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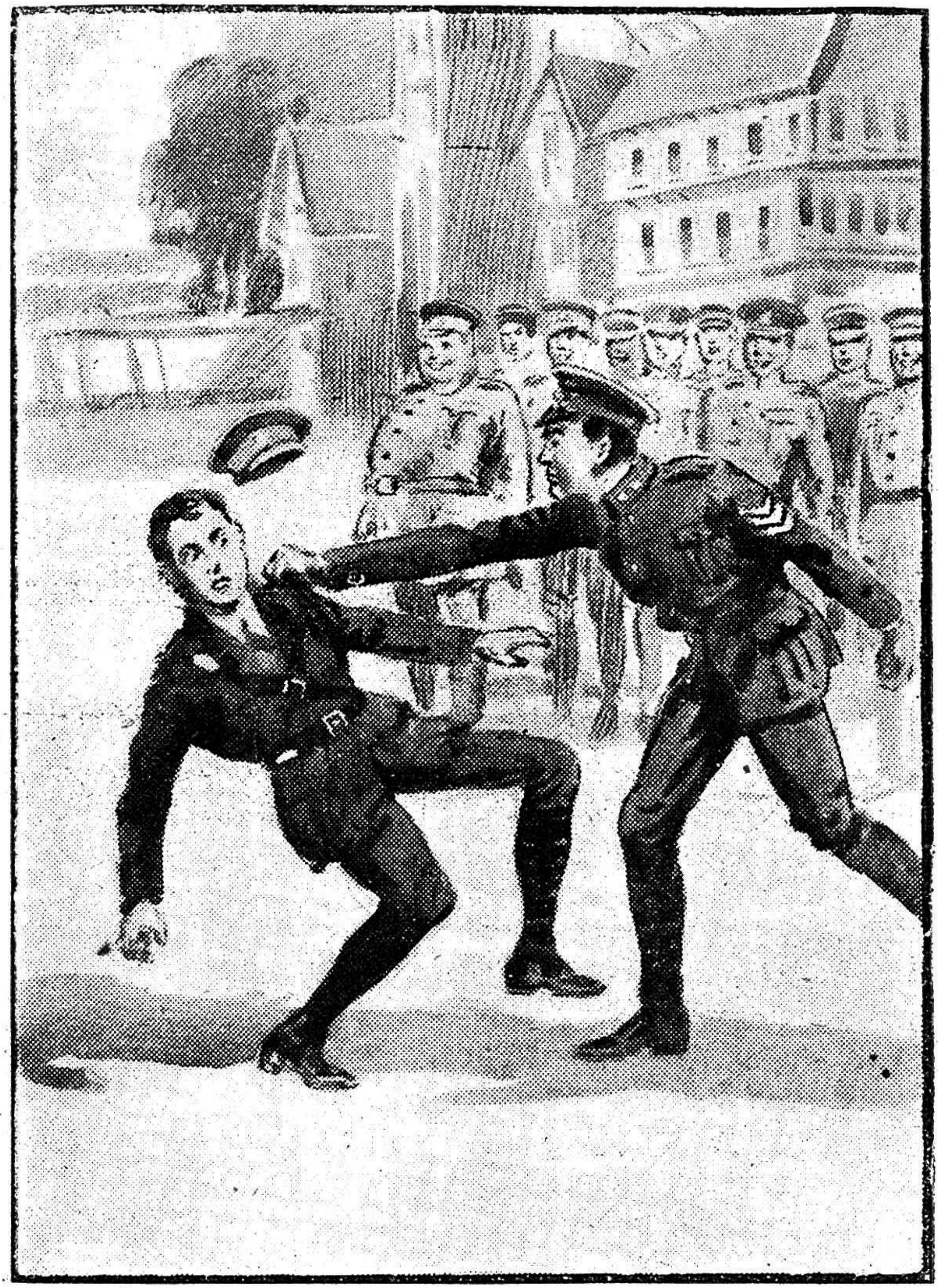
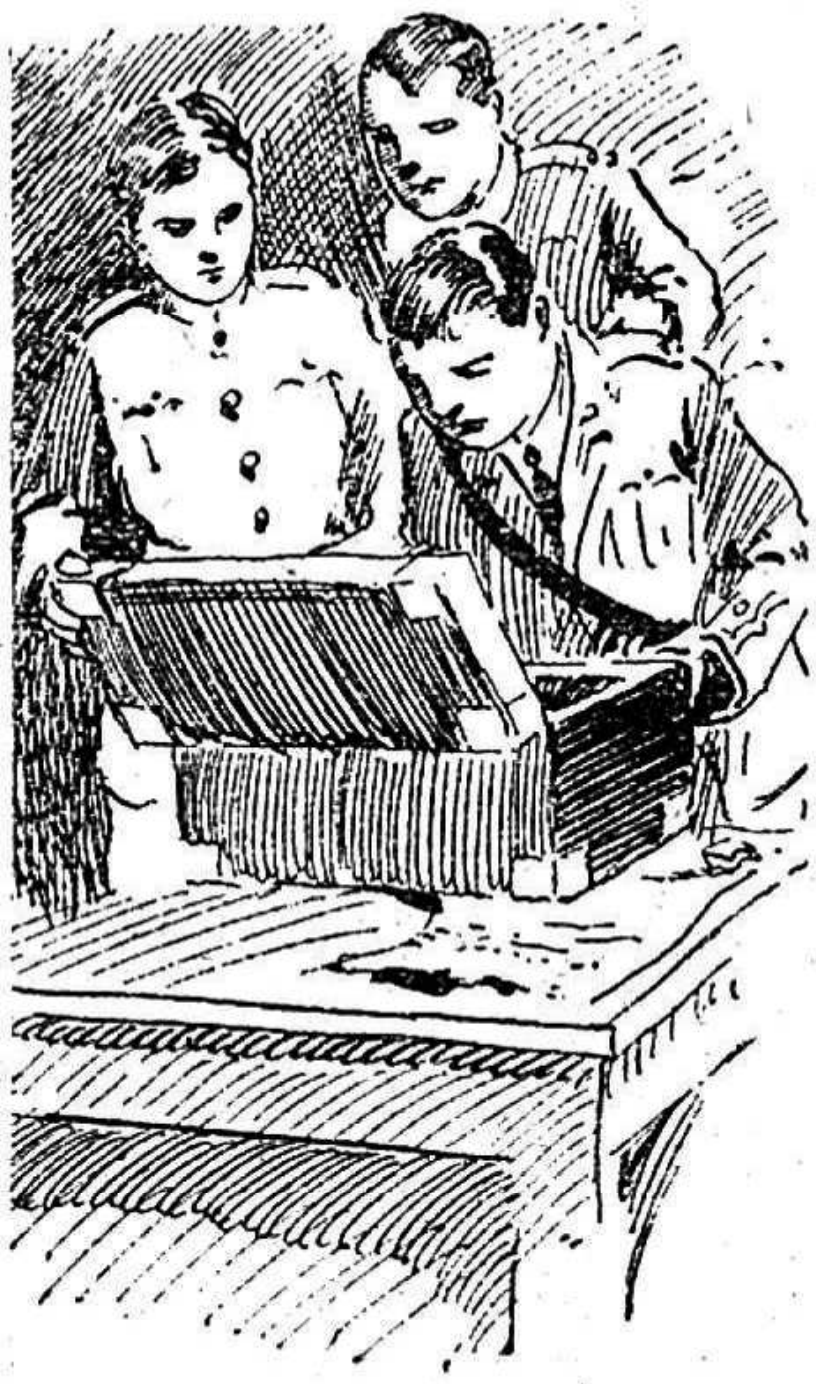
THE FLOOD AT ST. FRANK'S.



"Dare!" bawled Handforth. "Take that!"
Biff!
I saw about twenty stars and crashed over backwards.



The Flood at St. Frank's

A Splendid Long Complete Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Dismissal of Nelson Lee," "The Downfall of the Snake," "The Boy from Nowhere," and many other stirring Tales.

(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER 1.

