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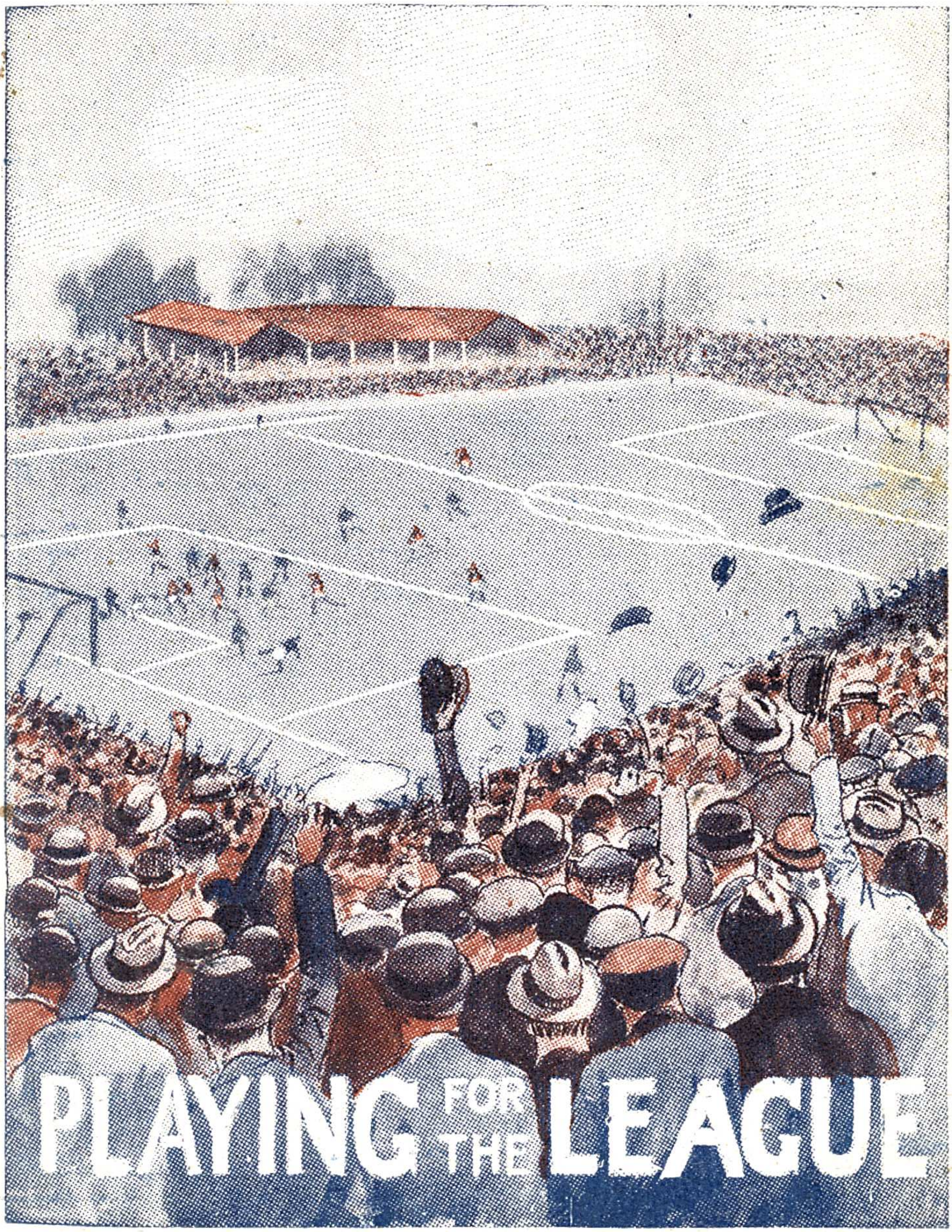

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE DISGUISE EXPERT.

THUD! Bang! Crash!

Walter Church was hardly enjoying himself. He had merely made his exit from Study D, in the Remove passage at St. Frank's. He had been greatly assisted in this operation by the application of Handforth's boot.

And he landed in the passage in such a position that his feet were where one would have supposed his head to be. He collapsed in a heap, rolled over, and proceeded to make an observation.

"Yow—yaroooh!" he roared.

"That's for being clever!" said Handforth tartly.

"Yow! You—you awful bounder!" hooted Church. "I'm half dead! You—you've broken my spine, I believe!"

"If you think I'm going to have any of your rot, you've made a bloomer!" said Handforth. "You don't come back into Study D until you apologise!"

Church struggled to his feet.

Biff!

Handforth was not looking for anything of that sort. But Church's fist shot out with extraordinary power. Handforth caught it nicely upon his nose, and his head went back with a jerk.

Crash!

"Unfortunately, Handforth was quite near to the door, and his head tried to burst its way through one of the panels. Failing to do this, it caused the door to fly open, and Handforth landed in the centre of the Study on his back. McClure regarded him calmly.

"No need to be in such a hurry," he remarked. "You always were such an energetic chap, Handy."

Handforth, roaring inarticulate threats, struggled to his feet, and charged out into the passage like a raging bull. If he expected to find Church he was doomed to disappointment. Church, like a wise youth, had made himself scarce.

"You—you rotter!" bellowed Handforth. "I wanted to punch you into a pulp! By George! When I catch him I'll——"

Handforth didn't wait to say what he'd do. He tore down the passage, and didn't pause for a second as he swung round the bend into the lobby. The next moment there was a violent collision. Handforth went one way, a pile of books hit the ceiling, a mortar-board slithered along the floor, and Mr. Crowell neatly turned a somersault, although this was quite an unrehearsed effect.

Handforth sat up and gave a horrified gasp.

"Oh, my goodness!" he panted faintly.

His first impulse was to fly. His second impulse was to remain on the spot, for he had just observed that Mr. Crowell had already recognised him. Flight, therefore, was quite unnecessary. It was just as well, perhaps, that retribution should fall at once.

Handforth sprang up and rushed to Mr. Crowell's assistance.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir—I was in a frightful hurry, sir!" said Handforth rapidly. "Let me help you up, sir!"

Handforth never could learn to be gentle. His method of helping Mr. Crowell up was to seize the Form-master under the armpits and yank him into the air as though he had been a sack of coal. Mr. Crowell staggered back and tried hard to recover his breath.

"How—how dare you!" he thundered. "Handforth, you have assaulted me in the most outrageous fashion!"

"I—I didn't see you, sir!" gasped Handforth.

"You have absolutely no right to come charging round the corner at such a headlong speed!" shouted Mr. Crowell furiously. "I have half a mind to take you to the Headmaster's study at once, so that you may be soundly flogged!"

"But—but accidents can't be helped," protested Handforth. "You—you see, I came round the passage, and directly I spotted you I tried to pull up. But it wouldn't happen, and you were rushing along, too——"

"I was walking quite sedately, Handforth!" roared Mr. Crowell. "How dare you say that I was rushing! Please understand that I never rush about the Ancient House. It seems that you are the only one who——"

"I was chasing Church, sir!" protested Handy. "I couldn't help it if Church dashed away, could I?"

Mr. Crowell looked at Handforth grimly.

"I am glad you have told me this, Handforth," he said. "So you were chasing Church, were you? That means, I suppose, that you were bullying him? You don't seem to realise, my boy, that you are continually bullying your Form companions. I have warned you about this before."

"Bullying!" said Handforth faintly. "Why, I always punch every bully on the nose!"

"Then it is high time you punched your own nose, Handforth!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I distinctly heard some extraordinary noises a few moments ago; and I was, in fact, on my way to investigate them, feeling quite certain my quest would end at Study D. What did you do to Church to make him cry out in that way?"

"Nothing, sir," declared Handforth.

"Nothing at all?"

"Not a thing!" said Handforth. "He cheeked me, sir, and I never stand that sort of thing. So I punched him on the nose!"

"Is that what you call nothing?" demanded Mr. Crowell curtly.

"Well, it was hardly anything, sir," said Handforth. "Then I took hold of him, opened the study door, and kicked him out into the passage!"

"Good gracious me!"

"It wasn't my fault that he fell on his head," went on Handforth, in an aggrieved tone. "And how could I help it when he caught his left ear against my fist? I didn't do anything! And then after that he had the nerve to turn round and punch me on the nose!"

Mr. Crowell stared.

"I am amazed to hear that Church had enough strength to do anything so formidable!" he exclaimed. "I am seriously afraid that the unfortunate Church will be confined to the sanatorium for several days. If that boy is really hurt, Handforth, you will receive a public flogging, and probably expulsion!"

Handforth's knees shook beneath him.

"The—the sack, sir!" he gasped. "But—but—— Why, look there!"

"Gracious goodness!" said Mr. Crowell, staggering.

Handforth had ended up in a terrific roar with his face about twelve inches away from the Form-master's ear. And Mr. Crowell, positively deafened, clutched at the wall for support.

Handforth vaguely wondered why Mr. Crowell had turned faint, and he rushed down the passage and seized Church, who had just appeared in view. The arrival of Church, in fact, had been the reason for Handforth's bellow.

Church was hardly himself.

At first sight it appeared that he was wearing a disguise. His nose, to begin with, wore a horribly close resemblance to one of those false noses which are worn at children's parties. It was twice the size of an ordinary nose, violently red, and fearfully puffy. His left ear stood out at an angle from his head, and in some peculiar way it seemed to have been inflated. In ordinary schoolboy language it was what is commonly known as "thick." Church was smothered with dust from head to foot, his tie was hanging down his back, and a formidable rent in his waistcoat bore testimony to the fact that the wars through which he had passed had been of a violent nature.

"You—you rotter!" hissed Handforth, thoughtlessly placing his mouth close to the swollen ear. "I shall get the sack for this, and it was all your fault. For goodness' sake get me out of it!"

Mr. Crowell came striding down the passage with a grim tread.

"Heaven help the boy!" he ejaculated, in horror. "Church, what is the meaning of this? Have you been attacked by hooligans? Or is it simply the result of Handforth's doing—or—nothing to you?"

Church tried to pull himself together.

"It—it's all right, sir," he said. "It's nothing at all."

"Have you any complaint to make against Handforth?"

"Nunno, sir."

"Dear me! You do not wish to have him punished for treating you in this ruffianly way?" demanded the Form-master.

Church made a supreme effort.

"But—but Handforth didn't do it, sir," he declared.

"What!" shouted Mr. Crowell.

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly.

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "Now, Church, tell me how you came by these ghastly injuries?"

"It—it was an accident, sir," said Church loyally. "We—we had a little argument. Handforth gave me a tap, and I bunked out of the study. But—but I must have tripped up, or something, and I fell out into the passage. That's all, sir."

"How do you account for your nose being treble its normal size?" snapped Mr. Crowell.

"Perhaps I fell on it, sir," faltered Church. "I—I don't seem to remember properly. I—I think I was a bit dazed!"

"I am not at all surprised to hear that," said Crowell tartly. "I can quite understand that I shall never get to the bottom of this affair, but I have my suspicions, however. Do you seriously tell me that you have no complaint to make against Handforth?"

"None at all, sir."

Mr. Crowell looked very disappointed.

"In that case I cannot inflict any punishment, although I am convinced that Handforth deserves it," said Mr. Crowell. "However, you will write me five hundred lines, Handforth for knocking me down!"

And Mr. Crowell strode off, with his nose in the air. The very instant he turned round the corner Handforth turned upon Church with a ferocious glare.

"You—you rotter!" he hissed.

"What?" gasped Church faintly.

"I'm going to smash you to a pulp for punching me on the nose!" said Handforth grimly.

"But—but I just saved you from being flogged and sacked!" said Church, panting for breath. "I say, Handy, let's cry quits. You've got the best of it, anyway. I can't see anything in front of me with this blessed nose of mine!"

Handforth suddenly softened.

"I'm not the chap to keep up a quarrel," he said gruffly, placing his arm round Church's shoulder. "That's all right, old son. Let's go back to Study D. I'm frightfully sorry about your nose. I didn't mean to punch it like that, you know."

They walked a few paces, and then Handforth stopped.

"But if I have any more of your rot I'll pulverise you!" he said ominously. "You'd better understand that—— My hat! What's happened to your ear?"

Handforth stared at Church's ear as though he'd only just noticed it.

"Oh, I trod on it!" said Church sarcastically.

"You—you silly ass!" ejaculated Handforth. "How on earth did you do that? A chap can't tread on his own ear!"

Handforth always took everything literally—sarcasm was lost upon him. And he certainly did not seem to realise that he had inflicted the injury himself. He was always like this, and Church made allowances for him.

They arrived back in Study D, and found that it was empty. At least, it appeared to be at first. After a moment or two, however, McClure cautiously appeared from beneath the table.

"What the dickens are you doing under there?" demanded Handforth.

"I—I dropped something," said McClure lamely. "Is it all clear?" he added, to a whisper to Church.

"Yes, he's sane again now," muttered Church.

"Eh?" said Handforth, turning. "What's that?"

"For goodness' sake don't start all over again!" groaned Church, sinking into a chair. "And all this needn't have happened—it was simply wasted effort. It's a pity we can't have a bit more peace in this study."

"Well, I haven't upset it," said Handforth.

"You haven't?"

"Of course not," said Handy. "You fellows will argue, and you know jolly well I'm a bit hasty. I admit it—it's my nature. I can't help that, I suppose, you silly asses!"

"Oh, we make allowances," said McClure, condescending.

Handforth grunted.

"The main thing that causes trouble in this study is your attitude towards me," he went on. "You both know that I've got more brains in my little finger than you've got in your whole giddy bodies! That's where it comes in. You're jealous—you know I'm clever, and you know you're dense!"

Church and McClure held themselves back with difficulty.

They said nothing.

