indians with a red-hot branding iron in his hand. This vile thing he had been about to press on the bare skin of Jerry Dodd's chest!

In fact, we had interrupted the proceedings at the crucial moment. Another minute's delay, and Jerry would have received that dreadful brand of the Twin stars!

Exactly what happened next was rather confused. I know that I marvelled a bit about the accuracy of Nelson Lee's deductions. He had tracked Jerry Dodd to his prison with

Without any warning Jerry found himself shooting down into a darkened vault, and before he could realise what had happened he was seized by two men.

surprising skill and speed. But it was impossible to think clearly on these matters just then.

For the Indians were attempting to escape—and failing. For Inspector Jameson and his men arrived, and Parteb Ghan, Rahzin, and the others were seized and handcuffed and rendered harmless. Nelson Lee and I dropped down into the hold, and in a twinkling we had cut through Jerry Dodd's bonds, and he was free.

Only in the nick of time had he been saved from his ghastly ordeal!

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE BOWLING MARVEL!

JERRY DODD lay back with a sigh of comfort.

"I figure I'm feeling real good now, chums," he said easily. "By jings! Those Indians got me good and proper that time!"

"That's all right, my son—don't you think about them," I said. "It's all over now, and you won't be troubled by the blighters any more. There's no possiblility of further danger."

"Begad! It was wonderful the way Mr. Lee tracked you down, old fellow—it was, really!" observed Sir Montie, adjusting his pince nez, and eyeing Jerry Dodd with great interest. "But I am frightfully doubtful about you playing in the match this afternoon."

"Yes, you'll be off colour," said Tommy Watson.

"Say, chums, you make me smile!" grinned Jerry. "Off colour! Not on your life! I reckon I'll put up a good show, an' I'll be in tip-top form."

"Well, you ought to know best," said Church.

Quite a crowd of us had collected round the Australian junior, who was seated in a deck-chair just within one of the big refreshment marquees on the fair-ground. Only half an hour had passed since Jerry's dramatic rescue from the barge, and much had occurred in that small space of time.

Nelson Lee, of course, went straight off into the town with Inspector Jameson and his prisoners, for the guv'nor would be required to make the formal charge against the Indians.

In the meantime we had seized Jerry Dodd, and had carted him off to the fair-ground. And now he was looking practically himself again. His old colour had returned, and he was full of confidence. The trying ordeal had left no ill consequences, and it was comforting to him to know that no further danger could assail him.

For Parteb Ghan and his fellow conspirators were now in the hands of the police, and we had been conjecturing as to their ultimate fate. Handforth declared that they would receive a sentence of not less than twenty years' penal servitude; but this, of course, was quite wrong.

"They deserve punishment, of course," I remarked. "But in a case of this sort the police have got to be jolly careful, and it's quite likely that the whole thing will be hushed up. Jerry's pater won't want this story published broadcast in the newspapers."

As a matter of fact, I was right in my surmise, for when Nelson Lee returned shortly afterwards, he requested that we should keep the facts to ourselves. He told the other boys that they would be doing Jerry a good turn by keeping their mouths closed. There was no reason why this story should be spread.

"I rather fancy those Indians will never be brought before a magistrate," went on the guv'nor; "or, if they are, it will be a very quiet affair, and no newspaper reports will be allowed."

"But what's going to happen to the rotters?" demanded Handforth.

"They will probably be held in custody for a few days, and then sent back to India, under escort," replied Nelson Lee. "That is, they will be deported; and there is no further possibility of Dodd being endangered. My advice to you, boys, is to forget the whole episode."

"Right you are, sir!"

"We'll do just what you want, sir!"

"That's very good of you, my lads," smiled Lee. "And now, how are you feeling, Jerry? Under the circumstances. I think I had better have a chat with Mr. Newman, and get him to release you from the match——"

"Jumping kangaroos!" gasped Jerry, leaping out of his chair. "Don't do that, sir! By jings! This is the chance of a lifetime, and I'd play if—if I had double pneumonia, and rheumatic fever, and the measles! I can't miss it, Mr. Lee!"

The guv'nor smiled.

"At least, there is no doubt about your enthusiasm, Dodd," he said. "But do you think you will be fit? Your nerves must be rather shaky——"

"I guess they're as steady as a rock, sir," interrupted Jerry eagerly. "I've forgotten all about those Indians—I don't know a thing! And my plan for this afternoon is to show these darned professionals that it's not always a wise thing to grin too soon!"

"Oh, so you know that they have been grinning?" smiled Nelson Lee. "As a matter of fact, Dodd, these Eastshire players are highly amused; they regard your presence in the Bannington team as a first-class joke."

"The conceited rotters!" said Handforth indignantly.

"Not at all," put in Nelson Lee. "These professionals have never met Dodd, and they do not know his capabilities. It is only natural that they should be highly amused at the thought of a schoolboy playing against them."

"That's right enough, guv'nor," I agreed, "and I don't suppose Jerry is offended. What he's got to do is to show these Eastshire men that he's not a joke, and I believe he'll give them a first-class scare."

"We'll hope so, at all events," said Nelson Lee. "You must remember, Dodd, that these county men are clever, tricky cricketers. They are no schoolboys, and you will need all your skill and courage to maintain your excellent reputation. The chief thing is to keep cool and calm. That, I realise, will be difficult, for you will be out of your element—every other member of the two elevens will be at least double your age. You will be a dwarf among giants. So it is only natural that you should be somewhat nervous to start with."

Jerry Dodd grinned.

"I guess it'll take more than that crowd to scare me, sir!" he observed.

"By the way, guv'nor, what do you reckon would be a good performance on Jerry's part?" I asked curiously.

Nelson Lee considered.

"Well, if Dodd takes one wicket for his side, and if he knocks up between twenty and thirty runs, he will do famously," he replied. "A score of twenty-five against these professionals would be highly creditable."

Handforth sniffed.

"Why, if Jerry doesn't make fifty off his own giddy bat, I'll eat my boots!" he declared. "He may be a kid, but size doesn't count in cricket. Those professionals will have some of the swank knocked out of them this afternoon!"

We were reminded that it would soon be time for the match to commence. The enclosures were already filling up. The public was being well attracted by the star cricket match of the year; before the time fixed for commencement, the cricket ground would be packed.

Jerry soon went off with Nelson Lee, and the majority of the juniors hurried off to obtain some luncheon before going to their own places. They had come for the special purpose of seeing Jerry Dodd do some wonderful things against Eastshire. Perhaps the fellows were expecting rather too much from their cricketing hero; a good performance on his part would be set down as poor. So Jerry Dodd was determined to play the game of his life.

He didn't feel at all nervous, as Nelson Lee had feared. On the contrary, when he was introduced to the Bannington eleven by Mr. Newman, the captain, he was perfectly cool and at his ease.

But he did not fail to observe the curious glances which were bestowed upon him by the local champions. Many of these cricketers entirely disapproved of their captain's decision, and they looked upon Jerry's inclusion in the team as a preposterous experiment which could only result in ridicule and disaster.