PLENTY OF WATER.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" I declared firmly.

"Oh, absolutely out of the question!" said Reginald Pitt. "Why, the whole playing field is like a bog. We should be buried up to our necks in less than five minutes, I'll bet."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West nodded his head.

"Begad!" he said, adjusting his pince-nez. "What frightful havoc, dear old boys! What truly appalling destruction! An' I'm afraid that football will be impossible for some little time to come."

A little crowd of us were inspecting the playing fields of St. Frank's. It was a half-holiday, and the sun was shining wanly from a watery kind of sky. A fair wind was blowing, but it never reached the proportions of a gale.

The gale had risen to its most frightful fury during the night, and by now it had practically died down to a breeze. But the ruin and destruction it had left in its trail was evident on every hand.

"Just our luck!" said Pitt. "We've got an important match on this afternoon, and the only thing you can do is to telegraph to Redcliffe that they had better not come. You'll have to be quick, too——"

"If you'll tell me how I can telegraph I shall be obliged," I interrupted. "You overlook the important fact that Bellton is flooded, and practically out of reach. There's another little point which is worthy of note. Nine telegraph wires out of ten are down in this part of the country. It would be quicker to send a message by a tortoise!"

"H'm! I'd forgotten that," said Pitt. "No, there wouldn't be much chance of a telegram getting through to-day."

"You needn't worry, in any case," I went on. "The Redcliffe fellows won't turn up—they'll have more sense than to start. By Jove! Just look at Little Side! Did you ever see it in such an unholy mess?"

From a distance the football field looked quite all right, green and fresh. But, at close quarters, it could easily be seen that the whole expanse of grassland was little better than a morass. Between every tuft of grass there lay a deep pool of muddy water. And what appeared to be solid ground was really so soft and spongy that one's feet squelched into awful mud well over the ankles.

"It'll be at least a fortnight before we can do anything with this pitch," remarked Tommy Watson, shaking his head. "And the weather'll have to be dry during all that time, too. My hat! Just look at the trees that are down! It's a good thing they didn't cause more damage!"

We looked round with interest, and a certain amount of awe.

The whole countryside was a scene of desolation. For the awful blizzard of the previous night had reached a fury hitherto unknown in this part of the country. The storm was, in fact, the worst that had ever been known. And it had been accompanied by appalling rain.

The storm had caused tens of thousands of pounds worth of damage in the district. Havoc had been wrought at St. Frank's, but, on the whole, the school was lucky to have escaped with no further damage, for the storm had been so truly terrible that half the fellows had expected the old school to blow down in utter wreckage.

Gazing round, we could see a great many trees lying pitifully on the ground. Their great strength had been as nothing compared to the storm. They had fallen like twigs, all their majesty destroyed. It was very lucky that the most important trees round about St. Frank's had escaped.

From the playing fields the meadows sloped down towards the watercourse of the River Stowe. And these meadows were now one huge lake, with the upper branches of a tree sticking out here and there. The fields and meadows over a great expanse of the Stowe Valley were completely inundated. The lanes and byways were impassable. And a considerable section of the main road from Bellton to Bannington was also under water.

All traffic was interrupted. Bellton Lane, which ran past the school and down to the village, no longer resembled a respectable roadway. The storm had changed its character, and it now looked like the worn bed of a dried-up stream. The surface had been entirely washed away, leaving great gulleys and potholes. And near the village the lane was a river.

There had been considerable fear that the bridge over the Stowe would collapse. But it was a strong stone structure, and had valiantly withstood the rush of the waters.

It was by no means a pleasant scene to look upon, but nobody at St. Frank's felt particularly depressed. The whole affair was a novelty, and the juniors rather welcomed it. Anything, in fact, by way of a change was heartily enjoyed. And this was a change indeed!

As for the school, everything was at sixes and sevens. During the height of the hurricane—in the middle of the night—one of the great chimney stacks of the Ancient House had blown down. It was providential that nobody had been killed, for the great mass of stonework had plunged through the roof, destroying an attic, and passing clean through the Remove dormitory to the Third Form Room on the ground floor.

And the enormous gale had ripped off a considerable portion of the Ancient House roof, resulting in the total destruction of the Remove and Fifth dormitories. That part of the building was now a hopeless chaos of bricks, plaster, sodden woodwork, and general debris.

It would take an army of workmen three or four weeks to repair the damage—and Dr. Malcolm Stafford was in a fine way about the whole business.

For he was at his wits' end to know how to accommodate the boys. Fully eighty fellows were deprived of their usual sleeping quarters and that's a serious matter indeed!

The Head had consulted with Nelson Lee and Mr. Stockdale, and it was found that about forty fellows could be squashed into other dormitories and spare rooms—the bulk of them in the College House. But what on earth could be done with the other thirty boys the Head could not imagine.

Accommodation in the village was impossible, for Bellton had enough troubles of its own. So many houses and cottages were flooded out—indeed, quite a number had collapsed altogether—that widespread distress had resulted. And the Headmaster was greatly worried.

"No football, and nothing to do with ourselves," said Pitt, as we turned back into the Triangle. "Now, Sir Oracle, what sayest thou on the subject?" he added, turning to me. "Speak, wise one!"

"I can do a lot of speaking, but I'm not sure that anything good will result," I replied. "It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to take one or two boats out this afternoon, and go for a row down the lane."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "That sounds frightfully queer, old fellow."

"Or over the meadows," I added. "We'll go on a tour of exploration after dinner, and see what damage has been done. Who's game?"

"Wise words!" said Pitt solemnly. "It shall be done, O chief!"

The Triangle was rather difficult to walk in

owing to the sodden nature of the ground. Our boots were considerably muddy by the time we reached the Ancient House doorway and entered the lobby.

A junior was standing just inside, and he stood back slightly as we entered, as though conscious of the fact that he was in the way. He was not an ordinary boy—that is to say, not of the same status as the other scholars.

For he was John Martin, Dr. Stafford's protégé. He was dressed in an ordinary lounge suit—not in Etons—and, although it was worn and threadbare in parts, it nevertheless looked neat and tidy. There was an air of wholesomeness about John which could not possibly be overlooked.

I stopped in front of him, and eyed him up and down.

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked severely.

"The meaning of what?" he smiled.

"You're an invalid, my son; you ought to be in bed," I replied. "A nice thing, coming out in this way, when you're all over bruises and court-plaster! Why, I'm surprised at Dr. Brett for allowing it."

John Martin smiled more broadly.

"I didn't see the fun of lying in bed," he said simply. "I've got one or two bruises, I know, but they're nothing to shout about. The doctor thought I was in for pneumonia, or something pleasant like that, but when he examined me this morning he found that I was quite fit. So I got up."

"Good man!" said Reginald Pitt. "I knew you weren't a molly-coddle. Plenty of other fellows would have stuck in bed for days. So Hubbard's the only patient now? The school's jolly lucky to get off so lightly."

"It's wonderful that more fellows were not hurt," said John.

"Hubbard would have been killed but for you!" I exclaimed. "You acted like a good 'un, Martin, and——"

"Oh, don't make a song about it!" growled John uncomfortably.

His modesty was equal to his bravery. Having performed an act of heroism, he very much disliked having it talked about. During the storm he had rescued Hubbard, of the Remove, from certain death—after he had had a wonderful escape.

For the chimney stack had crashed clean through the attic, and John had fallen through into the Remove dormitory. Racked with agony, he had extricated Hubbard from beneath a fallen beam. And now, instead of lying in bed, as one might have expected, he had come down as usual.

He was looking rather pale and shaky, and one or two patches of plaster were showing here and there, where he had been grazed and scratched. John Martin had been hitherto regarded as an intruder.

Most of the fellows called him a "charity kid," and they looked down upon him. The cads of the Ancient House—such as Fullwood of the Remove and Kenmore of the Sixth—had openly declared that it was a disgrace for St. Frank's to have such a "low down rotter" in the school.

But all that was altered now.