"So you're always arguing and squabbling," went on Handforth. "What were we talking about before I chucked you out of the study, Church?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Church didn't want the subject to be revived, for it was very likely that more trouble would be caused. It would be far better to let the whole matter drop. But Handforth was not inclined to let it drop.

"Haven't you got any memory?" he demanded.

"We were talking about detective stories and disguises," said McClure. "But we don't want to continue the discussion——"

"Yes, we do," interrupted Handforth. "You told me that my ideas were all offside, and that I was practically an idiot. Do you think I'm going to stand that sort of thing? Not likely!"

"Oh, give us a rest," groaned Church.

"I want to hear all that again," said Handforth. "You were reading a detective story, Church, and you made some remark about a chap not being able to disguise himself. That's what you said, isn't it?"

Church was drawn into the argument again.

"Yes, I did say it," he replied. "It's true enough, too."

"Rot!"

"There you are, we can't say a giddy word without you calling it rot," snapped Church. "I suppose we're entitled to our opinions?"

Handforth smiled pityingly.

"Well, perhaps you are," he agreed. "And I'll just tell you what. Just for this once I'll let you say what you like. You can air your views as much as you like, and I promise I won't get angry or violent. How's that?"

"I should think there's been enough violence already," replied Church. "The thing I sneered at was the way these fiction detectives disguise themselves and spoof everybody—even their own friends. They simply put on a false nose and a false wig, and they go about without being discovered."

"Well, that's quite feasible," said Handforth.

"Perhaps so, in a detective story."

"But not in real life?"

"Of course not," said Church promptly. "A man can't do that sort of thing in real life. Anyone with an ounce of common sense can see that. It sounds all right in a story, but when it comes to the actual thing—well, it's a different matter. For example, supposing I disguise myself, do you think you wouldn't see through me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Handforth.

"What's the matter now?"

"Nothing; only it's a dead certainty that we should see through you," yelled Handforth. "You're not a detective, my son, and you wouldn't be able to wear the disguise properly. That's just where it comes in. If you get an expert on the job he does the thing as it ought to be done."

Church sighed.

"Well, let's give it up," he said. "I'm fed up with this discussion, anyway. And I still maintain that nobody in real life could disguise themselves so completely that they'd spoof their own friends."

"Piffle!" said Handforth.

"All right, you have your own idea," retorted Church. "It doesn't matter to me. The thing's never going to be proved, anyway. Let's change the subject. Let's talk about football, or boxing."

Handforth was sitting quite still, with a peculiar expression on his face. Then he gazed at his chums strangely.

"We'll see!" he remarked darkly.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"We'll see," repeated Handforth. "By George, I've got a wheeze—I—I mean we'll dismiss the subject," he added hastily. "After all, what does it matter? The thing can never be proved!"

But both Church and McClure had an idea that Handforth had hit upon one of his marvellous brain waves; and, inwardly, they groaned.

Trouble of some kind was looming up!

CHAPTER II.

A RIFT IN THE LUTE.

"OH, well kicked!"

"Good old Pitt!"

"That's the style, old son!"

Little Side rang with shouts. It was not a football match, but merely practice. The leading lights of the junior football eleven were disporting themselves in front of goal, and over the field generally.

I was there, of course, being captain of the team. But Reginald Pitt, of the Remove, was still maintaining that wonderful form which had been so noticeable of late. He was, in fact, doing extraordinary things.

Since the commencement of this term Pitt had shone brilliantly as a wing forward. His place in the field was outside right, and he played a game such as is seldom seen in school football.

His passing was perfection itself, his speed astonishing, and never for a moment did he lose control of the ball. And Pitt was tricky, too; so tricky that any backs or half-backs opposing him were always at sea. They never knew what Pitt was going to do next.

He could be marked and watched, but he always eluded all enemies. With an agility that was somewhat uncanny, this wonderful winger generally managed to take the ball right up the field, and then send over a perfectly placed centre. It was only on very rare occasions that Pitt misjudged a kick.

And this evening he was quite up to his best form. He was enjoying himself hugely, too, and the juniors round the ropes were enthusiastic. And so were the members of the Eleven.

"It's a dead certain win for us on Saturday," declared Jack Grey, as he strolled up to me.

"Rather," I agreed. "We're playing Redcliffe—a hot team, but with Pitt on our right wing we're bound to win. It's really astonishing what strength a perfect winger will give to a side."

"Rather," agreed Grey. "After all, the wing men are the most important men on the field. Without 'em the inside-forward can't hope to do much. It's the duty of the inside men to take prompt advantage of the centres which are passed over by the outside-forwards."

"I know all about that, you ass; you needn't teach me how to play football. By Jove! I'm looking forward to that match on Saturday. We've been whacked by Redcliffe many a time, but this season we won't give them a look in."

Reginald Pitt strolled over, beaming with sheer health and good spirits.

"Well done, old man," I said approvingly. "If you play like that on Saturday afternoon we ought to whack Redcliffe by about six goals to nil."

Abruptly, Pitt's expression changed.

"Yes, I suppose we ought," he said slowly.

"You look downcast," I said, eyeing him curiously.

"Do I?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all!"

Pitt half turned away, and stared out across the playing fields. Saturday afternoon! The match was with Redcliffe College, and all the fellows were absolutely relying upon him to play the game of his life!

Pitt felt downcast and troubled. All his jovial spirits left him. For he knew that it would be impossible for him to play against Redcliffe, much as he wanted to do so. For something else was in the wind.

Pitt walked off by himself, and Jack Grey and I looked after him queerly. He was not his usual self.

"Blessed if I can understand the chap," said Grey.

"No, he's different," I agreed.

"And he won't tell me anything," went on Jack, with a frown. "We've always been the best of pals, and we've never had any secrets from one another. Yet, ever since he came back from his holidays, he's been like this. He simply told me that he was worried about some family troubles."

I nodded.

"Yes, that's right enough," I said.

"Why, do you know anything about it?"

"Only that he's had a little worry about his pater and mater," I replied vaguely. "In any case, Grey, it's not my business. But I certainly can't understand why he should look glum like that when we mentioned the Redcliffe match."

"No, that's jolly mysterious."

"Pitt's always been himself when playing football," I continued. "He's forgotten his troubles and everything. I should think he would be terrifically pleased at the thought of playing against Redcliffe College."

"And yet, as soon as you mentioned it, his face simply dropped," said Jack. "I'm going to have a talk with him when we get in."

Meanwhile, Pitt was strolling away across the field by himself, leaving the other fellows to go on practising without him. For that mention of Saturday afternoon's match had set him into a deep train of thought.

"What the dickens shall I do?" he muttered. "I'm jolly well afraid to mention the matter to Nipper. What will he say when I tell him that I can't play against Redcliffe? My hat! He'll have a fit!"

Pitt was very concerned.

He wanted to play for his school—but yet he couldn't!

And the reason, after all, was quite simple. For Reginald Pitt, the outside-right of the St. Frank's Junior Eleven, had fixed matters up to play regularly for the Bannington Football Club!

On the face of it this seemed an extraordinary thing, but it was feasible enough. Pitt had become acquainted with a member of the professional team, a very pleasant young fellow named Tom Howard. And he had visited the Bannington ground just casually one evening, and discovered that a practice match was about to start. Pitt had played in that match.

His performance filled Mr. Page, the manager, with amazement.

As a direct result, he was asked to help the Bannington Reserves in their Wednesday afternoon match. Pitt had not only helped, but he had won the match for the Bannington Second Eleven.

His play had stood out above the play of all the professionals; he had put up an amazingly good show.

And Mr. Page, a man of impulse—a man who believed in quick action—had offered Pitt the chance of playing in the regular League games—with the First Eleven! The idea of such a thing thrilled Pitt through and through, and he had consented—without much thought at the time.

But now he was beginning to find out that it was not so easy.

What would he do about the school matches? He couldn't be playing for Bannington and the school at the same time—that was certain. And he was faced with a very difficult problem. It was as much as he could do to think the thing out properly without becoming confused.

It would seem that his duty was to forsake the Bannington match and play for the school. But in his heart Pitt knew that his duty lay in the opposite direction. He must play for the professional club!

And why?

Because it was Pitt's duty to think of his own parents before even his school!

And that is exactly what this amounted to. In accepting Mr. Page's offer, Pitt had been thinking only of his parents. They were in low water—terribly low water. Pitt nearly cried when he thought about it.

He had come back from his holiday trip to find that a scoundrelly financier had ruined his father. Pitt had returned to his home, only to discover that it was in the possession of a stranger.

And his father and mother were living in lodgings in Fulham!

It was a terrible blow for the lad. And it had been made heavier when he discovered that his parents were penniless.

The blow which had descended upon them had been one of the heaviest pos-

sible character. Mr. Pitt had not only lost his fortune, his position in the City, but he had lost his home also. He had been driven out by his rival, Mr. Simon Raspe.

And Pitt learned, to his consternation and dismay, that his people were practically devoid of all means of sustenance. His father had no work, and it was an extremely difficult matter for a middle-aged man—a man who had been in a great position in the city for thirty years—to obtain employment. For Mr. Pitt would never go to any of his former friends. This blow had fallen, and he and Reginald's mother were suffering in silence and seclusion.

Pitt had refused to go back to St. Frank's at first. But his father had explained that all the fees were paid. It was impossible to get this money back, and it would be better all round if Pitt went to St. Frank's as though nothing had occurred. Those fees had been paid before the crash had come. Therefore, why shouldn't the junior take advantage of the fact?

At last Pitt had seen the reason in his father's advice. And he had come to St. Frank's as of old. But he was a changed Reginald Pitt. The worry which hung over his mind robbed him of his usual cheerfulness, and practically all the fellows in the Remove were aware that something was wrong.

Pitt's chief thought had been one of desperation. What could he do—how could he help his parents? He had felt mean and contemptible in eating the school food when he remembered that his own father and mother were possibly going hungry.

Then had come this chance.

With both hands Pitt had seized it. It was in his power to play for the League—to play for the Bannington Football Club. And, in return for his services, the club would pay him the sum of six pounds per week—six pounds for a game!

Pitt was absolutely staggered. He hadn't been able to believe his ears at the time. The fact was, he couldn't quite realise that he was worth such a sum to the club. But he was.

Bannington was going all out for promotion this season it seemed. It was an energetic, progressive club, and this was its first year in first-class League football. And all the directors, the players, the manager, the trainer—they were all bent upon securing promotion into a higher division.

And, in order to achieve this worthy object they would have to win their matches consistently—particularly the home matches. And Mr. Page had considered it well worth the risk to engage Pitt.

Some of the directors had been staggered when they heard of the manager's decision. They could not realise that the inclusion of a schoolboy in the team would have a good effect. It was their opinion that Pitt would let the team down.

But, in reply to all criticism, Mr. Page invited the sceptical ones to be in the grand stand on the Saturday afternoon. If Reginald Pitt did not show up well, he would be dispensed with. But Mr. Page was convinced in his own mind that Pitt would surprise the natives.

The junior's cheeks glowed as he thought of the honour which had been bestowed upon him. For, undoubtedly, it was an honour. Such a thing had hardly ever occurred in League football. And he was determined to use every effort to make good for his side.

Naturally, it was impossible for a St. Frank's boy to play in a professional match openly. If the news of this reached the Headmaster's ears—well, Pitt would promptly be forbidden to appear again.

And so a simple expedient had been decided upon.

It is really astonishing how insignificant little matters will develop into large ones. At first, this thing had been a mere joke. Pitt had played in the reserve match for fun, and the captain of the team had suggested that he should use some brown stain, and his name on the programme was put down as "Abdullah." It had been considered quite a rich joke.

This little deception had been worked for one occasion only—but now, of course, it had to be kept up.

Abdullah to start with—Abdullah all the time!

That was the only possible way. Pitt had appeared in public as the mysterious Egyptian footballer. The public had taken to him with open arms. And so it was necessary to keep the thing going.

In future, Reginald Pitt would be Abdullah.

And he was, in honour bound, compelled to play for the Bannington Club on Saturday. A further inducement was the six pounds that he would receive—the six pounds that he would be able to send to his parents.

He was not keeping this secret from them.

His father knew all about it, and had approved. For, after all, there was nothing dishonourable or disgraceful in the junior playing the healthy game of football for a professional club. And if he could do it without exposing himself to any trouble, why shouldn't he?

Certainly Mr. Pitt did not like the idea of accepting money from his youthful son. But he was greatly impressed by the splendid spirit which Reginald was showing. He was very proud of the boy.

He didn't tell Pitt so, but he meant to keep all this money, and to put it by. No doubt he would be compelled to use most of it now, but, later on, when things got better, every penny of it should go to the junior.

"I'm jiggered if I know what to do," muttered Pitt, as he walked slowly about Little Side. "I simply must play in this match—and yet it clashes with the Redcliffe match. But how can I get out of it—by telling lies? That's one way, but it wouldn't do. I'm not going to involve myself in a tangle of lies over this business. There must be some other way."

He wondered what kind of excuse he could make—how he would be able to get away for the afternoon. And, finally, he decided that there was only one possible way out of the problem.

He wouldn't be watched, and, directly after dinner he would have to slip off. When the time came for the Redcliffe match to start, he would be missing. There would be trouble later, of course, but he would have to face the fellows' wrath.

Certainly he couldn't explain.

Under no circumstances could he say that he was playing for a professional club so that he could get money to send to his parents. He couldn't tell that even to his own study-mates—his closest friends. It was a secret which would have to be kept locked in his own bosom.

The whole position was rather uncomfortable, and Pitt felt that he would be letting down St. Frank's. But he had to choose the lesser of two evils. And he considered that it was better to let St. Frank's down than his own parents. He owed more to them than he did to the school.

And then came a very welcome surprise for Pitt.

A telegraph boy appeared at the gateway which led from the playing fields into the Triangle. I spotted him just as Pitt was strolling up. And then we both noticed that the telegraph boy was coming towards me.