But Jerry had expected this, and he did not mind particularly the somewhat scornful glances which were cast in his direction. He mentally resolved to turn those scornful glances into ones of approval. He wanted to make good—and if pluck and determination could help him, he would certainly do so.

But the reception he received from his own side was nothing compared to the open scorn which was heaped upon him by the professionals. The Eastshire County eleven was a famous one. They had been doing extremely well in the county championship campaign, and this one-day match was regarded by Eastshire as a leisurely holiday. The thought of Bannington winning never even entered into the heads of the professionals; and the knowledge that a schoolboy was included in the opposing team fairly made them roar.

When Jerry was first introduced by

Mr. Newman, he was greeted with eleven broad grins and several hearty laughs. The Eastshire men were good fellows, every one of them, but they couldn't possibly accept Jerry seriously. The knowledge that he was the nephew of "Bill" Dodd, the well-known Australian player, had very little effect. He was a schoolboy, and a junior at that. It was amazing that the Bannington captain should have chosen him.

The Eastshire captain was J. H. Keen, a very well-known cricketer—and, incidentally, a member of the selection committee, that unique body whose duty it was to choose the players for the big test matches.

Keen was a big, bluff individual with a bronzed, clean-shaven face. He seized Jerry Dodd's hand quite frankly, and was pleased to be somewhat facetious.

"So you're the dark horse, eh?" he said pleasantly. "You're the terrible demon who means to score a century, and wipe us to bits?"

"I'm not saying what I'm going to do," replied Jerry. "I don't figure it's my habit to take things for granted, Mr. Keen; but it's a darned sure thing that I'll do my best to alter the shape of that smile of yours!"

The Eastshire captain roared.

"Good!" he said. "I dare say you will alter the shape—it'll grow wider. But I admire your pluck, youngster—and your cheek, too! And if you make more than five runs, I'll buy you a new cricket bat."

"Thanks awfully!" said Jerry. "But I've got a beauty of my own."

All the other members of the Eastshire team joked loudly about Jerry. He took no offence. He knew this would happen, and, after all, nothing else could have been expected. But after he had proved what he could do—well, perhaps he wouldn't be taken as a joke.

A cold chill ran down his spine as a thought struck him—the thought of being dismissed by the first ball. Such disasters happened to the best of cricketers. But he thrust this fear aside; he didn't allow his confidence to desert him.

At the exact minute for the start the two captains tossed, and Keen won. This was rather unfortunate, for the amateurs had been hoping for the privilege of batting first, while they were fresh. Naturally, the Eastshire skipper decided to bat at once.

Accordingly, Mr. Newman and his men went out into the field. Jerry Dodd was placed at cover point, and he was well satisfied with his position. A cheer went up as the first two professionals came out to the wickets—Johnson and Haycraft. Haycraft was a famous batsman, and it was evidently Keen's intention to show the Bannington people some rapid run-getting at the very beginning.

The match started.

The Bannington bowlers were Martin and Longwood, and I didn't know much about them. I watched the play with great interest and keen attention. The weather was glorious, and the crowd was huge and appreciative. Better conditions for a big cricket match could not be desired.

The first ball was sent down by Martin, and Haycraft swung his bat round and dispatched the leather to the boundary for four. This was a good opening, at all events.

There followed some pretty work by the two batsmen, and the runs were made fairly rapidly. After fifteen minutes' play the score stood at thirty-three, and Haycraft was responsible for twenty-two of these runs. The bowlers could do nothing to dismiss the professionals. And then came a little bit of excitement—when it was least expected.

Longwood was bowling, and he sent down a ball which broke rather awkwardly. But Haycraft was not put out; he swung his bat, and the leather went soaring away at express speed.

Jerry Dodd leapt upwards, just as he stood—a clean, agile jump. His left hand was outstretched, and there was a sharp smack. The next moment he calmly tossed the ball into the air.

A tremendous roar went up.

"How's that?"

"Out!"

"Oh, well played, Dodd!" yelled the St. Frank's juniors.

"Good old Doddy!"

"Well-caught, sir!"

It had indeed been a smart catch, and one that nobody had believed possible. Haycraft himself looked stupidly at Dodd for a moment or two, and then shook his head. He walked towards the pavilion with a very serious expression on his face. That catch of Jerry's had made him think.

But the other professionals were not much impressed. They regarded it as a fluke. This idea, however, did not last long.

Cutcliffe, the next man, had not been in for more than five minutes before his wicket went to pieces. It happened rather dramatically—and Jerry Dodd was again responsible.

Cutcliffe had sent the ball away almost to the boundary, and it was rather smartly returned by the fieldsman. It came straight to Jerry, and he hurled it at the wicket without a second's pause.

The leather struck the stumps squarely, scattering them, while Cutcliffe's bat was still a clear six inches away from the crease.

"Out!"

"Oh, well fielded!"

"That's the stuff to give 'em!"

The St. Frank's fellows were simply yelling themselves hoarse. The two noteworthy incidents of the match so far had been performed by Jerry Dodd, and with the net result that two of the professionals were dismissed. Nobody could deny that Jerry was hot stuff.

"Two wickets for thirty-nine!" said Handforth. "Good business! If things keep on at this rate we shall see these Eastshire bounders whacked yet."

But things did not keep on at that rate. Kettle was the next batsman, and he proceeded to make the fur fly. The Bannington bowlers were changed occasionally, and nothing seemed to result. The score stood at fifty-eight before Johnson's off stump was found by Martin. He had played well, but not brilliantly. Fifty-eight for three wickets was quite good.

Bateman now joined Kettle, and these two formed a partnership which led to excellent results. They batted confidently, and in one over alone three boundaries were secured, to say nothing of a pair of threes. Newman changed his bowlers again, but this made no difference.

By twos, threes, and fours the score mounted up, and the enormous crowd was delighted by the excellent display of batting. The game was fast, interesting, and altogether good.

But the amateurs were feeling their handicap. Against these Eastshire men they were almost powerless. And Bateman and Kettle had settled down so comfortably that they seemed to be firmly "set" for the afternoon.

While the field was changing at the end of an over, Longwood tapped Newman on the sleeve. The Bannington captain looked round.

"No, Longwood, it's no good," he said. "Your bowling isn't any good against these men——"

"I don't want to bowl," interrupted Longwood. "Just a suggestion, old man. Why not try that youngster?"

"Dodd?"

"Yes," said Longwood. I was rather opposed to it at first, but I've been watching him. He's fairly on his toes, and as keen as mustard. I've heard he's pretty good at bowling. Why not try him?"

Newman nodded.

"I hadn't thought of it," he replied. "By George, I will!"

A moment later he tossed the ball to Jerry, whose face flushed with delight. He had been hoping for this all along. He gripped the leather with a fierce sense of exultation. The flush in his cheeks increased slightly as he heard a murmur of laughter from certain sections of the crowd, and he did not fail to notice the smiles on the faces of Bateman and Kettle.

"Good for you, kid!" chuckled Bateman, as Jerry passed him. "Now your pals are going to perspire!"