John's bravery had earned him the respect and approval of the whole school. He was, indeed, quite popular in the Remove, and all the decent fellows accepted him, without question, as one of themselves.

"You'll have to go easy, my son," I said to him. "Strictly speaking, you ought to be in the sanny. By the way, I should like to know how you shape at games. Football, for example. Do you know much about it?"

"I've played now and again," replied John.

"What position?"

"Left-half."

"Right-oh! As soon as the weather's better, and as soon as the field's in decent condition, I'll give you a trial," I said. "We'll see what you can do, and if you're any good, I'll give you a chance in a House match."

John's eyes sparkled, and his pale cheeks flushed.

"You—you're joking, aren't you?" he asked awkwardly.

"Of course not."

"But—but I'm not really in the Remove," said John. "I haven't got any right to expect——"

"Never mind about that," I interrupted. "You're a sportsman, and just the kind of fellow to make a first-class footballer. And as you're in the Ancient House, it's only right that you should have a chance. But we'll talk about it later. And if you ever feel lonely, just drop into Study C."

"It's—it's decent of you!" exclaimed the boy gratefully. "You're a brick, Nipper. I don't know how to thank you——"

"Good!" I said. "There's nothing to thank me for, anyhow."

And I passed on with my chums, leaving John Martin still looking somewhat flushed. Sir Montie gave me a gentle pat on the back.

"Splendid, dear old boy!" he observed approvingly.

"Eh? What's splendid?" I asked.

"The way you talked to Martin."

"My dear ass, I spoke to him just as I'd speak to any of the other fellows," I said. "Anything splendid about that?"

"Precisely, old fellow—that's exactly what I meant," smiled Tregellis-West. "You see, most of the chaps are conscious of the fact that Martin is—Well, he's frightfully poor, you know, an' he ain't on the same standin' as we are. An' when the fellows speak to him they use a condescendin' tone. They don't mean to, but they can't help themselves. That's just the difference, dear boy. You spoke to Martin in just the same way you'd speak to me."

"I get your point," I said lightly. "Hang it all, what does it matter whether Martin's poor or rich? He's just as good as I am—probably better. And you can't make me believe that he's common. He talks like a gentleman, acts like a gentleman, and in every action he proves his good breeding."

It was hardly surprising that Dr. Malcolm Stafford had come to the same conclusion as myself. From the very first moment he had taken to John; and the Head did not hesitate

to let John mix with all the other juniors on what was virtually an equal footing.

But at the moment Dr. Stafford was thinking of other matters—and talking of them, too. He was, in fact, in consultation with Nelson Lee, and he was looking decidedly worried.

"The position is extremely difficult, Mr. Lee, and I am more concerned than I can say," he declared. "This disaster has come upon the school so suddenly that we are totally unprepared."

"That is generally the way with all disasters," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "It is impossible to be prepared for such eventualities, Dr. Stafford. And we must make the best of our own particular catastrophe."

"I'm afraid the best of it will be very bad," said the Head. "All the Fifth Form boys and all the Remove boys have no sleeping quarters. Their dormitories are utterly wrecked—their beds and bedding ruined beyond hope. I'm referring, of course, to your boys, Mr. Lee—not Mr. Stockdale's. Fortunately, the College House came to no harm."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I think Mr. Stockdale has already intimated that he can manage to squeeze in twenty or thirty extra boys at a pinch," he said. "That still leaves us with a considerable number to deal with——"

"I'm afraid that we cannot make any arrangements for to-night," interrupted the Head. "The only solution, as far as I can see, is for a great number of boys to sleep two in a bed. That will be satisfactory for once, but it could not possibly continue. I really think, Mr. Lee, that I shall be obliged to send twenty or thirty boys home, in order to relieve the situation."

"That would be a pity," said Nelson Lee. "These repairs will take nothing short of a month, and for so many boys to return home would set them back in their lessons rather seriously. One or two would not matter—but thirty makes the whole question a serious one. Have you communicated with the Bannington Grammar School?"

"I was speaking with the Headmaster only an hour ago," replied Dr. Stafford. "We had quite a long chat over the telephone, but the Grammar School is full up, and there is no spare accommodation whatever. But the idea is a sound one, Mr. Lee, and I have sent an urgent letter to the Headmaster of Yexford College—which, I believe, is by no means full up. I requested him to wire me if he would take a number of boys as a temporary measure."

The Head was talking rather more optimistically now.

He was quite hopeful, in fact, that room would be found in Yexford College for twenty or thirty boys. If this actually turned out to be the case, the plan would not be popular, for Yexford had rather a bad name. The St. Frank's juniors had always been at loggerheads with the Yexford fellows—who were a rough crowd.

However, time would soon show.

CHAPTER II.

THE BRASS-BOUND BOX.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked aggressive.

"It's all rot!" he declared emphatically. There's no earthly reason why we shouldn't do some drilling this afternoon. I want to show the fellows how jolly keen I am on the whole game——"

"My dear old Handy, it can't be did!" I interrupted gently.

"Why can't it?"

"Because the game wouldn't be worth the candle," I explained. "I'll admit that the Cadets are fully equipped, and eager enough to get busy. But our uniforms are brand new, and it would be a pity to start operations on a day like this."

Handforth regarded me witheringly.

"And you're the commander!" he sneered.

"Yes."

"A jolly fine commander—I don't think!" said the leader of Study D mockingly. "Afraid to drill his men because the ground's muddy! By George! Did you ever hear anything like it? I'm sergeant of the Corps, and I demand an immediate round up of the troops——"

"Dry up, Handy—Nipper's quite right!" put in Reginald Pitt. "It would be rather dotty to start the Cadet business this afternoon. The Triangle's in a frightful state, and it might come on to pour with rain. Better leave it till to-morrow, and see how things are then."

All the other members of the Cadet Corps were in agreement. They had no particular desire to go splashing about through the puddles and patches of mud. The Cadet Corps was not really a going concern yet. A number of fellows had joined up, but there had not been any drilling or practising, or anything else. And it was hardly an auspicious occasion to begin now—when the whole school was in a muddle, and when the floods were still at their worst.

Consequently, when I suggested to my chums that we should take a boat out, they all agreed. Handforth, of course, immediately pointed out that this was his own idea, and insisted upon coming with us.

For the sake of peace, I agreed. And, shortly afterwards, we took one of the largest rowing boats, and set off. There were six of us in it—Watson, Tregellis-West and myself, and Handforth & Co. A number of other fellows took out boats of their own.

We had to thank old Josh Cuttle, the porter, for having any boats at all. Mr. Cuttle had been very doubtful about the weather the previous evening, and had been heard to remark that "things was bad," and that "there was rain comin' like a deluge." Mr. Cuttle's forebodings had turned out to be true.

Anyhow, he had obtained the services of the gardeners, and grooms, and between them they had taken all the boats out of the boathouse, and had pulled them up upon high ground, in safety.

Mr. Cuttle was now inclined to pat himself on the back. The boathouse itself was flooded out, and had almost disappeared. If the river-craft had been left there, they would have been utterly out of reach—and, in all probability, destroyed. Cuttle's precautionary measure had been very necessary.

It was extremely novel, gliding over the meadows. The experience was one that we had had before—during a previous flood—but we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Tommy Watson was steering, and he had to look to his work, too, in spite of the fact that we were rowing over an expanse of water which was like a lake. For here and there trees jutted out. And now and again we would scrape over the top of a hedge. There were fences to be avoided, too. A gatepost would have made a nasty obstacle to strike.

Tommy Watson, therefore, kept his eyes wide open, and steered with skill. On every side of us lay the water, with trees protruding their upper branches from the flood. In some meadows the flood was only a few feet deep. But, in the hollows, the depth of the water was probably not less than eight or ten feet.

The River Stowe itself had practically vanished. It could now only be distinguished by the various well-known landmarks—clumps of willows, a bridge, or other well-known spots.

And, of course, there was the current—now fairly swift. Over the meadows and fields the water was practically still. But the River Stowe flowed with even greater speed than usual.

"Better not get right in the current," said Church.