"For you, Master Nipper," said the boy.

"Oh!" I said. "A wire for me? I wasn't expecting one."

I took it rather curiously, and tore it open, and read the words upon the pale pink form.

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

"Bad news?" asked Pitt with concern.

"Yes, jolly bad!" I replied grimly. "It's all right, kid, you needn't wait."

The telegraph boy went off, and I found myself surrounded by a little knot of juniors. They were filled with the curiosity of youth.

"What's the trouble, Nipper?"

"Anything particularly awful?"

"Ghastly!" I replied, with set lips.

"I'm sorry!" said De Valerie. "Somebody dead?"

"A murder, perhaps?" suggested Hubbard.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" I said. "This is from Lexton, the skipper of Redcliffe Juniors. The rotters aren't coming over on Saturday."

"What?"

"Not coming over?" shouted Pitt eagerly.

I looked at him in surprise.

"You seem quite glad!" I said bluntly.

"Glad? I—I——" Pitt hesitated. "Nunno! I'm not glad! It—it's rough luck, isn't it? Won't there be a match at all?"

"Doesn't seem like it," I replied.

"But why not?" demanded a dozen voices.

"I don't know—listen," I said. "This is how the wire goes: 'Sorry, can't come Saturday. Please alter fixture to Wednesday next week. Explaining by letter.—Lexton.' That's what the bounder says."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"We're dished out of the match, then?"

"Rotten!"

"No, we're not dished out of it," I said. "It's postponed till Wednesday, that's all. I expect Lexton sent this wire because he thought we might be making other arrangements for Wednesday. Let's hope it rains on Saturday—then we shan't feel disappointed."

"So we sha'n't have a match at all?" asked Pitt carelessly.

"No—unless we get up a scratch affair."

"Oh, we don't want to do that," said Pitt quickly. "I vote we take the afternoon off, and give Redcliffe a jolly good whacking on Wednesday. It's disappointing, but these things can't be helped."

Pitt strolled off, and I looked after him with a very thoughtful expression on my face. He had tried to pass it off, but I knew well enough that he was greatly relieved by the arrival of this telegram. For some unaccountable reason Pitt didn't want to play on Saturday.

And this was totally opposed to all my ideas.

I knew that he was worried about his people—I knew that they had been turned out of their home by Simon Raspe—I was, in fact, the only fellow in the school who did know it.

But Pitt had always taken keen joy in playing football. The great game had given him relief from his worry—it had made him forget. And he had entered into it with enthusiasm—he had looked forward keenly to playing in the school matches.

Why, therefore, was he so pleased by the knowledge that our fixture for Saturday was cancelled—or, rather, postponed?

Not being in possession of the facts at the time, I was greatly puzzled. Pitt went off, his heart beating rapidly with relief. He had never expected anything so satisfactory as this.

"Great!" he murmured to himself. "By Jove! What a ripping piece of luck!"

The more he thought about it the more he exalted. He would be able to play in the professional match on Saturday, and he would be able to play for the school against Redcliffe on Wednesday. Nothing could have been better than this. He would play in both games.

Bannington was playing Helmford United—a team that had been in the League for many seasons—a strong, well-established, reliant club. In football circles it was generally supposed that Helmford United would beat Bannington on their own ground. And the home side, in consequence, was determined to capture both the points.

On the week following, in the usual way of League football, the return match would be played—at Helmford. Pitt would be required to play in this match if he could possibly do the trip without arousing any suspicions. And he certainly thought that he could do so.

He went indoors, changed into Etons, and made his way to Study E. He was feeling more cheerful than he had felt the whole day long. And when he entered the study he found that Jack Grey was already there.

"Hallo! Here you are!" said Jack. "I was wondering where you had got to, Reggie. Pretty rotten news from Redcliffe, eh?"

"Awfully bad!" said Pitt. "It seems that we're dished out of the match on Saturday."

"Well, I don't suppose it matters so much," said Grey. "We've got the afternoon for ourselves, and we shall be able to play this match on Wednesday. Personally, I'm rather pleased."

"Why?"

"Because of that letter this morning."

"Letter?"

"My hat!" said Grey staring. "Have you forgotten it?"

Pitt was thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, I knew you'd got a letter this morning," he replied. "It was from your pater, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"But how does that affect our arrangements for Saturday?"

"My dear chap, there's something wrong with your memory," said Jack Grey, with a sigh. "Doesn't my pater say that he's coming down to Caistowe for the week-end? Doesn't he ask me to go over and see him on Saturday afternoon—and doesn't he ask me to take you with me?"

"Oh, yes—I seem to remember now," said Pitt.

"Well, that's good!" went on Jack. "Of course, now we can go. As this match isn't coming off, we can pop over to Caistowe directly after dinner, spend

the afternoon with my pater, and probably bring him back to the school with us to tea."

Pitt looked rather alarmed.

"No, that can't be done," he said firmly.

"Can't be done?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because—oh, because I'm going out on Saturday afternoon," replied Pitt vaguely. "I'd like to come with you, Jack, but it's impossible. I dare say you'll have quite a good time with your pater."

"I'm hanged if I can understand you, Reggie!" said Grey bluntly. "I don't very well see how you can have anything arranged for Saturday. Until a few moments ago you thought you'd be playing in the Redcliffe match. Why can't you come with me over to Caistowe?"

"I'm awfully sorry, old man, but I can't, really," replied Pitt. "As this match isn't going to be played, I have got something else. I simply must go out; it's important!"

"Where are you going to?"

"Oh, out on my bicycle!" said Pitt hesitatingly.

"There's a fat lot of information in that answer, isn't there?" demanded Jack Grey. "What on earth's the matter with you? Why are you so beastly secretive? If you've got an appointment, why can't you tell me what it is? You weren't like this last term, Reggie."

Pitt felt very uncomfortable.

"Look here, Jack, I'm awfully sorry, but I can't explain—honestly," he said. "I should very much like to come to Caistowe to see your pater; but—but this other thing is more important."

"And you won't tell me where you're going?"

"I can't."

Jack Grey snorted.

"You can't!" he repeated tartly. "You mean to say you won't!"

"If you like to put it that way, I can't stop you," said Pitt, with a sigh. "But, hang it all, we don't want to squabble!"

"Goodness knows, I'm not anxious to squabble!" said Grey. "You're the chap who's causing all the trouble. If you'd only be a bit like your old self, and not off-hand and secretive, I would be all right. You're absolutely different, Reggie! I don't want to pry in your business, but it's the first time I knew you had secrets."

"Oh, don't talk rot!" growled Pitt. "There's no secret of an unpleasant character. As a matter of fact, I think it's rather indelicate of you to be so jolly pressing. Why can't you trust me, and believe me when I tell you that the whole thing is connected with a little worry concerning my people?"

"I'm ready to believe that, and I'm sorry if you're worried," said Jack. "But what's that got to do with Saturday afternoon? Are you going to see your people on Saturday?"

"No."

"Then why can't you tell me where you're going?"

"Oh, hang!" snapped Pitt impatiently. "Give it a rest! I'm going out on Saturday afternoon, and where I'm going to is my business! I shan't interfere with you, and there's no reason why you should interfere with me!"

Jack Grey turned red.

"Oh, all right!" he retorted hotly. "That's an end of it; I won't say any more. I shall know what to do in future."

"What do you mean?"

"You won't need to tell me to mind my own business twice!"

"I didn't tell you to mind your own business," said Pitt.

"Yes, you did!"

"Look here——"

"I'm fed up with it!" snapped Grey curtly. "We've always been the best of pals, but it's quite clear that you want to make things different. Well, I'm not going to stand in your way. Have your secrets, and be blowed to you!"

And Jack Grey turned on his heel and strode out of the study.

He closed the door with a slam. Pitt stood there, looking at the door with a worried frown on his face. He had been half fearing something of this kind, but he had hardly believed that the good-natured Grey would bring things to a head. Jack's patience, however, had been exhausted.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Pitt miserably. "This is a nice go, if you like!

I've had a row with Jack, and goodness knows when we shall patch it up! I can't explain to him where I'm going on Saturday!"

Reginald Pitt was beginning to find, in fact, that playing football for the League would not be as simple as it had originally seemed!

CHAPTER III.

THE DESPERADO!

HANDFORTH glanced out of the window and nodded.

"Buck up!" he said briskly.

"Buck up?" asked Church. "What for?"

"We're going out."

"Oh, are we?" said Church. "It's the first I knew about it, Handy."

Handforth and Co. were in Study D, and the great Edward Oswald had evidently been planning things for himself and his chums. Whether they approved of his plans was a question which he did not even consider. He fixed certain things up, and he took it for granted that they would agree. For the sake of peace, they generally did.

It was Friday evening and somewhat dull, although there seemed to be no immediate prospect of rain. Tea was over, and quite a number of fellows were out in the Triangle and on the playing-fields. But Handforth had something quite different in mind for the evening's enjoyment. Church and McClure, as a matter of fact, had thought about retiring to the gymnasium to have a little sparring bout.

"So we're going out?" asked McClure. "What for?"

"It's got nothing to do with you!" retorted Handforth. "If I say we're going out, that's enough. I've never known such fellows for raising objections. We're all going out on our bikes, and we shall take a run round the country—just for a ride. We couldn't have a better evening."

Church grunted.

"Oh, rats!" he said. "I don't see why we should go out cycling. My back tyre isn't any too strong, for one thing—I shall probably get a puncture before we've gone a mile. Better give it up!"

Handforth glared.

"We're not going to give it up!" he snorted. "I've been planning things especially—— I—I mean, I've been looking forward to this ride, and I'm not going to be dished out of it!"

"We're not trying to dish you," said McClure. "If you're so keen, why can't you go alone?"

"Another word, and I'll punch your nose!" roared Handforth. "We're going on this bike ride, and I'm going to prove to you chaps—— That is to say, we're going to have a look at the country," he added hastily.

His chums stared.

"Of course, we don't know what the country's like, do we?" asked Church sarcastically.

"I've never known such fellows for arguing!" snapped Handforth. "You go on from morning till night. Here I've been arranging all this, and fixing everything up, and you want to spoil it!"

"Arranging it?" asked Church, staring. "Fixing things up? What do you mean? There's nothing in going for a spin, I suppose? Are you thinking about doing anything this evening?"

"Of course I am!" roared Handforth. "I've got it all planned! I'm going to prove—— Oh, rats! Why can't you shut up?"

For a second Handforth looked quite alarmed, and he turned red. Church and McClure eyed him wonderingly. There was evidently something quite different about Handforth, and it was equally evident that some deep and subtle scheme was revolving in his mighty brain.

What this scheme could be, neither Church nor McClure could imagine. It would be a sheer waste of breath to ask Handforth anything; he would not tell them. And so they resigned themselves to the inevitable.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to go," said Church. "It wouldn't matter so much if we were going to the big cinema in Bannington——"

"Blow the cinema!" said Handforth. "This is more important."

"Just going for a spin?"

"Yes."

"It's a pity we can't go to the cinema," said Church. "It's a ripping

place, you know. It hasn't been opened long, and it's simply a tip-top show. Solly Levi's pater knew what he was doing when he built it."

But Handforth was not interested in Solomon Levi, of the Remove, or in the cinema which his father had recently completed in Bannington. Handforth had something else in mind.

And a few moments later the three juniors left Study D, and went outside to the bicycle-shed. Both Church and McClure were not slow to notice that a large brown-paper parcel was strapped upon the carrier of Handforth's machine.

"What's that?" asked Church.

"Eh?" said Handforth. "What's which?"

"That parcel."

"Oh, nothing!"

"It looks like nothing, I must say!" said McClure sarcastically. "Are we going to some shop or other?"

"No."

"Then what's the idea of carting that parcel about?" demanded Church, going up to Handforth's bicycle and feeling the parcel. "I can't see——"

"Let that alone!" roared Handforth, in alarm.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not going to have you prying into my affairs!" snorted Handforth. "If you touch that parcel, I'll punch your nose!"

Both of his chums were considerably astonished. For Handforth to act in this way was remarkable. Why he should be carrying the parcel was a mystery in itself, and it was a still greater mystery why he refused to tell his faithful followers anything about it.

However, Church and McClure were accustomed to these little idiosyncrasies, for which their great leader was famous. By asking questions they would learn nothing, but if they only left Handy to himself the secret would not be long in popping out. Edward Oswald didn't know how to keep anything to himself.

Handforth mounted his bicycle and went towards the gates, glancing behind him in a somewhat anxious manner. He probably suspected that Church and McClure might have some dark and sinister intention of slipping off. However, he was satisfied when he saw his chums mount their machines and follow.

"Come on!" shouted Handforth. "You chaps ride in front."

This was unusual, for Handforth nearly always insisted upon taking the lead himself. And he was so engaged in turning round to look at his chums that he entirely omitted to take the necessary precaution of looking where he was going.

The result, as might have been expected, was disastrous.

Handforth was nearer to the gateway than he thought, and he was pedalling fairly strongly. And, near by, Fullwood and Co. were looking on with supreme interest and lively anticipation.

For Handforth was steering his bicycle straight into one of the massive stone pillars which supported the wrought iron gates. Fullwood and Co. grinned and lounged safely out of range. They never thought of issuing a warning.

Their chief idea was to see what would happen to Handforth's bicycle—and what would happen to Handforth—when his front wheel hit the stonework. And then Fullwood uttered a grunt of disgust.

"Rats!" he growled. "This silly nigger will spoil it!"

Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, the Indian junior in the Remove, had just entered the gateway from the lane, attired in all his usual splendour. In a way, Hussi Kahn out-Montied Sir Montie when it came to a matter of dress.

Handforth was now about five yards from the gate pillar, and still looking behind him. The Indian junior's eyes opened wide.

"Stop—cease—desist!" he shouted loudly.