This meant, of course, that Bateman expected to knock Jerry's bowling all over the field. Kettle was of the same opinion, and Kettle himself was rather anxious to be facing the junior.

Jerry took a short, leisurely run, and it seemed that the ball would be sent down quite slowly. But at the last moment his wrist gave a peculiar movement, with a twist in it. The ball left his hand and fairly hissed down the pitch. Bateman was unprepared—as a matter of fact he was over-confident. Before he knew what actually happened, the leather slipped under his bat and lifted the middle stump clean out of the ground.

"Bowled!"

"How's that?"

"Out!"

"Oh, good old Jerry!"

Bateman stared at his wicket blankly.

"Well. I'm hanged!" he gasped. "How—how on earth——"

This was certainly the most surprising event of all, and it was gradually becoming apparent to the onlookers that Jerry Dodd was something out of the common. He was not merely a clever schoolboy

cricketer, but a past-master at the game. He might be only fifteen, but his knowledge of cricket was complete and wonderful.

"We owe that kid an apology!" said Keen, as Bateman strode into the pavilion. "By gad, that was no fluke, old man, the way he got your middle stump! When our innings is over I shall apologise to Dodd."

"Oh, don't make a fool of yourself!" snapped Bateman. "I'll admit the youngster's a bit of a surprise, but he can't keep it up for long."

J. H. Keen, however, was looking very serious now. He had watched the play very closely, and he continued to watch it in the same way. Coles was the next batsman, and he was the Eastshire wicket-keeper. If he knocked up fifteen runs in a county match he did well. To-day he expected to double his usual average.

He was dismissed for nil.

Jerry sent down the second ball of that over. It was a tricky one. Coles was obliged to hit it, or his middle stump would have gone. He did hit it, and his worst fears were realised. It went sky high, and descended into the waiting hands of Newman.

"Out!"

"The infernal young wretch!" muttered Keen, frowning. "What that boy doesn't know about bowling isn't worth learning! Thank Heaven he wasn't put on earlier! I certainly do owe him an apology!"

At last the crowd knew the truth—and the Bannington eleven knew it, too! With exultant joy they watched Jerry's every movement, and they realised that Newman had been suffering from a brainwave when he included this schoolboy in the eleven. The Australian junior was playing an astounding game.

Five wickets were already down, the score stood at one hundred and five. Heath was the next man to join Kettle. The St. Frank's fellows were half hoping that Jerry would do the hat trick—at least, that he would dismiss Heath for a duck's egg. But this was too much to expect.

The professionals were cautious now. They realised, rather too late, that this schoolboy cricketer was more than their match; they knew that he was something of a wizard at the game.

The runs were now obtained slowly, and only fifteen more were added to the score during the next twenty minutes. Then Kettle's leg stump went flying. This time it was Martin who found it.

Murray came in, and exactly three minutes afterwards, when the score stood at one hundred and twenty-one, he fell into one of Jerry's traps and was caught out. The position was not looking very good for Eastshire now. Seven wickets down for one hundred and twenty-one runs could not be called a brilliant performance, considering that the professionals were up against an amateur eleven.

Further disasters followed.

Heath was soon out, and now Muggleton and Keen were at the wickets. They put up a bit of a show. Keen himself was determined to pull the game right out of the fire. But his determination was not good enough.

He had only added twenty-five to the score when Jerry took up the bowling once more; the junior had been having a short rest. He sent down a ball which Keen completely misjudged. It broke awkwardly; seemed to be going wide, and the Eastshire captain attempted to tap it into the slips. Instead, he sent the leather crashing into his own wicket.

"Out!"

"By gad, and so it is!" said J. H. Keen ruefully.

There were nine wickets now down, and less than ten minutes later the tenth went; Muggleton being tempted to hit out at a ball which he should really have blocked. It soared high, and it was Jerry Dodd himself who caught it.

He was aware of the fact that the outburst of cheering was intended for him, and he flushed with pleasure. The professionals were all out, and their score was by no means formidable—one hundred and seventy-two.

It was a most surprising result. Keen himself had expected to declare at about tea-time, after making between two and three hundred runs. And now, at about four o'clock, they were all out for quite a moderate score! And J. H. Keen did not lose sight of the fact that he had Jerry Dodd to thank for this state of affairs.

He looked forward to the Bannington innings with secret misgivings. If Jerry Dodd could bat as well as he could bowl; but Keen did not like to think too much. Nevertheless, he looked as serious as he felt.

As for Jerry Dodd, he was already the hero of the afternoon.

## CHAPTER V.

### PROVING HIS WORTH.

BATEMAN shook his head as he filled his pipe.

"Hanged if I can understand it," he said bluntly. "That boy doesn't look anything much, after all. And I made a proper ass of myself when he was first put on to bowl, confound him! He took me fairly by surprise!"

Keen nodded.

"There's no doubt about that," he agreed. "It shows that we mustn't be so confident. These people are only local amateurs, and I wouldn't give a fig for the ordinary team. But that boy raises it out of the common ruck completely. I tell you, he's as smart as they make 'em, and we shall have to look out for ourselves when he goes in to bat."

The tea interval was nearly over, and it would soon be time for Eastshire to take the field. The professionals were a very different set of men now. That feeling of supreme confidence had deserted them, and they were in a very thoughtful mood. There were, however, one or two optimists.

"Oh, I don't know," said Coles, the wicket-keeper. "This boy is certainly a good bowler, but that's all the more reason to suppose that he's not very good at batting. If we can only dismiss him with only a few runs to his credit the others will soon be polished off. In fact, I'll bet you ten to one, Keen, that these Bannington men are all out for less than a hundred.

"I wish I could believe you," said J. H. Keen. "In any case, I'm not going to bet. I only wish we'd realised Dodd's value at the beginning, instead of setting him down as a dunce. That's where we made our big mistake."

Keen had already seized his opportunity to speak with Jerry. And the Eastshire captain had apologised freely and generously for his banter at the commencement of the game. It seemed all wrong to him that a boy should be able to play so wonderfully. But Keen was a sportsman, and his heart was in cricket. He was full of enthusiasm for Jerry Dodd's astounding prowess.

There was a big cheer when the county men streamed out of the pavilion into the field. Then came the first two Bannington batsmen—Alderton and Lockson. These men, of course, were all known in the district, and much was expected of them.

Unfortunately, they did little.

Eastshire proved that they had some excellent bowlers. At present, Muggleton and Kettle were doing the bowling, and Muggleton was particularly deadly. He was nothing to look at, a short, stumpy individual with a bald head. But he sent the leather down with a sting which had staggering effects.

The fourth ball of the over proved to be Alderton's downfall. His leg stump was just touched, and the bails went toppling off. The first man out, and the score stood at nil.

This was by no means a promising opening. But, as somebody pointed out, it was better to start badly and finish well, than to start with a bang and go all to pieces later.

Dale came and filled Alderton's place, and the tremendous round of applause which went up told me that Dale was something of a local champion. As a matter of fact, he was the best batsman that Bannington could provide, and he had been doing great things in the local games.