"Why not?" demanded Handforth.

"Because we don't want to be swept away," said Church. "The flow is jolly treacherous at a time like this, and' ——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Watson, the best thing you can do is to steer straight for Willard's Island—that's in the middle of the river. It'll be rather interesting to see what's happened to it."

Tommy Watson looked at me.

"I think it's all right," I said. "There are plenty of us in the boat, and we sha'n't get out of control. My plan is to cross the stream, go over the fields to the back of Bellton Wood, and then row through the village high street."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "That sounds frightfully queer, you know. But it is a good plan dear boy, an' it will be interestin'. An' perhaps we can do somebody a good turn in the village. Begad! We might as well be of some use while we're out!"

"Just what I was thinking," I said. "Bear away, Tommy."

"Four points to starboard!" said Handforth carelessly.

I grinned, and Watson steered so that we sheered off to port. Handforth was always a bit hazy about starboard and port. And now we were making straight for the River Stowe.

Willard's Island was already in sight.

In normal times, the island stood in the very centre of the river, and could easily be reached by a few strokes of the oars in a small boat, for the river was not particularly wide.

But now Willard's Island stood out like a tiny rock in a great lake. It was only half its usual size, and would have vanished altogether if the ground had been comparatively flat.

But the island rose steeply from the water's edge. And in the very centre of it there stood that curious old building known throughout the district as Willard's Folly. It had been built a good many years earlier, and was now weather-stained and ancient-looking.

Indeed, it looked much older than it actually was, for it had been designed after the style of a Norman castle. It was built of greystone, with gables and picturesque ornamentations, with turrets and towers. It was, indeed, a replica of an ancient castle—but all in miniature. And it was by no means completed, for half the floor space had never been roofed over.

Beneath, there were cellars and dungeons—just as though the place had been built in the Middle Ages. It had been erected by a rich old crank, named John Willard, who had been a famous character in the district long before the time of the present St. Frank's crowd.

Old Willard had been reputed to be enormously rich. He was certainly a crank—an eccentric who spent a great deal of his money upon this peculiar fad. He had wanted to build himself a home upon the island—a home totally unlike any other. But before the work could be completed, old Willard died. And thus the "castle" had remained ever since—unfinished, neglected, and an object of curiosity to chance visitors.

We approached the island at an angle, and we could see how the current had undermined the upper portion of it. The hard ground had been washed away, until a kind of cliff was left. And the current was swirling round the base of this, thick, muddy, and unpleasant looking.

"Better go easy here," I remarked, as I pulled in my oar. "There's no need to go too close. My hat! There's not much of the island left, is there? Three parts of it is covered up, including all the bushes——"

"The castle seems to be pretty intact, anyway," interrupted McClure. "But if the flood gets much higher, that'll be washed away completely."

"Ass!" said Handforth. "The flood won't get higher—it's going down now, all the time. I vote we land, and have a look round. It'll be easy enough to row in under the shelter of the lower end——"

"Look out!" yelled Church abruptly.

"What the dickens——"

"Look!" shouted Church. "The earth's collapsing!"

He pointed excitedly, and we all stared.

In a way, Church was quite right. At the top end of the island, where the water had been swirling round the land, a great portion of the newly made cliff was crumbling away.

Even as we looked, several tons of ground toppled over and fell into the stream.

Splash!

The great mass fell into the water with a tremendous commotion. Masses of foam splashed up, and half drenched us—for we were

quite close in. Then a succession of waves caused our little craft to rise up and down alarmingly.

"Pull away—for goodness' sake!" gasped Watson.

"You—you clumsy asses!" howled Handforth. "I'm soaked! What the dickens did you mean by steering so jolly near, Watson? I'll jolly well punch your nose——"

"Why, you fathead! It was you who suggested coming to the island," snorted Watson. "How were we to know the cliff would collapse?"

"We shouldn't have got splashed if I had been steering!" said Handforth tartly.

"No—we should have been drowned!" snapped Watson.

"If you're looking for a thick ear——"

"Oh, dry up, you squabblers!" I broke in. "Always wanting an argument—that's you, Handy! You're hardly damp, and——"

"Well, I'm blessed!" interrupted Church. "Just have a look at that cliff now! Why, I believe there's a tunnel there, or something! Bear round a bit, so that we can see more clearly."

"A tunnel?" repeated Handforth staring. "By George! So there is!"

The commotion had subsided now, and the water was again comparatively calm. By rowing judiciously, we kept the boat in almost the same position, Watson manipulating the tiller in order to keep us just off the island.

And, looking up, we could see a great wound in the land where the mass of earth had fallen away. Mixed up with the soil there were bricks and stones—as though they had been embedded in the very ground itself. And a gaping hole yawned clearly, and I came to the conclusion that a well-made brick tunnel had existed underground, in this part of the island.

This was not very surprising, for the eccentric old Mr. Willard had included many novelties in his building scheme. It was quite like him to construct a tunnel—probably leading nowhere. Being more than cranky, he had planned the building and its dungeons and tunnels without any real idea of what they were for.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if we were to land, after all," I said. "This looks rather interesting, my sons. We'll land, and go down that tunnel, and see where it leads to. I've always been a keen bounder on exploring."

Handforth nodded.

"Same here," he said. "So you had to come round to my idea, after all. I suggested landing in the first place."

Dear old boys, I'm puzzled—I am, really," observed Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and gazing into the stream. "Are my eyes deceivin' me, or can I really see somethin'?"

"You ought to see quite a lot!" said Watson.

"Really, dear boy! I mean somethin' unusual," said Tregellis-West. "I just noticed it a minute ago. It came to the surface, an' then floated away."

"What did?" demanded Handforth.

"The box!"

"Box!"

"Exactly, dear fellow," said Sir Montie. "Didn't you see it? A box, with metal bindin's round it. I suppose it must have fallen into the river with all that earth, you know. An' then it must have become treed, and it rose to the surface. That's how I figure it out, anyway."

"You're dreaming!" said Handforth. "You're dotty!"

"No, he isn't," I exclaimed keenly. "There's the box. I can spot it just floating flush with the water."

"We don't want to bother about that."

"Yes, we do, Handy," I said. "There's no telling what it might contain. A metal-bound box from an unknown tunnel on Willard's Island! It sounds promising. We'll have a look into this."

The other fellows were feeling interested, too, and a moment later we had swung the boat round, and were speeding down the stream with the current. We knew we should have no difficulty in overtaking the floating box. And, as we bore down upon it, I could see that it was about fifteen inches square, and so heavy that it was on the point of sinking at any moment. Indeed, by the time we drew opposite, it was just below the surface, gliding down with the current, and apparently in half a mind to sink sluggishly to the bottom.

What was the secret of this curious find?

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN JOSHUA NIGGS AND MR. BEN CROKE!

"STEADY now, Tommy, just a bit to the left!" I sang out.

Leaning right out of the boat, I reached down and clutched at the brass-bound box as it bumped against the side of the little craft. It was heavier than I had expected, and I nearly toppled into the river in my endeavour to lift the box quite clear.

But at last I managed the task, and with soaked sleeves I dragged the trophy on board.

"I thought you were going overboard," grinned Watson.

"It's not funny!" I snapped. "If the giddy box is empty, I shall say a few choice things, I can give you my word. Pull out of the current now, so that we can drop our oars for a bit. We don't want to be swept down the stream."

The box was as I had at first imagined it. It was made of some hard wood—oak probably—and it was so perfectly made that the lid fitted snugly and closely. Completely round the box there were several bands of dull-coloured metal, which turned out to be brass.

"It must be something important, anyway," declared McClure. "A box like that wouldn't be buried in an old tunnel for fun. It's probably been there for hundreds of years."

"Rubbish!" I interrupted. "The tunnel was only built twelve or fifteen years ago, and

this box looks practically new. If it wasn't wet and muddy, you'd think it had been made yesterday. We'll get the lid off."

"Perhaps there's gold inside," suggested Church eagerly.

"Or diamonds!" panted Tommy Watson.