"Eh—what?" gasped Handforth.

He turned his head, jammed on his brakes, gasped again, and found that it was impossible to pull up in time. He wrenched at his handle-bars, the bicycle swerved, and charged Hussi Kahn with extraordinary precision right in the very middle of his gorgeous waistcoat.

"Yarooh!" howled Handforth wildly.

He crashed to the ground, and the Indian junior made a few pithy remarks in his native tongue. He had reason to be annoyed. Handforth's left foot was in his neck, and Handforth's bicycle was on top of him. His exquisite clothing was ruffled, torn, and smothered with dirt.

Handforth struggled to his feet, and glared.

"You — you chocolate coloured baboon!" he roared.

"Good graciousness!" gasped Hussi Kahn, picking himself up painfully. "Kindly permit me to objectionably remonstrate——"

"Rats!" snorted Handforth. "You silly, brown fathead! What the dickens do you mean my getting in front of me like that? Look what you've done! My bike's ruined!"

This was a gross exaggeration, for Handy's bicycle was hardly scratched. Hussi Kahn, however, was not only scratched, but bruised and battered.

"I am fully of the regretful and superior sorrow," said the Indian boy. "But I was merely urging you to hinderously check your unsightly progress, Handforth. The danger was hilarious and paralysing. With the rear of your ridiculous head you omitted to see the pillar of stonework, and but for my unnecessary warning you would have injured yourself. Your abominable eyes were in your rear——"

"Who's gót abominable eyes?" demanded Handforth grimly.

"Pray refrain from keeping your temper," protested Hussi Khan gently. "The complex simplicity of my remarks are grotesque. I was compelled to cry out the exhilarating truth. Knowing your glorious peril I could not remain loquaciously silent——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure roared, and the latter grasped Handforth's sleeve.

"Come on!" he said briskly. "Apologise to Hussi, and pick up your bike. It was your fault, Handy. You ought to have looked——"

"Rot!" snorted Handforth, grabbing his machine, and feeling the mysterious parcel with much tenderness. "The silly ass got into my way, and it served him right to be bowled over. Rats to him!"

Hussi Kahn shook his head, and walked towards the Ancient House. And Handforth and Co. wheeled their bicycles out into the road, and had a short argument on the subject of looking ahead when cycling. Handforth would probably have done some damage, only he seemed very anxious about his parcel. And the argument was dropped before any real trouble arose.

They were soon off, and they went gliding down the lane towards Bellton. Handforth kept slightly in the rear—his reason probably being that he did not want his chums to inspect that parcel too closely. They got through the village, and arrived at the fork where the road divided up—one section going towards Bannington, and the other towards Caistowe. Church and McClure instinctively went towards Bannington.

"This way!" said Handforth.

He was going up the other road, and he allowed his chums to get in front again. They continued their ride for some distance, and then turned into a by-lane. After this they went on a roundabout course, passing through little narrow lanes, where the flint stones were thick and treacherous.

"Is this what you call going for a pleasant spin?" demanded Church, as they got off to walk up a steep rise.

"Well, it's enjoyable enough, isn't it?"

"With flints like this all over the road?" said Church. "It's a wonder we haven't had all our tyres punctured! I'm expecting mine to go at any minute. My hat! You must be dotty to come along here!"

Handforth smiled.

"It's the best road," he said calmly. "Everything's quiet here, and we're not likely to be disturbed."

"What does it matter if we are disturbed?" asked McClure.

Handforth made no reply, and by this time the top of the rise had been reached. They remounted, and continued on their way for some distance. And then, quite suddenly, Handforth began puffing and blowing. A minute earlier he had not seemed fatigued at all, and it was strange that he should develop these symptoms so abruptly.

"Phew!" he gasped. "I'm fagged!"

"Pretty quick, isn't it?" asked Church.

"I—I must have a drink!" went on Handforth, looking round. "Ah, good! We might as well get off at this spot."

They all dismounted, and Church and McClure waited for developments. They were fairly certain that something was about to happen. Whenever Handforth was mysterious in this way he always enlivened his chums by some hare-brained scheme.

"There's a little farmhouse over there," said Handforth, pointing. "Good egg! They're certain to give me a drink there."

"But it's a long walk," protested Church. "What's the matter with this little brook here? The water's running quickly, and its looks as fresh as spring water. Why can't you have a drink here?"

Church pointed to a babbling stream which chattered along its way only a few yards from the road. The water was, indeed, bright and sparkling, and perfectly good for drinking purposes.

Handforth laughed.

"Do you think I'd drink that water?" he asked scornfully. "It might be full of live things!"

"My hat! You're getting jolly particular!" put in McClure. "You've drunk water out of a river hundreds of times, Handy——"

"I don't want any argument about it!" snorted Handforth. "I'm going to that farmhouse for a proper drink, and you chaps can wait here until I come back. Understand? Wait here—at this exact spot. I shu'n't be long."

Church licked his lips.

"I'm a bit thirsty," he remarked. "What do you say, Clurey? We'd better go with him. They might give us milk!"

"Good idea!" said McClure.

For some strange reason, Handforth looked quite alarmed.

"No you don't!" he said sharply. "You're not jolly well coming with me. Not likely! You've got to stay here until I come back!"

"But why should we?" demanded Church. "We're thirsty, too—and if you're going to this farmhouse, we might as well come with you. Why should we stick here, in this lane, waiting for you?"

"I'm not going to stand here answering your fatheaded questions," snorted Handforth. "I've got a particular reason for going alone, so don't let me have any more of your rot. Are you going to stay here and wait?"

"Oh, I suppose we'd better!" said Church resignedly. "But don't be too long."

Handforth nodded, and walked off. But he hadn't proceeded more than ten yards before he came to a halt, hesitated deliberately, and came back. He went straight to his bicycle.

"I'm not going to leave this parcel here," he said bluntly. "I don't want you chaps to go prying into it while my back's turned. So I'll be on the safe side, and take it with me."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said McClure. "Do you think we want to look into your rotten parcel? I'll give you my word, Handy, that we won't touch it. Is that good enough to please your lordship?"

Handforth unstrapped the parcel, and tucked it under his arm.

"I'm taking it with me," he said shortly.

And off he marched.

The farmhouse was situated just down in a little hollow, and was reached from this spot by means of a footpath. There was a little spinney half hiding the farmhouse from view.

Handforth soon vanished behind the trees.

"He's a queer beggar!" said Church. "I'm blessed if I can understand what he's been getting at. First he couldn't tell us about that parcel, then he insisted upon going to this farmhouse alone, and now I'm dashed if he hasn't taken the parcel with him."

McClure nodded.

"And we didn't arrive at this spot by accident, either," he said significantly.

"What do you mean?"

"My dear chap, it's obvious," said McClure. "Handy planned all this beforehand. He brought us to this place on purpose. Haven't you seen it all along? He's been mysterious and queer. He fixed this all up, and there's something behind it."

"By jingo! I believe you're right!" said Church. "I wonder what his game can be? He must have got something in that parcel he wants to take to the farmhouse, and he was just trying to spoof us."

"Looks like it," said McClure.

They waited, impatient and curious. Ten minutes elapsed, and there was no sign of Handforth returning. The lane was a very quiet one, and even in the middle of the day it was generally deserted, except for an occasional farm cart. Now, in the dusk of the evening, there was hardly any chance of a soul coming along.

And it was growing dusk, too. The sky was cloudy, and in the lane it was not easy to see with any great distinctness.

Another five minutes elapsed, and still there was no sign of Handforth.

"If he doesn't come soon, I shall jolly well go and look for him!" said Church wrathfully. "I say, I wonder if it's a trick? I wonder if he's ever coming back at all?"

"What about his bike?"

"Oh, I'd forgotten that," said Church. "He'll come back, of course. But it's a bit thick keeping us here all the time—that's all I've got to say. We shall be late for calling over," he added, glancing at his watch.

"That's what I'm thinking," said McClure. "We don't want to get into trouble with old Crowell——"

"Hands up!"

A voice, harsh and rasping, broke in suddenly upon the two juniors. They turned round with a gasp, and found themselves staring at somebody who was standing in a little gap in the hedge.

"Great Scot!" panted Church. "What—what the——"

"Hands up!" commanded the man fiercely.

Church and McClure looked at him with wide open eyes. He was certainly a very desperate looking character. His chin was covered with something which looked like a blue-grey stubble. The upper part of his face was hidden by a roughly made black mask, and a curiously shaped cap was pulled down over his eyes. And in his hand he held a revolver!

"Why, you—you——"

Church paused abruptly. He and McClure were close together. Suddenly they both flung up their hands, and stood there shivering with fright. The appearance of this desperado had certainly taken them by surprise.

"Oh, why doesn't Handy come back?" muttered McClure feverishly. "He'd soon settle this chap! Handy's as brave as a lion!"

"He—he's not here!" said Church, with chattering teeth.

The desperado laughed harshly.

"I suppose you're talking about that other blessed kid?" he said. "Well, you'll be interested to know that I'm going to settle with him later. Keep your hands up, or I'll fill your carcases with lead!"

"Don't—don't do that!" gasped Church.

The stranger came out into the road, bursting through the gap. And then Church and McClure opened their eyes wider with horror. For they could see something which caused them to cling tightly to one another.

This desperado was wearing convict's garb!

They fitted him loosely and carelessly, but there could be no mistaking the drab colour of the material, and the significant broad arrow. It was a startling position to be in.

"Oh, don't—don't kill us!" pleaded McClure. "We—we'll do anything you say!"

"He—he must have escaped from that prison the other side of Bannington Moor," muttered Church huskily. "Oh, why doesn't Handforth come? If he doesn't hurry up he'll find us both lying dead upon the road."

Again the desperado laughed.

"There's no need for you to get frightened, kids!" he said roughly. "I'm not going to harm you—all I want is money so that I can buy food. I'm desperate, and I won't take any nonsense from you."

"We—we'll do just as you say," faltered Church.

"Then don't let me have any of your rot!" snapped the convict. "If you have the nerve to sauce me, I'll punch—— You silly asses! Why can't you keep still?" he roared. "Another inch and I'll fire!"

"We shall be murdered—I know we shall!" wailed McClure. "Oh, please don't shoot us! Don't take away our young lives!"

"Do what I tell you and you won't come to no harm," said the convict. "Now then, where's the other boy—where's the boy who ought to be riding that bicycle?"

Church shivered.

"We—we'll take you to him," he said huskily. "If you'll only come with us, we'll show you Handforth."

"Do you know where he is?" demanded the convict gruffly.

"Yes—oh, yes!"

The desperado glared.

"You fathead! How can you know where he is?" he asked. "I—I mean—— Hands up! And keep 'em up, too!"

The convict was evidently somewhat confused, for Church and McClure had

their hands up all the time. But he soon recovered, and he clenched his teeth grimly.

"I've had enough of this nonsense," he snarled. "Hand over all your money—and be sharp about it!"

With trembling fingers the two juniors obeyed.

"That's all right!" growled the convict. "And now, about this pal of yours. Where is he?"

"We'll—we'll show him to you!" said Church.

"Do it—if you can," snapped the convict.

Church led the way down the lane, and then turned off near the little brook. Quite near to it there was a large, still pool. The water looked almost like a mirror, so motionless was it.

"What's the darn game?" asked the convict angrily. "Your pal ain't here."

Church pointed with a trembling finger.

"He—he's in there!" he whispered.

"In that pool?"

"Yes—look, and you'll see."

The desperado bent over the pool and saw a very perfect reflection of himself, but nothing more.

"There's no boy in there!" he shouted fiercely.

"But you're looking at Handforth now," exclaimed Church. "Can't you see him? He's an awful ass, you know, and he thinks he can do tremendously clever things. Can't you see his reflection?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled McClure.

"Ho, ho, ho!" shrieked Church.

Try as they would they couldn't contain themselves a second longer. For several minutes they had been almost on the point of bursting. And now they had reached the point when it was impossible to keep it up any longer. They fairly leaned against one another and sobbed with hysterical laughter.

The convict gave a fierce snort and looked into the pool. Then, in a dazed kind of way, he realised what Church had meant.

"You—you rotter!" he bellowed.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled the pair.

Handforth nearly choked. Until a moment ago he had taken it for granted that his tremendous scheme had been a huge success. But now, all in a second, he knew that he had failed.

Church and McClure had recognised him from the first.

It was a great blow. Handforth had done this on purpose to prove to his chums how easy it was for a clever detective to disguise himself. Certainly he had disguised his form by means of a convict attire, and he had altered the appearance of his face. Unfortunately he overlooked one important point.

He took no trouble to change his voice.

His chums had known him from the first moment. But entering into the spirit of the joke, they had kept it up. And instead of Handforth spoofing his chums, his chums had spoofed him!

At the very first sight of him, Church and McClure had known why they had been brought along this quiet lane. They realised what that mysterious parcel had contained, and they knew why Handforth had been so particular about going off by himself. Certainly, Edward Oswald was not exactly a master of strategy. If he had only known it, he had given himself away at every point.

And now, realising all this, he was filled with a terrific rage.

"Ha, ha, ha!" sobbed Church and McClure.

"You—you spoofing rotters!" gasped Handforth. "My hat! I'll—I'll knock you into the middle of next week, for this! Just you wait!"

Handforth made one leap forward. At least, this is what he intended doing. But he was in such a hurry, and so near to the edge of the little pool that he didn't quite realise what he was doing.

Without warning a portion of the bank gave way. Handforth felt himself slipping backwards. He gave a startled gasp, staggered, and then lost his balance.

"Yarooh!" he howled wildly.

Utterly unable to recover his balance, he worked his arms about like millsails, and then sat down with a terrific splash in the very centre of the pool. He sent the spray spurting out on all sides.