He did not disappoint the crowd.

Right from the start, he exhibited great confidence, and hit out at everything that came, scoring twos and threes with unfailing regularity, with an occasional boundary thrown in.

He had scored thirty-one, and Lockson seven when the next wicket fell. Dale seemed to be set, and he was batting brilliantly. Then he fell a victim to the smartness of Coles, the wicket-keeper.

Leaping forward to meet the ball, apparently with the intention of sending it well over the boundary, he completely missed the leather. Before he knew it there was a click and a crash. Coles had knocked off the bails with the ball in one movement, while Dale was still out of the crease.

"That's out, I think!" said Coles pleasantly.

"Hard luck!"

"Well played, Dale!"

Dale did not look very happy as he carried his bat out. He had expected to put up a much better performance. Newman, himself, went in next, and covered himself with somewhat doubtful glory by knocking up nine runs and fizzling out.

He was neatly caught by Bateman, and the swift downfall of the local captain had its due effect upon the crowd. Everybody was now watching anxiously.

"Why don't they send Doddy in?" demanded Handforth. "He'd show them the way to bat!"

"Rather!"

"Oh, Doddy will be in soon, don't you worry!"

The next man in, however, was Thornton, a long, lean young fellow who had been rather smart at fielding. Misfortune dogged him, for he managed to get his leg before the wicket before he had been batting four minutes, and the umpire pronounced him to be out. He had added nothing to the score, which now stood at fifty-two for four.

Then Longwood came out, and proceeded to wake things up somewhat. The first ball he sent to the boundary, and then followed this up by scoring a three. This brought the bowling to Lockson.

It was rather unfortunate, because Lockson tried to lunge out. He actually did so, but the leather went sky high, and there was no mistake about the catch. The fieldsmen were now looking rather more pleasant.

Five wickets down, and only fifty-nine runs scored. This was very different to what Eastshire had done. With five wickets down, their score had been over double this amount.

"This won't do—this won't do!" said Newman anxiously. "Unless we improve we shall fail to get a century between us. Who's the next man? Oh, Barrow! For goodness' sake, man, do your best. Longwood's in good form to-day, and the pair of you ought to make up for lost time."

"Leave it to me," said Barrow confidently.

Three minutes later he came back, his wicket having been knocked to pieces by the first ball. There was no doubt that Muggleton was a dangerous bowler. He was causing the wickets to fall in a deadly way.

"Oh, corks!" groaned Handforth. "These Bannington rotters look like beating the county, don't they? The match is a giddy frost! Six wickets—fifty-nine runs! Help!"

"It's a bit rotten," admitted Church.

"They'll never do it now—it's impossible!" put in Reginald Pitt. "Why, they need a hundred and fourteen to win, and they've only got four more men. They'll have to do wonders!"

The roar which went up immediately afterwards was heard half over Bannington. For Jerry Dodd smiling and cheerful, came out of the pavilion with a bat under his arm. Newman had decided to put him in next. I was very pleased to see this, for now there was a chance that the fat might be pulled out of the fire. I had great confidence in Jerry, and I expected him to remain at the wicket until the end of the innings. He would outlast the others in my opinion.

But there was a lot of lee-way to be made up, and it was only natural that the county players should consider themselves to be in a fairly safe position. But they were just a bit doubtful about Jerry.

"It all depends upon that youngster," muttered J. H. Keen anxiously. "I'm infernally worried about him. If Muggleton gets him out first ball I'll love him for the rest of his life."

Muggleton certainly had this intention. He smiled rather grimly while Jerry was busy with the umpire. Then he prepared to bowl, and he steeled himself to make an extra effort—to send down one of his most destructive spinners. It was this spin which had deceived many a first-class batsman.

That ball was certainly a terror, and Jerry Dodd knew it. Consequently, it did not prove his undoing. On the contrary, he tapped it neatly into the slips; and, owing to the spin, it fairly shot over the ground towards the boundary. Jerry and Longwood crossed the pitch three times.

Longwood received the next ball, and tapped a single. Again the bowling came to Jerry. He opened out his shoulders and delivered a mighty swipe which sent the ball hurtling over the pavilion.

"Hurrah!"

"That's the way, Jerry!"

"Just the same as usual!"

Jerry Dodd was already famous as a terribly powerful hitter. At St. Frank's he had sent the leather to amazing distances. And now he was proving that he could do exactly the same thing when playing against professionals. It simply meant that he

had nothing to learn—that he was capable of facing any bowling.

And then Jerry treated the onlookers to a wonderful display.

No matter who bowled, he did exactly as he liked with the ball. In one over alone he scored four boundaries. He was calm, confident, and he seemed to exert that uncanny power over the bowler which others had noticed.

The bowler, indeed, had his confidence robbed from him by Jerry's very attitude. The county men were not at their best when facing Jerry. They couldn't account for it themselves, and their anxiety was great.

"And we laughed at this youngster!" said J. H. Keen gloomily. "By gad! We laughed at him!"

There was something rather bitter in his tone. He and his colleagues fully realised the fact that this schoolboy was the best cricketer they had played against during the season. A boy, certainly, but a man so far as cricket was concerned.

The score was mounting up rapidly, for Longwood, too, was doing fairly well. Already the board registered the total of ninety-five, and Jerry was responsible for twenty-seven of these.

There was a round of clapping when the hundred mark was reached. And still the batsmen were playing confidently. No matter what Keen did, it made no difference. The county skipper altered the field again and again. He set it expressly for Muggleton's bowling and Jerry's batting.

But every time the alteration was made, Jerry calmly changed his tactics. Where he had sent the ball earlier, now closely guarded by hawk-eyed fieldsmen, the ball never came. It went shooting away elsewhere, to be chased by perspiring, irritable professionals.

J. H. Keen's experience was of no avail. He simply didn't know what to do. And Jerry went on batting like a machine, to the great joy and delight of the crowd—and the almost hysterical pleasure of the Removites.

While Longwood was obtaining five runs, Jerry scored twenty. And when the fifty went up under his number there was a big roar. But, after all, it couldn't last for ever, and Longwood's off-stump was found.

"Seven wickets for one hundred and twenty-two!" I exclaimed. "That's all serene, my sons. If these other men will only keep their wickets intact the county will be walloped. Jerry will do all the batting that's necessary. We only need fifty-one to win."

Martin was the next batsman. He rather resented Jerry's performance, for he considered that he and his colleagues were being shown up. And Martin decided to teach Jerry a thing or two. This was a most unwise proceeding, and he was quickly rewarded for his egotism.

He fell into the simplest of simple tricks, and was caught out before he had scored a single run. Newman was inclined to be snappy when Martin returned to the pavilion.

"It's no good doing that sort of thing!" he said curtly. "You can't play those games against these county men, Martin. You deserve to be sent out for a duck, but we can't afford to take risks."