"Oh, go on, make it radium, or something even more valuable!" sneered Handforth. "You fatheads! Getting excited over a mouldy old toolbox! That's what it is, I'll bet. A blessed toolbox with——"

"Help!"

We all looked up, rather startled.

During the last few moments we had drifted round a clump of willows which projected drearily from the flood, with torn and battered branches. And now we could see over a further expanse of the flooded valley.

But we could see no sign of any living soul.

"Did you hear something?" I asked queerly.

"Somebody shouted for help!" declared Watson.

"That's what I thought," I said. "But I can't see any boat or——"

"Hold still a minute and listen," suggested Handforth. "Hi, there!" he added, in a bellow. "Who's yelling?"

"Over here, young gents," came a hail. "Help!"

We stared harder than ever. The voice seemed far away, and it appeared to come from the very flood itself. But we could see no indication of the owner of the voice.

"I say, this is jolly rummy," muttered Church. "I suppose it's a real voice, you chaps. I've heard queer yarns about floods."

"Don't be a nervous ass!" snapped Handforth. "I expect there's somebody drowning," he added cheerfully. "We'll soon locate——"

"What asses!" I interrupted suddenly. "There they are—two of them."

"Where?"

I pointed to a big oak tree which thrust the upper part of its trunk and branches out of the water. It was about three hundred yards away, with a clear expanse of water intervening.

I remembered the oak-tree clearly, it stood just at the corner of the turnip field, with a meadow on the other side. And, clinging to the branches, were two human figures.

We had not seen them at first, because at that distance they were hardly distinguishable from the tree itself, and the voice had seemed to come from quite another direction.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth "They're two men."

"Marvellous!" said Church. "Anything very astounding about that, Handy?"

"But what are they doing up in that tree?" asked Handforth. "How did they get there? There's no boat within sight, and it's hardly likely they've been marooned in the tree ever since the flood started."

"My dear chap, there's no earthly sense in guessing at things," I said. "We shall find out in a few minutes, because the men will tell us all about it. You see, our little jaunt has borne fruit, after all. We're about to

Niggs grabbed the brass-bound box from Handforth, and at the same second he drove his fist towards my face.

rescue two unfortunates from a nasty predicament."

"You're quite right, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "Why, if we hadn't come along, those men might have been imprisoned in that tree until to-morrow. And by that time they would be dead, begad!"

There was a great deal of truth in what Tregellis-West said. No ordinary boats would come to this spot, and it was only by pure chance that we were there. It was right in a vast expanse of the flood, fully a mile from solid ground. In all probability, the hapless men in the tree had been shouting for help for hours. We could easily imagine their feelings upon sighting our boat.

The brass-bound box was momentarily forgotten. It lay unheeded at the bottom of the boat. There was more important work to be done, and a glance at the sky assured me that it would not do for us to waste any time. For masses of heavy cloud had risen, and were now stretching raggedly across the zenith.

With them came a freshening of the wind. I knew that the gale was not returning, but a sudden rain squall was by no means improbable. I was not particularly keen upon getting drenched to the skin.

We had been quite safe from this possibility while we were near the island. for there was plenty of cover there. But we were going away from it now, and I urged my chums to make all haste. The afternoon was not keeping as fine as we had originally anticipated.

We were now quite close to the old oak-tree, and could see the two figures clearly.

They were two men, and rather rough-looking customers at that. One was big and burly, attired in a blue suit of thick, coarse material with a blue sweater. An ancient peaked-cap rested upon his head at a rakish angle. He had a rugged, weather-beaten face, and was clean-shaven.

His companion was a much smaller man—a wizened-up speciment of humanity, with a rough blue suit and sweater, similar to his companion, but wearing an ordinary tweed cap. He had a black patch over one eye, and two of his front upper teeth protruded from his mouth even when the latter was closed. He was not at all pleasant to gaze upon.

We came up right under the tree, and Church and Sir Montie seized the trunk and steadied the boat.

"By Peter! I thought we was never going to attract your attention, young shavers!" exclaimed the big man in a gruff voice. "Nigh on six hours we've been up in this blamed tree, an' if pore old Ben don't peg out I'll be surprised. He's been coughin' like a corpse for the last hour!"

The other man grunted.

"You ain't been corfin', have you, cap'n?" he demanded, in a husky wheezy voice. "Strike me timbers! You ain't got the strength to survive this 'ere affair. You've got one foot in the grave already."

"Well, don't argue about it," I grinned. "It looks like rain, and we don't want to get caught. Lower yourselves as gently as you can into the boat, and we'll row away."

"You don't need to teach us nothin' about lowerin' of ourselves," said the bigger man. "'Tain't likely we'd jump an' bust the bottom boards through, is it? You'd best help pore old Ben. His bones is that set he can't move his blamed joints! Pore old chap? This'll be his finish, sure as my name's Joshua Niggs."

Ben certainly didn't appear to be afflicted with stiff joints. He scrambled down the tree trunk with the nimble agility of a monkey, and dropped lightly into the boat. At close quarters we could see that he was all skin and bone and wiriness—as hard as nails, and weather-proof. Both he and his companion were blue with cold.

Captain Joshua Niggs descended more slowly, but at length he sat in the boat, and nodded with approval.

"Mighty lucky you young gents comin' along," he observed. "I reckon it's up to us to thank ye for gettin' Ben an' I out o' this 'ere mess! Pore old Ben was fair scared stiff—thought he'd have to stay in that tree the whole durned night. Y'see, he's only half a man, so to speak—and this exposure will just about put the finish to him. I don't suppose he'll live arter the mornin'."

Ben gave another grunt.

"If I don't live ten year longer than you, cap'n, I ain't no prophet!" he wheezed. "You got size, you 'ave, but size ain't everything. Why, strike me timbers! A man what's composed of blubber an' flabbiness ain't no man at all—he's a bloomin' helephant!"

We couldn't help grinning. This queer pair had quite a peculiar way of their own. They talked with the utmost gravity. Captain Niggs seemed to think that Ben was half dead, and Ben was just as certain that Captain Niggs was in a similar condition. Yet, although widely different in type, they were as hardy and tough as seasoned timber.

Captain Niggs beat his hands about to get warm.

"You don't need to take no notice of Ben Croke," he said confidentially. "I reckon that name was giv' to him a'puppose. Croke? Why, he don't do nothin' else but croak from mornin' till night! Fair gets on me nerves, too! It's a queer thing I ain't strangled him years ago!"

"It takes a man to do stranglin'!" wheezed Ben Croke. "With all doo respecks, cap'n, you ain't got the strength to strangle a jelly-fish!"

We grinned more than ever, but put our backs into the rowing, for one or two spots of rain had already fallen. We were being greatly entertained by these rough men, for they were exceedingly quaint.

Captain Niggs wiped his mouth suggestively.

"Don't do that!" said Ben Croke, with a shiver. "Fair makes me go funny, cap'n! I s'pose you young gents don't happen to 'ave a tot o' grog about you? Strike me timbers! I just need a dose now!"

"You'll be needin' doctor's medicine afore long, my lad!" said Captain Niggs. "An' ain't you got more sense than to ask a set o' nice, respectable young gents for a tot o' rum? I ain't sayin' but what it would come in mighty useful, but it won't be long afore we can get all we want."

"How did you manage to become marooned in that tree?" I asked. "I don't want to be inquisitive, Captain Niggs, but we're naturally interested."

"Rather!" said Handforth.

Captain Niggs nodded.

"As you sez, young gents, it's nattural that you'd be curious," he exclaimed. "There ain't a great lot to tell ye, anyways, so it won't corst me much in breath. Me an' Ben Croke are from the old barge Sally. We was comin' down the river yesterday afternoon, afore the storm broke."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "Were you wrecked?"

"Well, I wouldn't rightly say as we was wrecked," replied Captain Niggs. "But ye see, young gents, the old tub went astray, in a manner o' speakin'. An' she got fair stuck in the mud up by Judkin's Corner, a mile or two back. Then the storm come down, and the Sally sprung a leak. Poor old gal, she's gorn, now, I'm afraid. Me an' Ben are sort o' stranded."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "But even now I can't quite understand how you got in that tree."