And there he sat, stuck in the mud, looking the most comical spectacle. The water was only a few inches deep, and underneath this there existed about two feet of slimy mud. Handforth was sitting in this.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you have the nerve to sauce me," snapped the convict, "I'll punch——
You silly asses! Why can't you keep still?" he roared.

If Church and McClure had laughed heartily before, they simply shrieked now. This was even better than they had hoped for. As Church said afterwards, it was worth quids and quids!

"Oh, my only topper!" gasped Church. "Wait till we tell the chaps about it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth, hooting and gasping, vainly attempted to get out of the pool. He floundered about in the mud helplessly. But at last, by making a valiant effort, he dragged himself clear. Then he charged down upon his yelling chums. Not that he caught them.

They turned on the instant, streaked up the lane, and seized their bicycles. In a moment they were in their respective saddles, peddalling along for all they were worth. They had little fear of Handforth overtaking them.

Nearly dropping off their machines with laughter they tore along. This lane, as they knew, would take them into the road which led from Caistowe to Bannington. They could easily join the Bannington Road and get back to St. Frank's. By the time Handforth arrived they would have the whole school roaring with laughter.

But Handforth was filled with only one desire—the desire for instant and swift revenge. He completely forgot that he was wearing convict garb, and he dashed to his bicycle, jumped into the saddle, and went off in full pursuit.

It was fortunate that the lane was a little frequented one. Otherwise, Handforth would certainly have caused a sensation. The country folk would have been considerably startled to see a desperate-looking convict wearing a black mask tearing across the country on a bicycle.

As it happened, Handforth didn't pass a soul, although it was fairly certain that he would meet some strangers before long.

For this little lane turned into a wider road—a road which led from Caistowe to Bannington. Church and McClure had already reached this, and they were speeding along with some difficulty.

It is a somewhat hard task to pedal hard while you are nearly bursting your sides with laughter. And that's the condition that Church and McClure were in. They were quite confident that Handforth would never succeed in overtaking them.

But Handforth was desperate.

Above all things, he wanted revenge for the way he had been treated. He quite forgot that he had brought the whole thing on himself. He considered that Church and McClure ought to have been completely spoofed by his disguise. And he was going to give them a hot time for not being spoofed.

And he used every ounce of his energy. Yard by yard he overtook the other two juniors. By the time he arrived in the wider road he was going along at about the speed of an express train. For it was down hill, and the road was quite clear, although very dim in the evening gloom.

Handforth threw caution to the winds.

He noticed that both Church and McClure had slowed down at the bottom of the hill, and now he was swooping down upon them determinedly. Handforth did not seem to realise that his chums had applied their brakes because a sharp corner had to be negotiated. Handforth had no thoughts for sharp corners just now. He was unfamiliar with this by-road, and he never considered any possible danger.

But it came.

Church and McClure disappeared round the bend, and Handforth tore down with the speed of a track racer. At the very last moment he realised that this bend was a sharp one, and that he would never succeed in getting round it at a tremendous speed. He grabbed for the brakes. He had always been rather careless about his bicycle, neglecting to make adjustments when they were necessary.

And now, to his horror, he found that the brakes were not effective! They hardly decreased the speed in the slightest degree. Going at a normal pace he could easily have pulled up. But at this break-neck rush it was practically impossible for him to stay his headlong progress.

Crash!

Instead of turning round the bend, Handforth went straight into the bank at the side of he road. It was only a miracle that he wasn't killed on the spot, for behind that bank a brick wall rose up. . . .

Handforth shot out of the saddle like a stone from a catapult. He turned a somersault, soared into the air, and pitched clean over the wall into the grounds of some private property beyond.

He landed on his back, rolled over, and lay still.

CHAPTER IV.

STRANGE HAPPENINGS!

MR. SIMON RASPE shook his head.

"My dear Stretton, there's no need for you to be worried," he said smoothly. "All these doubts and troubles of yours are quite unnecessary. I have repeatedly told you that there is no possibility of any danger."

Stretton lit a fresh cigar, and leaned back in his chair.

"I know you are very confident, Raspe, but I can't help thinking that you have laid yourself open to considerable risks," he declared. "Until you went into this Pitt business you always conducted your business in such a manner that the law could never touch you. But on this occasion you overstepped the mark, in my opinion."

"Nonsense!" said Simon Raspe, in his oily way. "If I don't worry about it, why should you? Pitt was worth two or three hundred thousand before I gave him my attention. He is now worth precisely nothing, and his money is mine. Every scrap he ever owned is mine also!"

"That's very satisfactory, of course," said Stretton. "I'll admit that you tricked the man perfectly. But what dangers have you exposed yourself to? You seem to think you are quite safe—but I don't."

"Well, I'm not worrying."

"I think you ought to consider all the possibilities——"

"Confound it, man, why can't you leave me to look after my own affairs?" demanded Raspe impatiently. "You are in no danger, anyway. If a crash comes, it won't involve you!"

The two men were talking in a well-appointed library—the library of Thornton House—the residence of Mr. Simon Raspe, on the outskirts of Bannington. It was this man who had ruined Reginald Pitt's father. He was a financier, and a scoundrel to his finger tips.

Nelson Lee had taken some little trouble to look into matters, and the great detective had already satisfied himself that Raspe had swindled Mr. Pitt in the most glaring and villainous manner.

Unfortunately, however, there were no proofs of Raspe's guilt.

As soon as these could be obtained it would be a comparatively simple matter to have Raspe arrested, and then the whole story of the fraud would come out. But the trouble was to obtain those vital proofs.

Reginald Pitt himself had been the first to discover that Raspe lived in the neighbourhood. It had come quite as a surprise to the junior, and he had lost no time in telling Nelson Lee—who was aware of the main facts.

And now, Simon Raspe and his friend, Stretton, were lounging in the library in the cool of the evening, with the French windows partially open. They had no fear of their conversation being overheard, for they were speaking in low tones, and at some distance from the window.

"I think I am differently constituted to you, Stretton," said Simon Raspe calmly. "I don't let these things weigh upon my mind. After all, what's the sense of doing so?"

"Well, of course, it is entirely your own business," said Stretton. "But what if the proofs of this business are ever made public——"

"Man alive, they never can be made public," interrupted Raspe. "There are only two possible ways in which disaster could occur. One is by the exposure of the papers which I hold. They are quite safe, and you can be absolutely sure that they will never leave my possession. I can't burn them, for reasons which you know of. However, they are perfectly secure."

"And what is the other danger?"

"It is hardly danger," corrected Simon Raspe. "As you know, Lockwood is safely put away in gaol. He will be there for the next fifteen years. So I don't very well see how I have much to fear in that direction."

"Lockwood was the man you used to pull this deal off?" said Stretton.

"Of course—and, having finished with him, I made certain of things by getting him arrested," chuckled Simon Raspe. "He was convicted, and is now serving his time in prison. Whatever he says makes no difference. Nobody will accept the word of a convict. My own credit is absolutely secure—in the City my name is a tower of truth and strength. So where is the danger?"

"What will happen when Lockwood comes out?"

Simon Raspe chuckled again.

"Lockwood was amiable enough to declare that he would 'get me' after he came out of gaol," he smiled. "But that will be many years yet, Stretton. I don't think Lockwood will carry out his threat—and, certainly, I am not worrying about him now. We will change the subject."

"Just as you like," said Stretton. "But, to tell the truth, I have been worrying quite a lot during these last few days. If you think everything is all right, I'll say no more."

"I am sure that everything is all right," declared Raspe. "Nothing can possibly occur which will—— Good gracious!"

He started forward in his chair suddenly, and Stretton himself was on his feet. For both men had been slightly startled by a dull crash which sounded from across the grounds. Dead silence followed.

"What was that?" asked Raspe sharply.

"How on earth should I know?"

Raspe strode to the French windows, walked out, and found himself upon a gravel terrace, with a well-kept lawn stretching before him, with flower-beds beyond. The gloom was thick, and nothing could be seen distinctly.

"I can see nothing," said Stretton, joining the other.

"Something certainly happened," muttered Simon Raspe. "It sounded as though an accident had occurred on the road. Anyhow, we'll go and see."

They strode up the path towards the main gate. Thornton House was a fairly big residence, and it stood in its own grounds. In the district Mr. Simon Raspe was considered to be a man of great wealth and generosity. His name in Bannington was well respected. The worthy inhabitants of the town little knew what a serpent they were harbouring in their midst.

"I don't see why we should trouble like this," said Stretton. "After all, it may have been nothing——"

"What's that?" demanded Raspe suddenly.

He came to a halt not far from the gate. And he was pointing to a dim form which lay upon the ground just on the other side of the brick wall. As he looked, the form seemed to move.

Both Raspe and Stretton ran forward, leaving the path. And then they saw that they had not been mistaken.

It was a human figure lying there, and it had evidently fallen over the wall, into the midst of some laurel bushes—which, no doubt, had broken the stranger's fall considerably.

"Good gracious!" muttered Raspe, hurrying forward.

He pulled an electric torch from his pocket, and flashed it out. Then, as he stood over the stranger, he uttered a gasp, and staggered back. And, in that second, Simon Raspe's face had gone as pale as putty and his shifty eyes were alight with fear.

"Good heavens!" he panted hoarsely.

For the light of his electric torch revealed something which took him completely by surprise. There, on the ground, lay a figure clothed in the garb of a convict! The drab cloth—the broad arrow—the hideous headgear! The figure was smothered in mud, and it was quite clear that he was either unconscious or absolutely dazed.

"Lockwood!" panted Stretton tensely.

"Of course it's Lockwood—who else could it be?" snarled Simon Raspe, in a panic. "Can't you understand? He's escaped—and he's come straight here to carry out his threat!"

"But—but——"

"We mustn't waste time in talking!" hissed Raspe. "Quick—your scarf!"

Stretton ripped his scarf off, and Raspe seized it. Then the two men fell upon the prostrate figure in the gloom. The next second Edward Oswald Handforth was roughly seized, the scarf was bound round his mouth, so that he could make no outcry. And he was held down.

"What are you going to do?" asked Stretton huskily.

"Keep him a prisoner—and hand him over to the police!" snapped the other. "There's nothing else to be done, Stretton. If this man remains at liberty

he will murder me. When the crash came he was ruined as well as Pitt—in fact, he was by far the greater sufferer."

"But will it be safe to hand him to the police?"

"Of course it will—it's the only thing we can do!" exclaimed Raspe. "Look here, I'll hold him while you get some rope. Then you can ring up the police."

Handforth stirred slightly, and mumbled under the scarf.

"He's getting his senses back!" said Raspe. "Man alive, we must do something. He's not strong—Lockwood always was a weakly rat, and I can easily hold him."

Stretton suddenly felt Handforth's legs.

"Weakly?" he repeated. "This fellow's strong enough."

"Prison diet, I suppose——"

"Perhaps—— I say, haven't we made a mistake?" asked Stretton sharply. "We didn't see the fellow's face—he may not be Lockwood at all! Bring that light of yours—show it on his face."

Raspe, full of sudden doubts, played the light of his electric torch upon the stranger's face. The two men saw a youthful countenance, smeared with grease paint, and slightly cut where a twig had caught the skin. A black mask had become displaced. The boy lay quite still, with closed eyes.

"Good heavens!" panted Raspe. "It's—it's not Lockwood!"

"That's what I thought," exclaimed Stretton. "There was no need for you to get into a panic. Why, he's not even a convict! There's some trick about this."

"Trick!"

"This is a boy—got up in this garb for a joke, by the look of it," said Stretton, as the light was flashed over the still form. "But why should this boy come here? Why should he enter these grounds?"

Raspe looked round, and saw the broken bushes.

"It seems to me that he met with an accident," he said, becoming calm. "That's about the truth of it, Stretton. But did he do this on purpose? Did he deliberately come into this garden, with the idea of spying——"

"You're nothing but nerves!" interrupted the other. "It's a pure coincidence—nothing else. I'll just run out into the road and see what's there. Perhaps he was thrown out of a motor-car—the crash sounded pretty severe, anyhow. We'd better make sure."

Stretton hurried off, and passed outside into the lane. Within a minute he discovered the wreck of a bicycle. And it certainly was a wreck. The front wheel was buckled up, the forks were snapped, the frame was twisted, and it was quite certain that the machine was damaged beyond repair.

"Phew!" whistled Stretton. "It's a wonder the boy wasn't killed outright! Lost control, I expect, and dashed into the bank. And he must have been flung clean over the wall!"

But for this fact Handforth would certainly have been killed. As it was, he seemed to be in a bad way.

But when Stretton got back to Simon Raspe he found that Handforth was sitting up, looking dazed. His eyes were open. But he could not see his companions distinctly, for the light from the torch was in his eyes.

"Feeling better?" asked Raspe kindly.

"I—I don't know where I am!" muttered Handforth. "My hat! I'm bruised all over! Just wait till I catch those rotters!"

"What has happened?" asked Raspe. "How is it that you are dressed in this garb, my lad?"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Handforth, trying to get to his feet. "I just played a joke on my chums, and they dished me instead. I was chasing them when I bumped into that bank."

"Oh, I see!" said Simon Raspe. "I'm afraid you are a reckless youngster. How do you feel? No bones broken, I suppose?"

Handforth struggled to his feet.

"Bones broken?" he said. "Rather not! It takes more than that to break any of my bones, I can tell you. I'll get my bike now——"

"Your machine is smashed up," interrupted Stretton.

"Great pip!" said Handforth, aghast. "Smashed up? Well, that's a fine go! But I'll make those bounders pay for the damage!"

Raspe looked at Handforth keenly.

"You heard what we were saying?" he asked carelessly.

"Of course I did!" replied the junior.

"Dear me! We were merely joking——"

"Joking!" echoed Handforth. "What do you mean? You've only asked me how I was, and whether I've got any bones broken!"

"Oh! You heard nothing before that?"