Martin had nothing to say, and Abbott soon went to the wicket. He was more careful than his predecessor. There was only one other man after him, so it was necessary to be cautious. The Bannington players were beginning to realise now that their only chance of winning lay in leaving the run-getting to Jerry Dodd.

In a way, this was rather humiliating. But it all depended upon the way in which one looked at it. The real sportsmen in the teams were not jealous—they were genuinely delighted at the great piece of luck which had placed Jerry in their team. The thought of beating Eastshire County was rather intoxicating.

Nobody had ever dreamed of a win in this charity match. The players themselves had expected a licking, and now there was a chance of beating the professionals, with the aid of Jerry Dodd.

The interest was now at fever-heat, and Abbott was watched with much anxiety. Very wisely, he never once tried to launch out. He successfully blocked four balls in succession, and then the batting came to Jerry.

During that one over, eighteen runs were added to the score—every one from Jerry's bat; and so the game proceeded. Whenever possible, Jerry so arranged things that he should have the batting all the time. And he kept up his

whirlwind innings, scoring twos and fours with hardly a break.

The crowd had never seen such cricket before, and the stories about Jerry's amazing form—discredited until now—were at last believed. He was so good, in fact, that J. H. Keen little cared whether his side won or lost. He was filled with intense admiration for this master cricketer.

"Man alive, the boy's wonderful—positively wonderful!" he exclaimed enthusiastically, as the field was crossing over. "I've never seen anything like it in my life. In five years' time this boy will be the talk of the world!"

"Well, we're in for a licking, anyway," growled Bateman.

He was probably right, for the scoreboard already announced that the total was one hundred and sixty-five. Unless a miracle happened, Bannington would win.

And then, at that crucial moment, Abbott was unfortunate enough to stumble, and he was run out. The last man in was Woodstock, and if his wicket happened to fall, which was quite possible, victory would be torn from the amateurs' grasp.

Woodstock came to the wicket looking nervous. He felt nervous, too, for he knew how much depended upon him. But there was only one other ball in that over, and he succeeded in stopping it.

The next over was the last of the match. Jerry was at the very top of his form, and only eight more runs were required. The Australian junior made no mistake. He sent the first ball to the boundary.

"Four more to win!" breathed Newman from the pavilion. "We shall do it—thanks to this schoolboy!"

Muggleton was bowling and he was filled by an intense desire to lower Jerry's wicket at this critical juncture. But the ball he sent down although a stinger had no terrors for Jerry.

The junior raised his bat, swung it round, and the leather went shooting away like a four-point-seven shell. It soared away over the pavilion and into the distance. The ball was never recovered.

It wasn't needed, for the match was over.

Pandemonium reigned immediately afterwards. The crowd swarmed over the ground, and Jerry Dodd only just succeeded in getting into the pavilion in time, otherwise he would have been severely mobbed by his excited admirers.

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee to me. "I hardly dared to hope for this result. Dodd is already famous. After to-day's match his name will be known wherever cricket is played—the boy who beat Eastshire!"

"By jingo!" I said. "He's a marvel!"

Uncle Bill thought so, too. He fairly hugged Jerry in the pavilion. In fact, Jerry hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels. The county men were generous. They freely admitted their guilt in ridiculing Jerry before the match; and J. H. Keen could hardly contain himself.

"I'd like to shout about this for a week!" he declared. "Why, hang it all, the Australians ought to play you in the next test match, my lad! If they did that England wouldn't have much chance!"

"By jingo!" grinned Jerry. "I figure you're joking, sir!"

"Joking be hanged; it's the truth!" said the Eastshire skipper. "I've seen some clever cricketers in my time, but I'd give all I possess to have you in my eleven. Players of your kind only appear about once in every eighty years!"

"You're right sir—darn me if you're not!" said Uncle Bill. "I've always reckoned that Jerry was a prodigy at cricket—a genius. He is too! Before he's a man he'll beat the best performances of W. G. Grace and Ranji!"

Poor Jerry hardly knew what to say, or to think. And little did he realise what amazing results this match was to have. But perhaps I may be allowed to whisper just a hint.

J. H. Keen was positively enthralled by Jerry's playing—and J. H. Keen was a member of the Selection Committee. The next test match between England and Australia was due to take place on Earl's ground, in London, the next week. And Jerry Dodd——

Enough said—for the moment, anyway!

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT JERRY!

MR. STAFFORD was hardly to be blamed for coming to the conclusion that half the boys of St. Frank's had suddenly taken leave of their senses.

He became aware of sundry peculiar noises, which rapidly swelled into a most appalling din. And, gazing out of his study window into the Triangle, he beheld scores of juniors engaged in a fantastic war-dance near the gates.

But the Head needn't have worried. It was only the Remove escorting Jerry Dodd back to St. Frank's in triumph. There was not the slightest doubt that Jerry was the most popular fellow in the whole school at that moment. He was not only the idol of the juniors, but he had gained the full admiration of the senior forms.

No longer was he regarded as a wonderful junior cricketer. He was given the full credit that was due to him, and every decent fellow in the sixth freely acknowledged that no member of the first eleven could hold a candle to him. Jerry Dodd's triumph was complete.

And a little surprise awaited him—a surprise which reminded him of the dramatic incidents of the morning. In fact, Jerry had practically forgotten the whole affair of the Indians. It seemed remote and far away after the exciting events of this great day.

Nelson Lee had returned to St. Frank's about half an hour earlier, and after the juniors had exhausted some of their energy—and incidentally the total supply of Mrs. Hake's ginger pop—Nelson Lee appeared.

"Now, boys, I think you have had Dodd quite long enough—he needs a bit of a respite," he said pleasantly. "I want Dodd to come with me."

"Is anything wrong, sir?" asked Jerry. "I hope the Head doesn't figure that I was to blame for playing——"

"Not at all, Jerry," smiled Lee. "This is quite a private matter. Nipper, however, had better come with us."

It was not long before we were in the Ancient House, and then we went straight along to the Headmaster's study—both Jerry and I rather wondering what was in the wind.

We were considerably astonished when we found the Head had four visitors, one being Mr. William Dodd, another a well-dressed and legal-looking stranger, and the remaining two were our old friends, Messrs. Podge and Midge. They were looking very important and dignified.

"Come in—come in!" said the Head. "Allow me to congratulate you, Dodd, upon your wonderful performance. It was all the more wonderful because of your startling experience this morning."

"I guess I'd forgotten all about that, sir," smiled Jerry.

"I am glad that the unfortunate incident does not worry you," said the Head. "And I am glad to tell you, my boy that the matter is now fully cleared up. This gentleman on my left is Mr. Ridgeway, of the firm of Anstey and Ridgeway, solicitors, Lincoln's Inn. Before making a statement he requested that you should be present."

"Well, I figure I'm here, sir," said Jerry.

"Exactly," agreed Dr. Stafford. "And now, Mr. Ridgeway, perhaps you'll be good enough to state your particulars."

Mr. Ridgeway coughed and adjusted his pince-nez.