Handforth sniffed.

"And you're supposed to be pretty smart at deduction!" he said, witheringly. "It only took me two minutes to get at the truth. I'll bet I'm right, Captain Niggs. You and Ben Croke found that the barge was sinking, and so you swam for safety. The current took you

down the river, and you climbed up into that tree? And I reckon this must have happened during the night."

Captain Niggs chuckled.

"Try agin, young gent," he said.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I must be right——"

"My dear fathead, why don't you use your eyes?" I interrupted. "Can't you see that both Captain Niggs and Mr. Croke are perfectly dry? Can't you see that they've never been in the water?"

Handforth started.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed blankly. "I—I didn't notice that, you know! That's queer, too!"

"Deductions!" murmured Church, grinning.

"I reckon you must have taken your boat, and started out some time this morning, captain?" I said. "I don't know how it is you got into that tree, but——"

"The young gent's right," said Ben Croke. "It ain't no sort of use talkin' to the cap'n, sonny. Fact is, he ain't got the strength to speak—he's that used up, he can't even say his own name!"

"Pore old Ben, he's wanderin' in his mind," said Captain Niggs, kindly. "Y'see, young gents, it was this 'ere way. We took the boat, meanin' to strike dry land. An' we come down on the current, so's to get to Bellton. But the blamed boat struck agin a tree trunk, or something that was hidden under the water. Anyway, her side was stove in, an' we only just managed to get to that tree afore she sunk. We climbed up without gettin' particular wet, an' we'd been there right through the day. I can tell you, we was mighty glad when we saw your little craft!"

Church and McClure chuckled, and Handforth glared. His precious deductions had come to nothing. But before we could make any comment, the rain squall came down—swift and sudden and tremendous.

But for this storm, we should have gone downstream to Bellton, according to our original plan. But there was no sense in getting soaked, and so we sought shelter. The squall would obviously pass in a short time.

With all speed we grounded the boat on the lower end of Willard's Island. In the pouring rain we jumped ashore, pulled the boat well up, and then raced to the little building, which was close by.

Handforth paused a few moments to grasp the brass-bound box and bring it along. I didn't know of this until we were actually in the building, or I would have stopped him. I didn't see why we should examine the box in the presence of these rough strangers.

They were entertaining enough, but we had no guarantee of their honesty. They certainly looked a ruffianly pair.

Within the miniature castle we found plenty of shelter. Portions of it were roofed over, and, although damp, quite protected from the rain. And we stood there in a group, listening to the pelting storm outside.

The wind howled, and the rain swished down in one blinding sheet, roughening the surface of the water until there seemed to be a mist hovering over it. And the wind caused all sorts of patterns to be woven over the river.

"I figger it'll soon pass," said Captain Niggs. "'Tain't nothing much, young gents. An' Ben Croke an' me will be mighty obliged if you'll put us on dry land arterwards."

"Of course we will," I said. "It's all right Handy—you needn't bother about that now," I added, as Handforth turned the box over. "We can look into that later on."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We can easily use the time now. This box looks jolly interesting, and I shouldn't be surprised if it contains a giddy hoard of gold! It came from this island, and old Willard was a bit of a miser."

I tried to shut him up, but it was impossible. Handforth was a most awkward fellow to deal with. The more you tried to dissuade him from a certain object, the more determined he became. He was as obstinate and pig-headed as a mule.

"Oh, all right," I said casually. "Go ahead!"

I hoped this would have the effect of making him stop. He was so contrary that such tactics frequently had the desired result. But Handforth continued hammering at the box, and quite ignored me.

And his efforts soon bore fruit. For, by using a heavy piece of stone, he managed to get the heavy lid loose. A stout wrench, and the lid came away. Captain Niggs and Ben Croke looked on with interest.

"What's inside?" asked Church, eagerly.

"Let's have a look!" said Tommy Watson.

Handforth snorted with disgust.

"Why, there's nothing here!" he exclaimed. "The giddy box is empty, except—half-a-minute! What's this?"

He dived his hand into the casket, and produced a number of curiously shaped pieces of wood. They were all kinds of fantastic designs, and had evidently been cut out with a fretsaw. The wood was old and stained, but perfectly strong. Handforth picked up a piece, and looked at it.

"Why, there's writing on one side—or bits of writing," he said. "What the dickens can it be?"

"They seem to be the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle," I said, looking keenly at the irregular pieces of wood. "A home-made jigsaw puzzle, Handy. The chap who did this must have had a tremendous lot of patience."

"There's a piece of paper, too!" said Church quickly.

Handforth took a folded piece of paper out of the box. It was faded and stained, and was a stout piece of foolscap. Upon it there were a number of letters and figures, written in what appeared to be hopeless confusion. I was instantly interested.

"It seems to be a kind of cipher," said Tommy Watson. "By jingo! A cipher—and jigsaw puzzle——"

"And there's a name at the bottom of all this jumble on the paper," shouted Handforth. "Look! 'John Willard.' It's as clear as daylight! Old Willard himself wrote this, and

I'll bet everything I've got that it's a clue to a treasure—a hidden hoard of wealth!"

The juniors gazed at one another with flushed faces.

"Hidden treasure!" whispered Church, with bated breath.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN HOARD!

CAPTAIN JOSHUA NIGGS looked on with a glitter in his eyes.

"'Tain't my business, but you young gents seem to be excitin' yourselves to a mighty big extent," he remarked. "What's all this 'ere about a treasure? Things like that don't 'appen now-a-days."

"Oh, don't they!" said Handforth. "You never know! This box was thrown into the river by a part of the island collapsing. It had been buried in the ground—and all hidden treasures are secreted like that."

I laughed.

"I don't suppose there's anything in it," I said lightly. "You chaps are making a big fuss over nothing. Just like Handy, to jaw about secret treasure, and all the rest of it."

Handforth glared.

"You prize dummy!" he snorted. "You know as well as I do that we're pretty sure of this—— What the dickens are you making faces at me for?" he added irritably. "What's the idea of winking like that?"

I remained quite calm, but I felt that I could have sloshed Handforth into the middle of next week. The hopeless duffer was not content with talking about treasure in front of these strangers, but when I attempted to make him understand by means of facial signs, all he could do was to give me away.

I've half an idea that Captain Niggs understood.

"I wasn't making faces!" I said shortly. "What a chap you are to imagine things, Handy! But about this box. There may be something in what you say, of course, but it's very improbable. Anyhow, it doesn't interest me."

I turned away, hoping that the the others would drop the subject.

But they didn't.

"In a case like this, you've got to think of all the facts," said Handforth importantly. "For example, we'll just take everything in order. This box was found buried on Willard's Island. If it hadn't been for that landslide we might never have come across it."

"But most treasures are discovered accidentally," said Church.

"Exactly," agreed Handforth. "Here's a big, strongly made oaken box, bound with iron——"

"Brass!" said McClure.

"What the dickens does it matter whether it's brass or iron?" snapped Handforth irritably. "It's a jolly strong box, and that proves that it was made to contain something valuable——"

"Those bits of wood aren't valuable!" said Tommy Watson.

Handforth shook his head.

"They don't appear to be valuable," he said wisely. "But after we've fitted the puzzle together, there may be a different story! See the idea? It's a puzzle—that eccentric old ass, Willard, did it on purpose. He didn't mean this treasure to be found easily. Cranky chaps are like that, you know. So he made this puzzle, and faked out the cipher, and hid 'em away in a box. He wouldn't have taken the trouble to bury them in a box unless they were valuable."

"That sounds reasonable enough," said McClure.

Handforth appeared to think that he was doing something very clever in thus stating the obvious—for, of course, it was perfectly obvious from the very start. I stood by, listening impatiently. Why on earth all this could not have been discussed in private, I could not imagine. But it was just like these thoughtless juniors to talk in such an open way.

"I reckon as how this 'ere Mr. Willard was rich?" asked Captain Niggs casually.