"How the dickens could I hear when I was unconscious?" asked Handforth tartly. "I've only just come to my giddy senses. Awfully good of you to look after me like this. I'll be getting along now, thanks. It's all right—I'm as fit as a fiddle. It takes more than a bike smash to hurt me!"

Handforth strode off, without saying anything further. And Simon Raspe and Stretton looked at one another, greatly relieved.

"And we were thinking all sorts of alarming things," said Stretton, with a short laugh. "It only proves, Raspe, that we mustn't get alarmed too quickly. The sight of that convict garb gave you a scare."

"By gad! It did!" said Raspe. "Fortunately, the boy didn't hear what we were saying. Confound these youngsters! He's the second one who's blundered into this place during the last few days!"

"Well, it doesn't matter—he heard nothing, and everything's all right," said Stretton.

Meanwhile, Edward Oswald Handforth was walking down the lane, carrying his bicycle with him. The leader of Study D was rather badly bruised, but otherwise unhurt. And his eyes were gleaming with inward excitement.

"By George!" he muttered. "Lockwood! Escaped from prison! And Lockwood can get those chaps shoved into chokey themselves! My hat! There's something pretty big here—and I'm on the track of it!"

It seemed that Handforth was not so ignorant as he had appeared to be!

He had used his ears, and he had not been unconscious, after all! To be absolutely truthful, Handforth had acted with quite unusual sagacity. His wits had been fully on the alert.

CHAPTER V

GETTING READY FOR THE FRAY!

REGINALD PITT regarded the sky with extreme favour.

"Ripping!" he muttered. "It's going to be a glorious afternoon for the match!"

He was standing at the window of Study E, and he had the little apartment to himself. Dinner was just over, and Pitt was ready for immediate departure to Bannington. The League match, as he knew, was to start at three o'clock, and this left him plenty of time to get there, and to prepare.

He was feeling bright and cheerful, and he was looking forward with keen delight to the match.

There was only one little regret.

He was unable to take any of the other fellows into his confidence. Under no circumstances could he tell them that he was playing professional football for money—so that he could send that money to his parents. He could not even give this information to his own study mate.

The afternoon promised to be bright and crisp. There was rather a cold snap in the autumn air, and in the sky there were little banks of fleecy white clouds. Hardly any wind blew.

Pitt was about to turn and leave the study when the door opened, and Jack Grey came in. There had been rather a coolness between the pair since their little squabble. They had been quite amiable to one another, but there was not that intimate friendliness which had been so apparent before.

"I say, Reggie, I'm fed up with this sort of thing!" exclaimed Grey impulsively. "I've been feeling rotten. Why can't we go on as before?"

"I'm willing enough," replied Pitt gruffly.

"Well, let the whole thing fly—let's forget it!" exclaimed Jack, going forward, and seizing Pitt by the arm. "Come along with me to Caistowe, as I asked, and we shall soon be——"

"Sorry," interrupted Pitt. "It can't be done."

"Great Scott! Why can't you chuck this idea of yours up?" demanded Grey. "Is it so terrifically important that you can't do anything to please me or oblige me?"

Pitt looked uncomfortable.

"It's not that," he said. "Hang it all, Jack, I hate these squabbles as much as you do. But can't you just trust me? Can't you let me do what I'm planning without asking all these questions? I'll explain afterwards, and then you'll understand."

"Why don't you explain now?"

"Well, I can't—that's all."

Jack Grey looked rather grim.

"I've got something else to suggest," he said. "You won't give up your plans, but I'm a peaceable chap. I'll chuck up my own, if you like. I'll come along with you——"

"No, you won't!" interrupted Pitt sharply.

"Eh?"

"You—you can't!" went on Pitt. "Look here, Jack, you can't come with me. I must go alone—you understand?"

Jack Grey certainly did understand, for the words were clear enough. And he was not slow to detect the sharp note of alarm in Pitt's voice. Obviously, Pitt feared his chum to come with him.

"Oh, very well," said Jack coldly. "If that's the way you take it, Reggie, I'll say no more. You won't come with me, and you practically tell me that my company isn't wanted. That's good enough."

"Oh, I say! Look here——"

"No, I don't want to hear any more," interrupted Jack Grey. "That's enough."

He sat down at his desk, and Pitt looked at him with a pained expression in his eyes. Then he realised that the time was getting on. Even if he remained, it would only lead to arguments, and, in any case, he couldn't explain. So he shrugged his shoulders and passed out of the study without another word.

But it left him feeling rather uncomfortable, that little tiff. Above all things he wanted to avoid friction with Jack. And yet that friction was coming—was growing more and more acute in spite of all Reggie's efforts.

He passed down the passage and into the lobby. Handforth was standing there, and Handforth looked somewhat the worse for wear. A piece of court plaster was on his face, one wrist was bandaged, and he limped slightly.

Pitt had heard some rumours that Handforth had nearly killed himself by reckless riding, but no details had been forthcoming.

"Oh, hallo!" said Handy. "Going out?"

"Yes."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure," replied Pitt truthfully. "Anything more? Shall I tell you where I'm going, and who I'm going to meet? Shall I tell you how much I'm going to spend? Would you like to know whether I've got clean socks on?"

Handforth glared.

"I don't want any of your nerve!" he replied darkly. "And look here, I know something! Just you wait, my son, I'll surprise you before long. I know all sorts of things."

"Marvellous!" said Pitt. "I thought quite the opposite!"

He passed out leaving Handforth to wonder what exactly he had meant.

"Cheeky ass!" muttered Handforth. "But I'm going to surprise everybody soon. I'm on the track of this mystery—the biggest mystery that any detective ever had to unravel, and I'm going to beat Sexton Blake, and Nelson Lee, and Sherlock Holmes at their own giddy game."

Marvellous to relate, Handforth was keeping his secret to himself. He had learned things at Thornton House on the previous evening, but he had said nothing. It was his idea to work on the case on his own, and bring it to a triumphant conclusion. The fact that he hardly knew what the case was, was a mere detail.

Pitt got his bicycle out, and was soon speeding towards Bannington. Arriving in the town, he kept his eyes open and his wits about him. Nobody saw him enter the private premises of the Bannington Football Club—that is, nobody knew him.

He had come specially dressed in a Norfolk suit, and on the way he had changed his school cap for a tweed one with a big peak. He was also wearing smoked cycling goggles. It formed a slight disguise.

He entered the dressing-room cheerfully, and found Hogan, the trainer, lecturing a number of the players. Hogan was an excellent trainer, and he was very anxious that things should go well this afternoon.

Fred Hearne, the captain of the First Eleven, turned as Pitt entered, and gave a shout of welcome.

"Here he is—the marvellous Abdullah!" he exclaimed, grinning. "Good for you, kid! We knew you wouldn't disappoint us."

"Rather not!" said Pitt. "Of course, you're keeping it mum about my real identity?"

"Every one of us," said the skipper. "If we get talking your Headmaster might know, and we don't want to lose you."

Mr. Page, the team manager, came bustling in.

"I saw you come in through the gates, Pitt," he said briskly. "Good lad! How are you feeling?"

"Oh, fit!" replied the junior.

"Had some practice?"

"Heaps!"

"Good!" said the manager, rubbing his hands together. "Now, you'd better pop off to your little dressing-room and proceed with the dyeing."

"But don't forget to come to life when the match starts!" grinned Hearne.

Pitt went off feeling very cheerful. All these footballers were fine fellows—full of spirits and cheeriness. He had imagined that professional footballers were different to this. He had pictured them as being of a common type, who drank and swore when they were off duty.

It was a very pleasant surprise to find that his ideas were quite wrong. Every professional in the Bannington Club was a thoroughly decent man—clean living, and healthy, and gentlemanly. There was an atmosphere of comradeship in the club which quite took hold of Pitt.

Tom Howard, the young footballer who had first seen Pitt play, was not in the team this afternoon, as he was suffering from a slightly sprained tendon, and Hogan had pronounced him unfit—much to Howard's disgust. Personally, he thought he was as fit as a fiddle, but the trainer had the last word.

Pitt had been provided with a little dressing-room to himself. It was only a tiny place, but quite large enough. Here he kept his big bottle of brown dye. He proceeded to strip, and then he applied the stuff with the sponge. It was a very easy process. He browned his face, his neck, his arms. Then he proceeded to apply the stuff to his legs, from his ankles well up his thighs. The whole operation only took him ten minutes.

And when he donned his colours he was Abdullah.

Reginald Pitt had vanished. It was really surprising what an extraordinary change the application of this brown dye made. Naturally dark, Pitt looked the part to the life.

Later on, it would be very easy for him to remove this dye by means of petrol. It came off with the slightest touch. Rather a smelly process, perhaps, but Pitt didn't exactly mind. The dye was proof against everything else—perspiration and rain. There was no fear of his colour running on the field.

Pitt presented himself in the big general room.

"Behold, the magician!" grinned Fred Hearne. "One minute he is a schoolboy, and the next minute he turns himself into a dancing Dervish!"

And the captain rattled off a fearful sentence in a quick jabber, which meant absolutely nothing. Evidently he was pretending to ask Pitt a few questions. The other footballers roared.

"Oh, he's off!" grinned Pitt. "What do you think our prospects are for the afternoon?"

"In the first place, you mustn't speak in English at all," said Howard, with a chuckle. "If anybody asks you any questions—any outsider, I mean—you've got to shake your head and look silly. Everybody thinks you're a blue-blooded Egyptian, and that you learnt football with our giddy troops. So if you want to speak at all, speak in Egyptian!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As regards the game, we shall have to look alive," said Hearne seriously. "We're playing Helmford United, and they're hot. They haven't lost a game yet. They've won every match this season, home and away. But, by Jove, we'll do our best to grab two points away from 'em!"

"Rather!" said Pitt.

The manager was equally concerned. He explained how necessary it was for every player to work with might and main—to play with the sole object of getting goals. All the members of the team were urged to do their utmost.

And it was quite certain that the team would do so. But whether they would win the match or not remained to be seen.

Meanwhile, a record crowd was assembling in the stand and on the banks. The Bannington ground was not exceptionally large, but it could

accommodate ten thousand—not that it had ever been full. On this occasion, however, the crowd was greatly augmented by a huge inrush of Helmford supporters.

Helmford was only twenty miles off, and hundreds and hundreds of football enthusiasts came by train and char-a-banc, and on bicycles. It seemed quite likely, therefore, that there would be a record gate.

The Helmford people were convinced that they would see their own pets win the game and take both the points back to Helmford with them. The Bannington supporters were equally determined to keep the points at home.

However, what they determined mattered little. It was the players themselves who had it in their power to decide.

And, at last, a tremendous roar went up as Bannington took the field. Another yell followed when Helmford United came out. For two or three minutes the two elevens kicked the ball about near goal. Then the referee appeared accompanied by the linesmen. The crowd was on the tip-toe of expectancy.

"Play up, Helmford!" yelled somebody.

"Go it Bannington!"

From all sides came a good deal of criticism regarding Abdullah. He had been seen and appreciated in the reserve match. But was he strong enough to play in the first eleven?

Many of the town club supporters shook their heads dubiously. Pitt was small compared with the other players, and he was practically untried. Many enthusiasts declared that his inclusion in the team would mean the loss of the game.

But Pitt intended opening all eyes.

The whistle blew, and the rival captains came forward and tossed. Fred Hearne won, much to the delight of the crowd. The elevens lined up, the referee set his watch, and blew his whistle.

The game commenced.

CHAPTER VI.

PLAYING FOR THE LEAGUE.

"GO it, Bannington!"

The game started with a rush, the Bannington forwards taking the ball down the field in determined style. They passed it neatly from one to the other, and it really looked as though they were about to secure a goal in the first few moments.

Hearne drove hard and true for the goal, but the Helmford keeper rushed out and met the leather squarely with his fist. It went soaring into mid-field, where it was neatly trapped by the opposing centre-half, and passed on the instant to the left wing.

The inside man tricked the back, passed to the outside, and it was swiftly centred, the ball falling right in front of the goal mouth.

Slam!

The ball rammed into the back of the net, and the Bannington goalkeeper was nowhere. He hardly saw the leather at all.

"Goal!"

The visitors fairly shrieked, and the home supporters remained silent. This was an unexpected rebuff. They had hardly expected that Helmford would open the scoring within the first minute.

"Play up, Bannington!"

"Come on, my bonny boys!"

"Put some ginger into it!"

The crowd was perfectly willing to impart any amount of advice, free, gratis, and for nothing. When their favourites were winning they were full of enthusiasm. When they were in trouble, the supporters were full of criticism. It was just the way of football crowds.

The game restarted, and for some little time the two sides struggled valiantly with one another, most of the play being in mid-field. The home defence had livened up, and did not give the visitors any further opportunity of breaking through. In the meantime, Bannington tried hard to score.

Pitt, much to his regret, was sadly neglected. The half-backs consistently fed the left wing, and Pitt hardly had anything to do. The left wing was good, but somehow, it never seemed to bring anything off. Before the ball could be taken down the goal area it was seized by the Helmford defenders and sent back into mid-field beyond.

The game was a clean one, the referee hardly finding it necessary to blow his whistle once for a foul. Now and again the game would be stopped

for off-side, but this was hardly to be wondered at.

Then came another shock for the crowd.

One of the Bannington backs misjudged a kick. The ball went spinning in an oblique direction. Nobody was near it, but, with one of those quick bursts of intuition which marks a first-class footballer, the Helmford centre-forward darted up the field. He reached the ball before the mistake could be rectified.

With a terrific first-time shot he sent the leather shooting into a corner of the goal.

The Bannington custodian flung himself flat in an endeavour to avoid the catastrophe. But the ball slipped under him—he was a shade too late.

"Goal!"

"Oh, well played, Helmford!"

"Goal!"

"We'll show you what we can do!" roared a Helmford supporter. "Who says you can play football?"