"It affords me great pleasure to meet you, my boy," he said, beaming at Jerry. "Perhaps you have been unaware of the fact so far, but since your arrival at St. Frank's you have been closely guarded and watched over by detectives—these two gentlemen on my right, Messrs. Podge and Midge."

Jerry seemed to swallow something with difficulty.

"I've got you, sir!" he said. "Guarded, eh? Why, yes, I do seem to remember having seen these gentlemen before. Sure, sir!"

Messrs. Podge and Midge bowed.

"As a matter of fact, they received their instructions from me," went on Mr. Ridgeway. "Previous to that I had received a long communication from your father, my boy, and I thought it only wise to take certain precautions. We feared, in fact, that

you might be molested by a band of mysterious Burmese."

"By jingo! I was molested, sir," said Jerry.

"Precisely, and it was the duty of Messrs. Podge and Midge to guard over you," continued the solicitor. "I have every reason to believe that they performed their duty in a creditable manner."

At this point it was only with great difficulty that I prevented myself from exploding, and even Nelson Lee had some trouble in keeping a straight face. For we knew that Messrs. Podge and Midge had made an unholy hash of the whole affair from the very start.

"This afternoon I received an urgent telegram from Mr. Podge stating that the Burmese had been placed under arrest," continued Mr. Ridgeway. "As it happened, only this morning a special letter arrived from Australia—from your father. I therefore considered it to be a happy opportunity to come down and acquaint you with the facts that are in my possession."

"Very good of you, sir," said Jerry.

"It is my duty to reveal to you an incident in your father's earlier life which he had hoped to keep secret for ever," said the solicitor gravely. "Let me hasten to add that this secret is quite honourable and casts no discredit upon Mr. Dodd. It would have been better, perhaps, to have kept this knowledge from you until you reach your majority; but under the circumstances it is necessary that the revelation should be made at once."

"Jumping kangaroos!" said Jerry. "I hope it's nothing serious!"

"Not at all—not at all" said Mr. Ridgeway. "But you are aware of the fact that these men from Burmah have attempted to brand you with a sign bearing the Twin Stars of the Rhoon religion. It is necessary that you should know the reason for this. I will explain."

"I figure that's what I'm waiting for now."

"I can do so in a few words," declared the solicitor. "Many years ago, when your father was quite a young man, he had occasion to visit Burmah. He was, in fact, the representative of an Australian firm. Well, the subject is a somewhat delicate one, and I will pass over it lightly without any details for details are unnecessary. You must remember that your father was only a very young man. It was, therefore, not unnatural that he should—er—fall in love with a certain young lady of the Burmese race."

"Say you're pulling my leg!" ejaculated Jerry quite startled.

"I assure you that I am doing no such thing," said Mr. Ridgeway. "Your father not only fell in love with this young lady but he married her—No! Let me finish please! Mr. Dodd was, I repeat, very young, and perhaps he did not fully realise the possible consequences of his act. The Burmese lady was the daughter of a very rich merchant, and they belong to that peculiar sect which worships the so-called god of Rhoon. Well, your father was obliged to submit to the indignity of being branded with the Twin Stars—not that he cared particularly at the time, being youthful and irresponsible. But the whole affair was a sad tragedy."

"I reckon I'm sure puzzled, sir," said Jerry wonderingly.

"Of course, you are, my boy—of course you are," Mr. Ridgeway hastened to say. "Let me explain to you that your father has directed that I should tell you all this. The peculiar circumstances make it necessary. To continue, Mr. Dodd married this Burmese young lady, and then came the tragedy. For, not two hours after the ceremony. and before the festivities could begin, the bride was bitten by a poisoned snake which had concealed itself in a large basket of flowers. I will pass over this tragic occurrence. The young lady died, of course—almost immediately. Your father, broken-hearted, left the country. He stayed for some time in Calcutta, finally returning to Australia. By this time he had realised his folly. He knew, in fact, that his love for the Burmese maiden could never have been lasting. And so he settled down in his old home in Australia and allowed that unfortunate episode to die. He attempted to blot it completely out of his own mind. In due course he met and married your mother, and—but it is needless for me to tell you all this. Not until a few months ago did Mr. Dodd realise the possible results of his youthful folly in Burmah."

"Why, what happened, sir?" asked Jerry.

"Your father was visited by a gentleman from Rangoon," said Mr. Ridgeway. "This man was, in fact, the brother of the young lady who had died from the snake bite. And it seems that when your father allowed himself to be branded he took certain oaths. And he was startled to find that it is one of the sacred laws of the worshippers of Rhoon that all the male children upon attaining the age of fifteen should be branded with the Twin Stars, no matter who the mother may be. In their religion it is the father that matters. If the father is branded, so must the son be branded. Your father was in a difficulty, for he refused to allow any such thing. He had long since forgotten his vows—indeed, he had never seriously entered into them. After much thought he decided to send you to England, where he imagined you would be safe. As events have turned out, you were not. These Burmese followed you and strenuously attempted to brand you on the appointed day—that is, this very day. They have failed, and are now in the custody of the police."

"But is it not possible that other members of this faith will suddenly appear and attempt to brand the boy?" asked Uncle Bill anxiously.

"No, sir," said the solicitor, with decision. "If any member of this faith is not branded on the specified day, he is considered to be an outcast, and is no longer wanted by the sect. It is a sacred rule that every attempt should be made to apply the brand at the right time. But if these attempts fail, then no further action is taken."

"I am exceedingly glad that this unfortunate matter is completely over," said Nelson Lee, rising to his feet. "We have had some exciting times with these determined Burmese, and the explanation is comparatively simple."

I could not help being amused by Messrs. Podge and Midge, who seemed to be under the impression that they had earned all the credit. As a matter of fact, they had made nothing but blunders the whole time.

Jerry Dodd was rather thoughtful for an hour or so, and this was only to be expected. But it was better that he should know the full truth, and he soon recovered his usual spirits. There was no longer any mystery.

But with regard to the cricket—well, the most momentous event of all would soon take place. It was an event which not only staggered everybody at St. Frank's, but the sport-loving population of the whole country.

The highest honour in the world of cricket was destined to fall to the lot of this wonderful Australian schoolboy. Jerry Dodd was included among the picked few to play in the next Test match between England and Australia!

THE END.



# TO MY READERS.

NOW that the mystery of the Twin Stars has been explained, it will be as well to mention that Dodd's father's real reason for not allowing his son to play cricket was a very natural precaution to avoid the prominence the boy would undoubtedly attain, with its consequent danger of advertising his whereabouts to the Burmese Indians, whom he knew were on Jerry's track. This danger is now happily past, and it only remains to conclude the series by the account of Jerry's inevitable rise to fame in the world of cricket in the highest honour a cricketer can receive—to represent England in the Test Match. The way in which Jerry acquits himself on this memorable day in his life deserves a story by itself, and it will appear Next Week under the title of "The Test Match Triumph!"

Also, in Next Week's Number I shall have an important announcement to make concerning the new series, in which our old friends, Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi, will appear. To our seasoned readers, these names conjure up adventures in distant lands. Anyhow, I will not disclose what it is yet, for it is something so good that it might take your appetite away for our next story.