"He was supposed to be," said Watson.

"Them as is supposed to be rich is generally gettin' ready to go in the workhouse," said the Captain. "It's them as don't appear to be rich as all the money. That's the way in this world, young gents."

I was getting more impatient than ever, for Captain Niggs and Ben Croke were getting fully interested in the whole conversation. I didn't actually distrust the men, but there was never any telling. And it was foolish, to say the least, to talk so openly.

"There was something queer about old Willard," said Handforth. "We've often talked about him, you know. He was supposed to have pots of money—fairly rolling in it, in fact. But when he died he was broke."

"Strike me timbers!" said Mr. Croke huskily.

"No money at all?" asked Captain Niggs.

"Well, nothing to speak of," said Handforth. "Of course, I haven't gone into matter thoroughly, but I've heard all sorts of tales. When old Willard died he was building this little castle place—it took him three or four years to get as far as this. He only had a few workmen, and looked after the building himself He was a sly old bird, by what I can hear."

"Where did he get the money from to pay the builders?"

"He must have had it somewhere," said Edward Oswald. "But when he died, and when his affairs were looked into, it was found that his banking account was nearly as bare as old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. There was hardly enough money to clear things up."

"And yet folks said as how he was rich? asked Niggs.

"Rather."

"It's allus the case!" growled Mr. Croke. "Gossip—that's what it is, Cap'n. There

ain't never no truth in gossip. Folks say as how you're a good shipmaster, an' they reckon you can manage a barge. Gossip—that's what it is!"

Captain Niggs frowned.

"If you wasn't nearly in your durned grave, Ben Croke, I'd lay you out flat!" he said. "But I allus has pity on the old and infirm! About this 'ere Willard feller—gossip sez he was rich. Well, as far as I can see, I reckon 'e must 'ave had his money hid away somewhere."

"Of course!" exclaimed Handforth. "That's just the idea. He had it all hoarded up, and then died before he could tell anybody about it. The only clue he left was this box, and the cipher message, and the jigsaw puzzle. Why, these things may be worth a million!"

"And they may be worth tuppence!" I snapped. "You chaps are absolutely off your rockers to imagine all these things. The best thing to do with that box is to chuck it in the river—jigsaw, cipher and all!"

Captain Niggs looked at me sharply.

"I reckon that would be a pity, young gent," he said. "It's worth something, even as a blamed curio. Look 'ere—I'm a sportsman. I dessay this box ain't worth a red cent. But just out of curiosity, I don't mind offerin' you youngsters a quid for it."

"Good for you, Cap'n!" said Ben Croke.

I took a deep breath, and said nothing for a moment. But this offer on the part of Captain Niggs was not absolutely unexpected. It proved conclusively that the Captain was more than ordinarily interested.

He would never have offered a pound for the box unless he thought there was something big behind it. I could see, by the very light of greed in his eyes, that this talk about old Willard and the treasure had taken possession of him.

At any other time, perhaps, Captain Niggs might not have been so eager. But he had lost his barge—he was stranded. He was probably the owner of the Sally, and made his living by it. And now he was at a loose end, and he seized upon this chance to gain a fortune. Perhaps Captain Niggs himself had no real hope of finding any treasure. But where gold is concerned, a man will clutch at a thread, so great is the lure.

"That's all right, Captain Niggs," I laughed. "It would be sheer robbery to take any money——"

"You mean you'll give it me?" asked Niggs.

"Well, no," I said. "It's hardly mine to give, in any case. We all found it together, and——"

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We found this box, and if there's any treasure-hunting to be done, we'll do it! It's just like you fatheads to start jawing about the business in front of strangers," he added privately.

Church and McClure had nothing to say—they were used to Handforth.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Really, Handforth, I'm frightfully surprised. You were the first to open the subject—really. I thought it was decidedly unwise an' imprudent, an' all that, but it was useless protestin'."

"There ain't no need to get arguin', young gents," said Captain Niggs. "Me an' old Ben ain't interested in this 'ere yarn. We're old 'ands—we've seen a bit of the world, I can tell you. I ain't allus owned a barge—I've sailed the seven seas, an' so 'as Ben. An' I reckon we've learned to take no sort o' notice of rumour an' gossip. You boys can amuse yourselves if you likes, but it don't interest us. Anyways, I reckon the rain's stopped."

Glancing outside, we could see that the squall had passed. The wind died down, and the sky was clearing. Handforth put the piece of faded foolscap into the box again, and closed it tightly. Then he tucked it under his arm.

"Come on, you chaps!" he said. "No need to stay here."

"The sooner we're off this island the better," said Church.

I noticed that Captain Niggs and Ben Croke were whispering together. But, although I was on my guard, I certainly did not expect the incidents of the next few moments.

Without warning, Captain Joshua Niggs suddenly swung round, grabbed the brass-bound box with one wrench from Handforth, and at the same second he brought his fist round, and drove it towards my face. I dodged in the nick of time, and the blow struck me heavily on the shoulder.

I spun round, toppled over, and crashed on my back. There was confusion for a moment. Ben Croke was as active as a monkey. He threw himself at Church and Watson, and the pair went down almost before they knew what had happened.

"Quick, Ben—follow me!" yelled Niggs.

They dashed out, and made a bee-line for the boat at the bottom of the island. Handforth, Sir Montie, and McClure rushed off in pursuit. The rest of us were picking ourselves up. I was furious. I was in pain, too, and I simply couldn't help letting out some of my temper.

"That idiot of a Handforth!" I shouted hotly. "He's the cause of this! I half suspected what might happen——"

"Let's go after them!" gasped Watson, sitting up.

We staggered out into the damp open, and were just in time to see the two bargemen pelting towards the boat at full speed. In spite of their humorous little ways, it was becoming very evident that the pair were unscrupulous.

Having failed to purchase the box, they had not hesitated at taking it by force. And owing to their surprise attack, they had succeeded. And, what was more, they looked like getting clear away.

McClure and Sir Montie were close upon their heels when they neared the boat. Captain Niggs turned round, and as Sir Montie was rushing on, the captain's foot shot out, and Tregellis-West sprawled headlong in the mud.

He gave a howl of dismay, for he was simply smothered. McClure was brought up short by a heavy punch on the side of the head, which knocked him silly.

As for Handforth, that reckless youth had come to grief.

I was not surprised at this. Handforth was always over eager—particularly when he was excited. He chased after the men with the fixed and positive intention of knocking them into a pulp.

And it was just like him to trip headlong over a stone just as he got outside. He went down with such a crash that he was utterly winded, and unable to rise until it was almost too late. When a fellow is winded he hasn't much fight in him.

Captain Niggs and Ben Croke reached the boat, and the box was tossed into it. Then the men jumped on board and pushed off. Their game was quite clear to us—and I could not help feeling alarmed.

We were to be marooned!

I could see in a flash what this would mean. Water surrounded us on every side, and it would be quite impossible to swim to land. At any ordinary time we could have risked it, for the distance to the river bank was slight. Now, however, the floods extended over the fields and meadows in every direction.

And it might be hours and hours before a boat came to take us off. Indeed, it would not be until dusk that we should be missed. Then a search party would come out, and it would be absolutely dark before rescue came. In the meantime, Captain Niggs and Ben Croke would have plenty of time to get completely away with their booty. It might be altogether too late for us to get on their track.

And all this because of Handforth's folly!

However, Edward Oswald seemed to realise at last that he was the cause of the trouble. At all events he made a valiant attempt to put things right.

The boat was not absolutely at the end of the island, but near it, and before the escaping men could get the oars out, the little craft drifted in towards the bank, forced by the current.

It was quite clear that the boat would drift within a few feet of the extremity of the island before getting out into the open sea. And Handforth gave a bellow of triumph as he noted this fact.

He shook his fist furiously.

"All right, you blackguards!" he roared. "Just you wait!"

He raced down the slope with such tremendous speed, that he could never have pulled himself up in time to avert plunging into the river. As a matter of fact, he didn't want to pull himself up. His very idea was to gain momentum.