The crowd was in a turmoil. Two down, and it wasn't yet half-time. This was worse than anything that could have happened. It was little short of a catastrophe. How could the home team possibly score three goals? And without them they could not win.

Indeed, they would be lucky if they drew.

But football is an uncertain game. And, as frequently happens, the winning side slackened down, probably believing that their lead was good enough to carry them through successfully. The defence lost its vigour, and the backs became careless. It was only too clear that Helmford United believed that they were "all over" their opponents, and had the game in their own grasp!

Then Reginald Pitt had his chance.

It was the first time he had been able to see what he could do. The ball came his way more by accident than anything else. From a throw-in it was kicked up the field. Pitt seized upon it—and away he went, streaking up the touch-line like a racer. The crowd fairly roared.

This was the first burst of speed they had seen. Pitt had perfect control of the ball, and he tricked a half-back and a back in quick succession—these players believing that they had nothing to fear from this coloured footballer.

Pitt was right near the goal-line. His progress up the field had been so quick, however, that there was nobody ready for him to pass to. If he centred the ball his efforts would be wasted.

So he ran in like a whirlwind.

The goalkeeper realised his danger, and came out to meet this unsuspected enemy. Pitt did not hesitate a second—he kicked hard and true. The leather left his foot, and sped over the ground low. The goalie missed it altogether, and it entered the net—one of the finest goals the Bannington supporters had ever seen.

"Hurrah!"

"Goal!"

"Oh, good shot!"

"Well played, Blackie!"

"Goal!"

The enthusiasm was tremendous, and Pitt's arm was nearly wrenched out of its socket by the handshaking he received by his comrades. Fred Hearne was overjoyed.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Great, young 'un!"

"We've got to win!" muttered Pitt grimly.

"That's the style—that's the spirit!"

But the game had only been started three minutes before another set back came. By a piece of atrocious luck, Helmford scored again. The Bannington left back was foolish enough in a moment of intense excitement to handle the ball in the penalty area; but the referee pointed to the penalty spot.

"Penalty!"

The Helmford supporters were on tip-toe, and the home crowd waited with feverish anxiety. The visiting centre-half took the kick, and he made no mistake. He defeated the goalkeeper—and Helmford scored again.

Three-one!

This was appalling. Pitt's goal was no good now—for Helmford were still two ahead. And it was now only a few moments from half-time.

When the game went on the players were listless. They knew that only a few moments remained before the interval, and Bannington had practically lost heart. They knew quite well that Helmford United was the better team. They were fighting against what seemed to be hopeless odds.

Then once again came a change. Once again Pitt rushed up the field with a

speed which amazed his fellow-players and the spectators alike. At the very precise moment he lifted the ball, and it dropped at the centre-forward's foot. Hearne kicked hard, but a groan went up as it was seen that the goalie tipped it over the cross-bar.

"Corner!"

And a corner kick it was—and it was Pitt's task to take it. Pitt knew well enough that here was a chance to score. His judgment was almost uncanny.

He lifted the ball, and it dropped practically into the very mouth of the goal. It came curving in, slightly assisted by the gentle breeze. Up sprang the Bannington centre-half, and he got his head to the leather. It went in well and truly, and the goalie was defeated.

"Goal!"

"Well played, Abdullah!"

Everybody recognised that Pitt had actually scored this goal, although he had not put it into the net. And then came half-time, with things appearing much brighter. The score was now three-two.

And, if Bannington made a supreme effort, there was no reason why they should not equalise, at least. And even one point was better than none at all.

"Splendid, youngster — absolutely splendid!" exclaimed the manager, as Pitt was sponging himself down in the interval. "Keep it up, and we'll win yet! By gad! You're the best man on the field!"

"I did my best, sir," said Pitt modestly.

He was delighted by the attitude of all the other players. He had expected jealousy—and bitter feelings. Nothing of the sort existed. These professionals recognised him as an exceptional player. They gave him full credit for his prowess. And they were glad to have him playing in the same eleven.

A roar went up as the two teams came into the field for the second half of the game. The crowd was excited now, for the game was in an interesting state. Helmford was one up, and the home team would have to work like niggers if they were to gain the mastery. And when the game restarted it went with a rush.

There was no question of Helmford slackening down now. The players were going all out to increase their lead, and they were playing extremely well.

However, much as they tried, the Helmford forwards could not get through. It was almost miraculous the way the home goal escaped. Corner after corner was forced, but not one of them materialised. Practically all the play was in the home half of the field, and the Bannington defenders were run off their feet.

Then they bucked up, and the game resolved itself into a sort of ding dong battle for the mastery.

Twenty minutes sped by, and by this time all the footballers were feeling the effects of their gruelling play. It was generally considered by the crowd that no more goals would be scored, and that Helmford would win.

Then the Bannington supporters lost all hope

For the visiting centre-forward made an individual run—a masterly effort such as one sees only occasionally. He beat everybody, and it is doubtful if he would have scored. But the Bannington goalkeeper flustered, ran out. If he had remained between the posts it is extremely dubious whether a goal would have resulted.

But the centre-forward twisted round the custodian with ease, and simply dribbled the ball into the open net.

The crowd groaned.

"O-oh!"

"Goal!" roared the delighted Helmfordians.

"That's just about put the lid on it!" said Fred Hearne grimly. "Four-two!"

The very idea of Bannington securing three goals in about fifteen minutes seemed preposterous. They needed three goals to win.

But, such is the uncertainty of football, a tremendous change came about within five minutes—and, after all, it was not so very surprising. The Helmford men had shot their bolt. They had played hard and had exhausted themselves. The home team was not so fagged.

And, even now, they did not give up hope. Once a side have given up hope in football, it has absolutely no chance.

The ball went over to the left wing, and in less than two minutes it was centred, rammed at the goalie, fisted out, and then headed in.

"Goal!"

This was better. The visitors were now only one ahead, but it seemed that they would remain so. For five minutes the Bannington players worked like Trojans, vitalised into extra activity by

that last goal. They tried their utmost to score again, but it seemed that luck was against them.

Holmford went to pieces, but the inside forwards of the home team had apparently lost their shooting ability. Again and again they got through, only to send the ball wide, sky high—anywhere, in fact except into the net. The crowd was exasperated.

Then Pitt came into the limelight once more.

The leather was passed to him from the centre-half—this man fully realising that their only chance of winning was to give Pitt every opportunity. There was a race for the ball between Pitt and one of the backs. Pitt got there first. The back, in desperation, attempted to foul the junior, but failed, Pitt leaping completely over the man, and charging down upon the goal.

He sent the ball into the net with terrific force.

"Goal!"

"Oh, hurrah!"

"Well played, Blackie!"

"Goal!"

The impossible had happened—Bannington had equalised!

"One more goal to win!" roared the crowd.

"Let's have it, Bannington!"

But was there time? It hardly seemed so, for there was only one minute left—one minute before the whistle would blow! In fact, there was hardly time for the teams to line-up, and for the ball to be got into motion. The referee was already eyeing his watch.

His whistle blew, and the game went on. But the crowd was already streaming out, knowing full well that the game was over. But those who went wished that they had remained.

For they missed seeing the most wonderful effort of the whole game.

A second after the kick-off the ball swung out to the right wing. Pitt obtained it, but made no attempt to follow his usual tactics. Instead of passing or going up the field near the touch-line, he made straight for the goal—becoming for a moment, centre-forward.

Nobody had been expecting it—nobody had looked for it. The Holmford centre-half threw himself at Pitt. Pitt dodged like lightning, curled round, and found himself opposed by both the Holmford backs. He gave the ball a soft touch, and it went high, to fall just in advance. Pitt sped round the two backs before they knew what he was doing, and they gasped with dismay as they saw that he had got the ball again, and that he was descending upon the goal.

"Shoot!"

"Oh, shoot!"

But Pitt didn't shoot in a hurry. He wanted to make absolutely certain of this—and he did. He steadied himself, and then the toe of his boot met the leather, it rose at an angle, and for a fraction of a second everybody thought that it was going wide. But it just slipped in at the very corner of the goal. The custodian jumped with all his strength. His fingers touched the ball—but could not save it. It rolled over his shoulder, bounced, and was in the net.

And then pandemonium reigned.

The whistle blew, and the game was over.

The crowd simply cheered itself hoarse. In spite of all the difficulties—in spite of the overwhelming handicap—Bannington had won. And Abdullah, the mysterious Egyptian footballer, had won the game.

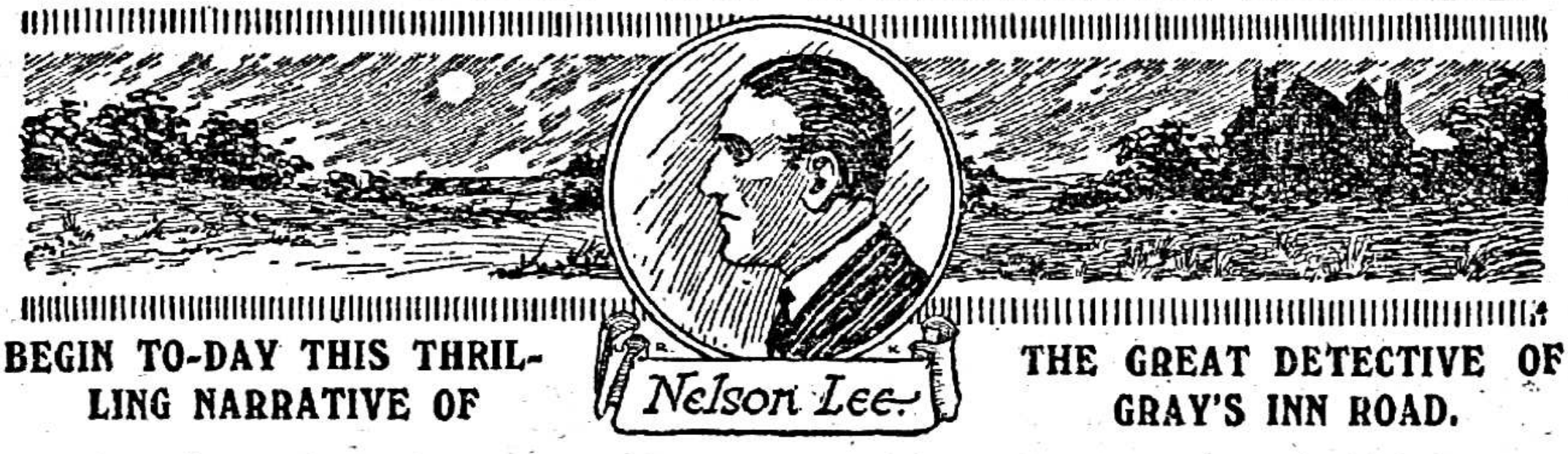
Without the slightest doubt, it was due to his efforts that the home team had gained the two points.

As for Pitt himself, he was in a state of excited and exhausted joy. His first game for the League had been a triumph.

And he had many glorious prospects before him. The future seemed bright. But Reginald Pitt didn't know of the trials and troubles which would shortly be descending upon him—and well-nigh overwhelming him.

THE END.

The Ghosts of Marsh Manor



BEGIN TO-DAY THIS THRILLING NARRATIVE OF THE GREAT DETECTIVE OF GRAY'S INN ROAD.

INTRODUCTION.

NELSON LEE, *the great detective, as Mr. Herbert Drake, B.A., secures a post as games master at Marsh Manor School in order to investigate strange visits of ghosts at the school. His young assistant,* NIPPER, *comes to the school as Barton, a backward boy. Unless the ghost can be laid, the Head, the* REV. OCTAVIOUS CHARD, *will be obliged to close down the school. Lee suspects Monsieur* VILOTTE, *the French master as being implicated in the ghostly manifestations.* ADOLPHE MALINES, JULES TROCHON, *and* MADAME TROCHON, *Belgian refugees and friendly neighbours of the Head, are found to be living on the hospitality of* INGLEBY-CHARTERIS, *known by Lee to be a financier of ill-repute. The mystery deepens, and Lee finds that he is up against some very desperate and clever criminals, including SOL CLITTERS, the notorious forger, who, learning of the famous detective's presence at the school, plots to murder him.*

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER XII. (*Continued.*)

The Murder of Nelson Lee.

NIPPER said nothing, knowing that the Rev. Octavius was at that very moment upstairs in "Mr. Herbert Drake's" room, it having been arranged that he should seize the opportunity of preparation to get there unobserved.

At ten minutes to nine Antoine Vilotte arose from the chair on which he had been sitting, and an odd silence fell on the other occupants of the hostel.

"It is time," he said, with a short laugh, "if I am to obey the rules and regulations of my Principal! Good fortune!"

And, raising the glass of red wine to his lips, he poured the contents down his hairy throat.

Sol Clitters and Professor Felix followed him into the hall, and helped him on with his mackintosh.

"You're feeling sure of yourself?' said the American. "It's not too late for me to give you a hand, you know."

"Poof! I have never been so confident in my life!" sneered Vilotte.

"Do not forget, my dear fellow," whispered the old professor, no longer the gentle, benevolent man of science, but looking for all the world like a rapacious wolf, "do not forget that one cry may undo everything!"

"Your chloroform will make that safe enough. Do you think I am a child in these matters, Felix?" replied Vilotte. "Honestly, I would rather have shot him, but, as you say, it must be done without noise—an operation under anæsthetics. Don't let that light from the room show when I open the front door."

And the old man closed the communication between the sitting-room and the hall.

"Well, so long!" said the American. "We sha'n't expect to see you for some time. This is pretty certain to let the police in. But you will let us know how things have gone through Charteris?"

"I shall let you know," said Vilotte, pressing Clitter's big hand with a firm pressure of his own, and, slipping out of the door, which was noiselessly closed behind him, the murderer went out into the wind and rain.