THE EDITOR.

# The Fall of the Curtain.

## *A Clever, Short Complete School Story.*

**BY A POPULAR AUTHOR.**

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

### Pine Coffin Disappears.

NOW, there was an ancient custom at Woodend School which bored everyone to distraction and drove the junior Forms into a state of seething revolt. At the end of the first month of summer term there was an infliction known as a Latin play. No one cared twopence about it; most frankly loathed it. Still, it was the custom, and as such it was put up with until this present time of writing, and until Blacker Douglas and Pine Coffin were promoted to the Remove In strict justice it should be added that their promotion was due to the fact that the Upper Fourth master was sick and tired of them rather than to any efforts, scholastic or otherwise, on their own part.

The Latin play was an institution of nearly twenty years. It was performed by the Sixth and Upper Fifth in the school theatre after four weeks of anxious coaching under the supervision of Mr. Raglan, the Upper Fifth master, and the guiding spirit of the Remove.

This particular term the play chosen was Terence's "Adelphi." To everyone, with the possible exception of Mr. Raglan, it was deadly dull. There was a certain spurious excitement when the wigs and dresses came down from the theatrical costumiers, also the actors got off all school after tea and gained additional liberty, and Lower School had the satisfaction of watching the carpenters build up the stage and proscenium during drill hour.

There were always three full-dress performances—first, a dress rehearsal for the benefit of an initiated few; secondly, a performance for the school and a few stray visitors, merely local people; third and last, the performance to which parents and uncles and aunts and sisters were invited, who yawned or whispered through the play, and were regaled with claret-cup, ices, and cakes afterwards.

That was gala day—a day associated with tips, hampers, and other rare experiences, a day to be looked forward to; the rehearsal and the school performance were things to be dreaded.

But for a fatal mistake on the part of Mr. Smithers, the Remove master, things might even then have gone well; but he, worthy man, was a keen classic, who regarded all time spent on the acquisition of merely useful knowledge as wasted. A boy who was weak on Latin prose or inappreciative of Ovid was the bane of his existence.

He was in deadly earnest over the success of the Terence, and for a while the Remove had rejoiced with a most unholy joy, for he he had neglected them, passing over slovenly work unheedingly, so great was his zeal in the perfecting of the forthcoming production.

A week before the momentous date, however, his attitude changed. So far he had been busy making the life of the performers themselves an inferno on earth. On the Monday he transferred his entire energies, which were considerable, to the audience—at least, to that section of it comprised by the Remove.

His ambition was that they should take what he was pleased to call an "intelligent interest" in the play, and ordered them to do three hours extra tuition on three separate days.

Pine Coffin was playing hard cricket with a view to getting his second eleven cap. Blacker Douglas, a slim-built, pale-faced chap, with very small, neat hands, and wrists and sinews like steel, hankered after his racquet colours, hoping to represent the school next spring term, and grudging every moment that he was kept out of the courts. He was a strong player with a peculiarly pretty knack in serving, which was often worth three points in a game to him, and the school pro. spoke of him with respect in unguarded moments. Therefore, it was only natural that the order for extra tuition was regarded by them as a crime to which fighting would have seemed a healthy and invigorating pastime.

They sat in class because they couldn't help themselves, but they kept their books closed with brazen effrontery, and made it a point of honour to refuse to do a single line of preparation.

Mr. Smithers, who saw how the land lay, and who had no wish to produce a storm, stood it as long as he could; then he called them up after Form, and, without any explanation, gave them three hundred lines apiece. It so happened that among the

Sixth that year were nearly a dozen serious-minded boys. Three thought themselves budding actors, the remainder were scholars, wore short-sleeved gowns, and had ambitions. Consequently, for once there was among the players at least a vague degree of keenness.

Pine Coffin noted this with an eagle eye, and resented the fact, proving to Blacker Douglas, in heated argument, that if the Sixth weren't such a lot of mugs, Sweeps—viz., Smithers—would never have had the cheek to do it.

It followed, naturally, that the Sixth must be slaughtered thoroughly, but with discretion.

For three whole days the pair of them combined their forces and endeavoured to map out a plan of campaign.

"What I should like," said Pine Coffin gloomily, "would be to guy the whole rotten concern—start a rag or something of that sort, and make 'em look good and sick!"

"Wouldn't do on gala day," said Blacker Douglas. "My people are coming to begin with; the guv'nor ought to be good for half-a-sov. Besides, it would be shocking bad form anyway, especially with a lot of womenfolk and girls about."

It should be explained that Blacker Douglas considered himself deeply in love with Hawkins major's sister, to whom he had spoken twice and fetched four ices for—she preferred the cream sort.

"Well, what's the matter with dress rehearsal, then? Let's guy that."

"Right-ho, old man! But how?"

"Don't know yet," said Pine Coffin. "Let's have a stroll in the town. I can always think best when I see things."

They got their caps and slid off down into the town, spent a shilling on a blow-out at one of the shops in bounds, but otherwise the journey was fruitless.

Blacker Douglas was in a state of lofty gloom for the rest of the evening, nor had he brightened up by dinner-time next day. He had incurred another three hundred at the morning school, and had to stop in and do them, though he had booked the racquet-court and arranged to play a practice game with the pro.

Pine Coffin had mysteriously disappeared, having emptied the study cash-box which was the receptacle for their joint pocket-money. That evening, however, he and Blacker held a long consultation—a mysterious affair, involving much muttering—from which both departed on their various ways with barely suppressed grins.

Pine Coffin, as a matter of fact, after a hurried visit to a slum quarter of the town which was out of bounds, had spent nearly the whole of his available spare time chatting to the stage carpenters and the college electrician. Among the former he had lavished money to the extent of two-and-fourpence, receiving in exchange valuable information as to the mechanism of wings and flies and the structural possibilities of the proscenium. Also, from the friendly and talkative electrician, he had abstracted the secrets of a temporary switchboard and the precise manner of cutting off the various circuits.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER.
### The End of the Play.

THE dress rehearsal had passed off well, and the school performance for 7.30 had been duly advertised on the notice-boards.

"I really think," said Mr. Raglan to the Remove-master—"I really think that we have got together a very creditable company this year. They take themselves seriously and try hard. Jameson has a very fair notion of acting, and I never saw anything better than Mascot's show at the Oxford University Dramatic Society."

"I like the way Arnot speaks his lines," said Mr. Smithers warmly. "That boy really has glimmerings of scholarship in him—the true love of a neatly turned phrase or idiom. He is a Latinist. His rendering of ——"

"Quite so, quite so!" said Mr. Raglan hurriedly, knowing Smithers' weakness.

At 7.30 to the minute the school clattered into their places—the elder ones bored and restless, longing for the excitement of a little ragging, hoping against hope that something would go wrong, so that they could enjoy at least one genuine laugh. The masters and their wives and friends occupied most of the front row; the rest of the audience was entirely school. Among some of the newer or first-term boys there was a slight flutter of excitement, and the air was heavy with that peculiar smell which always goes with footlights.

The wing of the gymnasium in which the theatre had been built was covered with red drugget and decorated with flags and shields of departed prefects. The front of the stage beneath the footlights was decorated with palms. The drop curtain represented a highly coloured and quite impossible scene of early Rome.

The curtain rose majestically after much tinkling of bells and very audible and excited whispers from the stage—one of which—Arnot's "I'm not ready yet, you ass!"—was greeted by the audience with vociferous cheers.

One Latin play is very like another from the audience's point of view. They stood the first act in restless impatience, with an occasional derisive roar when a well-known sentence from the Latin Grammar put in a welcome appearance—the only words they understood in the scene—or when, as happened more than once, a Roman senator's wig slipped back, or a beard went awry.

At the rise of the curtain on the second scene, Pine Coffin's nose began to bleed—at any rate, he left the theatre hurriedly with his handkerchief to his nose, and Blacker Douglas followed unostentatiously in unusual solicitude.

Both of them managed to escape unnoticed in the confusion of the boys resettling themselves in their places, and, once out in the darkness, raced round to the back of the building, where, hidden under some shrubs, was a small box.

Pine Coffin opened the lid gingerly, and disclosed a small but active-looking monkey with a belt round his waist.

"There he is," he whispered. "I paid old Guiseppe half-a-crown for the loan of him, and it'll be ten bob if he's damaged. I've fixed all the other things. Come on, old man! 'Ware fleas—and don't bite!"

He gathered up the monkey by the scruff of the neck, and stowed him away under his coat.

"Now, Blacker, old man, here's the outside switchboard which turns out all the lights in the blessed show. See that handle thing there? Well, when I whistle, all you've got to do is to jerk it down and cut back to your place as hard as you can. Don't touch anything else, or you'll be electric something or othered! Whilst they're all kickin' up a row inside, I can put Master Jacko in his box and slip in and join you in the darkness. Savvy?"

"Right-ho!" said Douglas, fingering the switch lovingly.

"So long, old man!" said Pine Coffin. "Won't Sweeps be pleased?"

And he and the borrowed monkey disappeared up the ivy leading to the roof of an outhouse, from which an iron escape led to the top of the improvised theatre.

Arnot—Mr. Smithers' pet—was in the midst of his most impressive scene, rolling out resonant Latin verse with an unction which made Lower School sick with disgust.

He fancied himself, did Arnot. In imagination, he was holding his audience spellbound. A sudden breathless silence seemed to fill the house. He expanded his chest, flung out his right arm in approved schoolboy declamatory fashion, and took two majestic strides towards the footlights. Then something heavy but agile flopped on his head, and his wig was grabbed away forcibly. He struck out wildly with his staff—which, for some unknown reason, all players of Latin parts invariably use—tripped over his flowing toga, and fell with a crash, sprawling along the stage amidst howls and cheers from the audience.

He glanced upwards, and saw a small brown monkey plucking at his wig with one hand, whilst with the other it clutched frantically at the canvas colonnade of a Roman temple.

Arnot was an artist in his way, but so was Pine Coffin. He had the monkey on the end of a fine black wire, strong, but almost invisible, borrowed—to use a euphemism—from his friend the electrician. Crouched on the roof above, he had awaited the critical moment, judged his distance, and dropped the little beast, suspended from his belt, as near as he could on Arnot's head. The scared monkey immediately and naturally grabbed at the first thing in sight. The moment that Coffin saw the wig safely in his grasp, with a twitch of the wire he deftly swung him off to the wings.

Arnot, furious and determined, made a rush at the luckless Jacko, using language which was certainly not in the text, whilst a delirious audience egged him on with cheers and yells, and Mr. Smithers gibbered from the prompt side.

Another deft twitch of the wire landed Jacko on the top of a canvas and lath statue of Minerva, where he sat, chattering and pulling the wig to pieces with method and industry.

Again Arnot made a rush, and Mr. Raglan, forgetting the proprieties, tore on to the stage, which was a signal for renewed cheers.

So far things had gone very well with Pine Coffin, and he was having what he would have expressed as a real, first-class, slap-up time. Whilst the pandemonium was raging beneath he was rolling about, clutching at his waistcoat in a vain effort to subdue his risible faculties. He laughed inwardly as he had never laughed before—laughed with a silent mirth that was truly agonising. Oh, for one moment to be able to shriek aloud at the funny capers cut by Arnot, the monkey, Mr. Smithers, the Head, and the rest. So engrossed was Pine Coffin with the enjoyment of the spectacle his fertile brain and undoubted ingenuity had brought about that he quite failed to notice how frail was the roof of the improvised theatre.

Already in more than one place the fabric had split; but, unfortunately, this fact had escaped his attention. It was, therefore, with a feeling of dismay that he was suddenly called to a realisation of his peril as a loud tearing sound fell upon his ears. For a moment he caught a confused glimpse of a small sea of upturned, startled faces looking with horror-stricken eyes at the rent in the canvas; then, with a shriek, he fell down—down to what he imagined to be certain death.

Only for a second, however, did he experience the terrible sensation of falling through space; then one arm, flung wildly out, caught at a cross-piece, and he hung suspended in mid-air, his fingers clasped tightly round a strong support. He heard the shouts of the horrified audiene—shouts which changed to cries of surprise as they saw, indistinctly, the figure above clutch at the cross-piece, shin along it, and disappear as mysteriously as he had appeared through the broken roof.

All this had occupied but the merest fraction of time. No sooner had Pine Coffin recovered from the momentary fright which his fall had given him than the first law of Nature asserted itself, and his efforts became at once concentrated in making good his

**(Continued on page iii of cover.)**

escape undetected. He realised—much to his credit, seeing that nine youngsters out of ten would have hardly given thought to such a thing—that those below were hardly so likely to have recognised him as he them, and this thought spurred him into action. He must get away without being recognised at all costs!

Cautiously he crawled across the swaying canvas, swung down the iron escape, and so made the roof of the outhouse. Unfortunately, the moon had just risen, and no sooner was he on the slates than he heard a shout from below, and recognised the voice of his Form-master.

His hands found the gutter-pipe. With the agility of a practised athlete, he swarmed upwards, in the hope of reaching one of the lower studies, whence he would easily make a class-room, and thence join the excited crowd in the school theatre.

It was but the work of a second to grasp the nearest window-sill, drag himself up, whip out his knife, and force back the catch. An instant later he stood inside the room.

He would have done a dozen things, but no choice was left him, for even as he stood irresolute the door was flung open, a shaft of light streamed in, and discovered him to the excited Head and a small group of Form-masters.

Poor Pine Coffin! It was a disastrous end to a scheme which for its very ingenuity, deserved success. He stood self-condemned as the culprit who had spoilt the play. The end of my story is obvious. As far as Pine Coffin and Blacker Douglas were concerned, the results of their escapade were of such a painful nature that we need not dwell upon them here. The Terence was played the next night, but it was the last Latin play ever produced at Woodend.

THE END.

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