The clock was striking the hour as the French master took his candlestick from the hall table, lit it, and mounted the stairs. And once inside his own apartments he drew two things from his mackintosh pockets, laying them side by side on the dressing-table.

One was a twelve-ounce bottle filled with a yellow viscous fluid, the other a foot and a half of two-inch piping filled with lead.

He picked the latter up several times, weighing it carefully in his hand, and smiting one or two blows with it, evidently to his complete satisfaction, for he smiled at himself in the glass and stroked his black beard to a point.

He was always a bit of a dandy, Antoine Vilotte, and had caught the habit of white spats from his colleague, Ingleby-Charteris. He took these off now, and, removing his trousers, placed them in a press, after which he put on an old pair, changed his shirt, and slipped his arms into a blue flannel jacket.

His oboe-case lay on the window-seat, and, with a foxy smile of intense cunning, he

screwed the instrument together and played a pretty little air, after his usual nightly custom.

Had you peeped in upon him, there was nothing to show that the man was meditating a foul crime. But when the clock chimed eleven he laid the instrument down and walking on tiptoe across his study, traversed the few yards that separated it from the nearest dormitory, opened the door very softly, and listened.

Little by little, he switched on an electric torch, and played the light round Nipper's head; but the boy lay sleeping on his back, the rosy flush of health on his cheek, and nothing to show that he was fully dressed and had only regained the dormitory two minutes before the Belgian entered it.

Satisfied with his examination, Vilotte closed the door noiselessly behind him and locked his own.

The action seemed to transform him, and a tigerish look came into his eyes as he lifted the table that stood in the centre of the study and opened the well-oiled trapdoor. Then he drew on an extra pair of socks over those he was wearing, eased the stopper of the bottle before placing it in his pocket, and, picking up his terrible bludgeon, followed the ray of the torch down the wooden steps. Using it only to light him along the communicating passage, he switched it off at the foot of the other ladder, and, opening the trap beneath the games-master's table, listened intently for several minutes.

A dull, yellow glow through the door of the adjoining bed-room, which stood slightly ajar, puzzled him, and it was some time before he crawled on hands and knees towards it, and peeped in.

The light came from a candle standing by the bedside, and it flung the shadow of the great detective's head across his pillow. Lee lay on his right side, his shoulder pushing up the bed-clothes into a mound, and it was evident to Vilotte that he had no suspicion of the approaching peril.

A stride from the bed-head, the large Japanese five-fold screen protected the sleeper from the wind, which, as it found a way through the old leaded panes, wavered the candle flame. But the figure on the bed was sleeping quietly, and made no movement.

Twice Vilotte's fingers tightened on the length of piping. But he paused, remembering that one cry might be fatal to the business in hand, and, cautiously withdrawing the stopper, he raised his arm as he knelt there, and poured some of the chloroform on to the top sheet.

The rain pattered briskly against the window, but that was the only sound, and Vilotte made bold to pour out the rest of the chloroform, and then waited.

To his excited imagination, as the candle flame flickered, the shadow on the pillow moved, and the head seemed to move with it. But that was fancy, and judging the chloroform to have played its part by that time, he raised himself slowly to his feet, lifted the lethal weapon, and brought it down with a dull thud on the skull of the sleeping man!

Ten times he smote rapidly, with the full force of a muscular arm, and then, seizing the throat with both hands, to make assurance doubly sure, he gave a startled cry.

His fingers had grasped nothing, and, as the soccer ball rolled with a bounce on to the floor, carrying the wig with it, he felt himself lifted from his feet by a double grip more powerful than his own. and flung face downwards across the dummy that had deceived him!

Steel handcuffs secured his wrists behind his back, and at the same moment the Rev. Octavius Chard passed a stout luggage-strap round the man's legs, and pulled it tight, as a preliminary.

All power of thought and movement seemed to pass from the man, so overwhelming had been the surprise, so terrible the future possibilities, and when they had turned him over, and he lay there, bound and helpless, the eyes of Nelson Lee were looking down into his own

"Bravo, Mr. Chard!" said Lee. "I think we'll have that other strap on him. We don't want any trouble under the secret passage. By Jupiter! If my head had been where he thought it was, it would have been past aching by this time!"

"The murderous hound!" exclaimed Mr. Chard, in a low voice full of horror and indignation. "At any rate, this is number one!"

And, while he strapped his knees together, Nelson Lee gagged the ruffian with a towel, on which Vilotte bit viciously.

They had neither of them realised when they darted from behind the screen that they had forced his face on to the very spot where he had soaked the sheet with chloroform; but the sweet, subtle odour was not lost on Nelson Lee, who seized him by the legs and dragged him clear, afterwards rolling up the sheet and opening the window.

"There was enough in that bottle to kill half a dozen men," he said, replacing the stopper. "And now, sir, he's a heavy fellow, and we've got our work cut out to convey him to his own room."

It was no easy matter to carry the inert, helpless man down the wooden steps and along the passage, but they accomplished it between them, and laid him for a moment on the floor of the adjoining bed-room.

"That Cromwellian chair in his study is the very thing for our purpose," said Lee, and he transferred it from one room to the other, finding it just as much as he could lift.

Vilotte had returned to his senses by that time, and his eyes spoke unutterable things as they sat him up and roped and strapped him, until he could neither move a limb nor throw his weight from one side to the other.

"So, Monsieur Vilotte, your career of infamy is finished. You will have plenty of time for reflection, because you are going

to remain here until we have rounded up the rest of your interesting little gang," said the great detective. "It may be a week before we place you in the hands of the police, but, in the meantime, I know you are anxious to communicate with your friends, and I am going to write a letter for you."

He took the candle into the study, and returned again, this time with a packet of the pink notepaper that Vilotte affected, and, sitting down beside him, placed a specimen of the Belgian's own handwriting on the corner of the dressing-table, repeating each line aloud for the scoundrel's benefit as he set it down in perfect French:

"Dear Monsieur,—Have the goodness to let them know that I have accomplished that little affair. The thing was not easy, but he was asleep, and never moved after the first blow. Unfortunately, he shed much blood; but I have removed all traces by taking away the sheets. They are hidden, with the body, in the passage under my room. For all my courage, the business made me very sick. My hand still trembles as I write, and I do not feel myself. It is the strain, the reaction of relief after the terrible discovery that Nelson Lee had a clue. All that is finished now, and the man is dead. Lose no time, for we have still the boy to reckon with.

"Bien à vous,

"VILOTTE."

"Admirable!" said Mr. Chard, filling his pipe, with hands that shook a little. "Direct the envelope to Ingleby-Charteris, and Withers shall deliver it in the morning."

In a few minutes they blew out Vilotte's candle, and, locking the outer door, left the miscreant alone with his thoughts.

As they passed the dormitory, a head was pushed out.

"We've done it, and without a hitch!" whispered Nelson Lee. "Get to bed. Events will begin to move rapidly now, and you will want all the sleep you can get."

In his hand the detective carried the suit-case bearing his assumed initials, containing a suit of pyjamas, his shaving tackle, and a supply of tobacco. And he took possession of Mr. Williams' empty rooms, which was all part of the scheme he had worked out in conjunction with the Headmaster.

It was one o'clock before Mr. Chard left him, with a clear knowledge of the part he himself was to play, and morning brought another surprise to the inmates of the Manor House.

"I say, what do you think?" said Seymour, in a frightened whisper, bouncing into the dormitory after a visit to the boot-room. "Froggie's been taken ill in the night, and they've had a doctor to him."

"Then that accounts for the noise I heard," said Tulk.

"And I thought there were people moving about," interjected Nipper.

"But that's not all," said Seymour. "Mr. Drake has gone!"

"What?"

And the whole dormitory joined in the cry.

"Yes—gone! Lowered himself out of the window, with his suit-case. Boyle says the Head's nearly out of his mind."

There was consternation on every face, and the news spread like wildfire through the school.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Mystery Deepens!

ABOUT eleven o'clock in the forenoon Mr. Ingleby-Charteris, driving his Rolls-Royce at a rapid pace, saw a figure on the high road, walking towards him with bent head, and recognised the Rev. Octavius Chard.

The stockbroker hesitated, thinking of the letter he had received an hour before, and which, his French being defective, he had clumsily translated by the aid of a dictionary. He had not been able to quite make out the allusion to Nipper in the letter; but now that Nelson Lee was dead the great danger had been removed, and, slowing down, he brought the car to a stand, struck by the strange look of anxiety in the schoolmaster's face.

"Good-morning, Mr. Chard!" he called out, in his boisterous, vulgar way. "You look like a man with a load on his mind. What's the matter?"

Mr. Chard, who had acknowledged the salute in a rather abstracted manner, stepped up to the car and shook hands with its owner.

"I am worried out of my very life, Mr. Charteris," he said gloomily. "Things seem to be going from bad to worse. My French master has broken down, and is running a temperature. The local doctor cannot make head or tail of it, and orders him to keep his room until the symptoms either develop or disappear. And, as misfortunes never come singly, my new assistant, Mr. Herbert Drake, is nowhere to be found"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Ingleby-Charteris, finding it difficult to conceal the unholy joy that filled him at this positive confirmation. "I don't understand. Disappeared? How has he disappeared?"

"If I am not detaining you, it would be a real relief to get a practical, commonsense opinion," said the Rev. Octavius. "Have you five minutes to spare?"

"An hour, my dear fellow, if I can be of any assistance," replied the stockbroker promptly.

"Then look here. To begin at the beginning, ever since this wretched ghost business I have made a practice of removing the keys of the outer doors at night. But this morning, when Drake did not come down to breakfast, I went to his room, and found the window wide open, everything else just as usual, but the sheets from the man's bed, his suit-case, and the man himself, gone! Now what do you make of it?"

The stockbroker closed his throttle until the engines purred with a scarcely per

ceptible hum, and looked as puzzled as his informant.

"Who was he?" he said. "Where did you get him?"

"He answered my advertisement in "The Times," and produced the very best of credentials."

The stockbroker's eyes contracted, and he smiled, remembering the Dowager Duchess of Linlithgow and how completely he had been taken in.

"Have you communicated with the police?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Then I should wait a little. He did not appear to me to be a man ever troubled with nerves; but you may depend upon it he's got the wind up over your ghosts, and didn't like to admit it."

"I'd thought of that. But nothing's been seen for several nights," said Mr. Chard, nodding. "And for a man to deliberately throw away his chances in life when he had only to come to me and give notice in the orthodox way, it seems almost incredible. Besides, he was the most popular master I've ever had."

"There's a lot of human nature even in popular masters," said Mr. Charteris, glad of an opportunity to smile at last. "If I were you, I should mark time. The beggar will write. He must do."

"I hope he will," said Mr. Chard gloomily. "To tell you the truth, Charteris, to use a vulgarism, I'm just 'fed-up' with the whole thing. I am seriously contemplating leaving the place altogether."

"That seems a pity," said the wily rascal sympathetically. "Of course, if you do I shall try to buy the house again. I'm not afraid of ghosts."

"Nor I," said Mr. Chard. "But, unfortunately parents and guardians don't look at things in the same light, and I cannot afford to trifle with my livelihood."

"No, of course not. You say Vilotte is ill? Nothing serious, I hope?"

"The doctor says he suspects brain fever, but he won't know for forty-eight hours."

"Well, well, you seem to have had nothing but trouble ever since you came here. I'm awfully sorry for you. If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to command me."

"You are very kind," said the disconsolate schoolmaster, accepting the proffered hand. "Then you do not advise informing the police to-day?"

"Not unless you're anxious for more publicity," said his false friend.

"Perhaps you're right. I'll see what the post brings, at any rate."

And they parted, Mr. Chard to pursue his lonely walk, while Ingleby-Charteris turned in at the open gate of the hostel, both men thoroughly satisfied with the result of that interview, though each in a widely different direction.

"Dear me!" said the Rev. Octavius Chard to himself. "I never thought I could practise such deception! But surely the end justifies the means in this case!"

"By jingo!" chuckled the stockbroker, as he jumped out of his car. "Vilotte has certainly saved the situation. A few more doses of ghost, and the Manor House is ours!"

As Mr. Ingleby-Charteris approached the house the door was opened by Adolfe Malines, his dirty hands trembling violently with bottled up expectation.

"Have you heard, monsieur?" was his anxious inquiry, which took the stockbroker rather aback.

"Heard what? Something wrong?" he demanded.

"No, no! I mean has Vilotte communicated with you? We are in an agony of suspense. It is twelve hours since Antoine was to have done that thing."

"And he did it!" said Mr. Ingleby-Charteris stalking into the sitting-room, as Adolfe Malines gave a hoarse cry of delight.

Madame Trochon and her giant of a husband, Professor Felix, and the big American were all there waiting, and there was wine on the table.

"Oh, the brave Antoine!" exclaimed madame, clasping her hands.

"I don't know so much about that!" growled Trochon. "I was ready to do it myself."

"Listen to the fool—he is jealous!" laughed the Belgian woman.

The pair were always quarrelling when there was nobody about to hear them.

"Say, do you mean that?" questioned Sol Clitters eagerly. "I shall believe it when I see it."

"Well, here's his letter. Read it in English, Professor, and, if there's any more proof wanting, I've just had a talk with Chard on the road."

And he told them what the Head had said to him.

"Well, I didn't think much of Vilotte before this," said the American crook, his face beaming. "But he's done what I failed to do, and he deserves a medal—with palms. There's only one thing we've got to guard against now—that blessed boy, Nipper."

"I don't think he's likely to trouble us much," said Ingleby-Charteris, who was perspiring freely and mopping his head with his handkerchief. "We've got to keep this in mind, that a man like Nelson Lee can't disappear from off the face of the earth without causing an immense commotion. His friends will know where he is, and we'll have Scotland Yard down here in a brace of shakes."

(To be continued.)

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