And at the time he reached the last piece of land he was travelling with the speed of a track racer.

And I must acknowledge that Handforth made no mistake. For once he performed a really creditable action, and did it thoughtlessly. When it came to a pinch, Edward Oswald could generally be relied upon to turn up trumps.

He took off superbly, and rose into the air in a magnificent leap. He had judged that leap to perfection, and he simply hurtled over the strip of water, and landed fairly and squarely in the boat.

Crash!

Handforth almost went clean through the boards, and he certainly nearly upset the boat. But he had alighted between Niggs and Croke, and the two startled rascals had no time to defend themselves.

Then the earthquake started!

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS CYPHER.

BIFF!

Almost before he had recovered his balance, Handforth brought his fist round, and his drive was terrific. It was one of his most famous punches, and he put every ounce of strength he possessed behind it.

His fist struck Captain Joshua Niggs on the point of the jaw. It was a wonder the captain was not knocked clean out then, and the fact that he recovered himself told eloquently of his great strength and hardiness.

He staggered back, roaring like a bull, but he pulled himself together, and uttered several lurid remarks.

"You blamed son of a sea hog!" he shouted. "You scum! By thunder! I'll soon make you pay for this——"

"Try it!" bellowed Handforth. "By George! You thought you'd pinch that box, did you? By George! I'll show you that we ain't the kind of chaps to be messed about with! Take that!"

Biff!

The next blow struck Captain Niggs in the chest, and did comparatively little harm. The next moment Niggs and Handforth were fighting as hard as they could go—hammer and tongs. Ben Croke was in Handforth's rear, and at any moment I was expecting him to pick up one of the oars and lay the junior flat.

But Mr. Croke was either possessed of a certain sporting instinct, or else he believed that his captain was capable of dealing with the junior single handed, or else he was scared stiff.

At all events, he crouched in the bows of the boat, looking on. Meanwhile, the little craft drifted down the stream, and we on the island stood looking on with great interest—and a certain amount of alarm.

We felt sure that Handforth would meet with dire trouble in a moment or two. But the leader of Study D was in his element now. He had been longing for a real good fight for weeks—and at last he had got one. He sailed in with pure delight and determination.

Strictly speaking, it was a most one-sided affair. Captain Niggs was a big, powerful man, and the very idea of him fighting a boy was ridiculous. On dry ground he could have laid Handforth out in twenty seconds. But here, in this precarious boat, his very size was

a disadvantage. Every time he moved he was afraid of upsetting the craft.

Handforth, on the other hand, was lighter—and he didn't care a jot, in any case, whether the boat upset or not. That was Handforth all over. Once having started on a scrap, nothing else in the whole world mattered.

He lashed out with right and left, dodging Niggs' powerful drives more by luck than skill. Handforth was not a scientific boxer, although he fondly imagined himself to be one. He was a slogger.

And slogging stood him in good stead now.

Niggs ducked as Handforth's fist swung round. But he was not quite prepared for a right uppercut which immediately followed. Then, before he could recover his balance, he pitched overboard with a wild, unearthly yell.

"Strike me timbers!" wheezed Mr. Croke, in alarm.

"And you're going, too!" snorted Handforth triumphantly. "By George! You rotten thieves! You burgling bounders! I'll show you whether you can——"

"I ain't the kind to argue!" said Mr. Croke hastily. "I surrender!"

"What!" snapped Handforth in disgust. "Ain't you going to fight?"

"I've seen enough to satisfy me!" replied Mr. Croke. "Bust me buttons! The way you knocked out the cap'n was enough for me."

Handforth was disappointed. He could not, of course, attack Ben Croke after the latter had surrendered, and Handforth felt that he had been swindled. However, he couldn't give the matter much thought or attention then.

For Captain Niggs had come to the surface, icily cold and with every scrap of fight knocked out of him. He couldn't swim, and he was struggling frantically and stricken with panic.

"Help! help!" he screamed wildly.

"All right, don't make a song about it!" growled Handforth. "Grab this!"

He held out an oar, and Captain Niggs grasped the end of it and pulled himself in towards the boat. He was blue with cold, for the water was icy, and Handforth's suspicious glances were quite unnecessary.

"I—I'm done!" panted Niggs. "Help me in!"

Mr. Croke obeyed with alacrity, and the captain was hauled over the stern of the boat, and lay floundering like a freshly-landed fish. Handforth eyed the pair for a moment, and then waved his hand to us.

"I've got my eye on you!" he said to the pair. "If you start any of your giddy tricks again, I'll smash one of these oars over your brain-boxes!"

He seized the oars and pulled strongly against the current. It was vigorous work, for the stream was running rapidly, and at first Handforth made very little progress.

But, yard by yard, the craft drew nearer, and finally entered the little area of still water caused by the island; and a moment later the boat grounded and we hauled it up.

"Get out, both of you!" I commanded sternly.

"I'm doing this!" snapped Handforth.

The Worm rubbed his hands together. "Very well!" he said softly. "I will see what can be done."

"They're my prisoners, and it's up to me to give orders! Now then, you rotters, step out here!"

Captain Niggs and Ben Croke obeyed meekly. They came out of the boat and stood in front of us. Niggs was shivering in every limb, for the wind was icily cold.

"I'm sorry, young gents!" he growled, with chattering teeth. "I was fair carried away, as you might say!"

"That box was nearly carried away, you mean!" I exclaimed.

"I don't rightly know what I was about," said Captain Niggs. "I 'opes as how you'll forgive me, young gents. I was wrong. The box ain't no more mine than it is Ben Croke's, but 'e put me on to it!"

"Strike me timbers!" wheezed Ben. "I never thought of no such idea!"

"Well, you'd better not waste time in arguing about it," I said. "The sooner you can get those wet things off, Captain Niggs, the better. We'll land you on high ground, but that's all. You'll have to get to the village in the best way you can. We don't want any truck with thieves!"

Captain Niggs had nothing to say. Both he and Ben Croke stood there sullenly, and a few moments later they were taken on board, and we all pulled off across the river, and so on over the meadows to high ground, where the flood did not reach. The very instant the boat grounded, Niggs and his companion splashed ashore.

"If we liked, we could hand you over to the police; but we don't want to make a fuss about it!" I said. "The best thing you can do, my friends, is to clear off as quick as you can, and don't let us see you again!"

Captain Niggs looked at me grimly.

"Meble we'll meet again, young gent!" he said. "There's never no knowin'!"

And he went off at the double, squelching over the sodden ground, with Ben Croke close behind him.

"That's the last we'll see of that precious pair!" said Tommy Watson.

"Is it?" I asked thoughtfully. "I'm not quite so sure. They've failed so far, but I don't think they'll give up the game so easily."

Handforth looked round in a fatherly way.

"Well, I did pretty well, I think," he observed. "It's not my way to boast, of course, but I've got an idea that any other fellow would have made a mess of it."

"And didn't you make a mess of it?" I asked grimly.

"Eh?"

"Didn't you act like a babbling lunatic?" I demanded.

"You—you——"

"Look here, Handy, the least you can say, the better!" I snapped. "I'm absolutely fed-up with you, and——"

"You idiot!" snorted Handforth. "What have I done? What's the idea of flying into a temper like this? Didn't I get that box back——"

"That was nothing; the whole damage was caused long before then!" I interrupted furiously. "Yes, I have lost my temper; a saint would have lost his temper! You're the biggest blockhead I've ever come across!"

Handforth clenched his fists.

"Come on!" he roared. "We'll fight this out!"

"Just as you like!" I retorted. "I'm just feeling fit to give you a jolly good hiding! Instead of keeping quiet about that box, all you could do was to blab out the whole thing in front of those two men. You told them exactly how we found it, and you told 'em about old Willard's missing fortune and you put ideas of a treasure into their heads!"

"I did?" demanded Handforth blankly.

"Don't try to be innocent!" I said curtly. "A dozen times I tried to shut you up, but all you could do was to make things worse. That box ought to have been untouched until we were by ourselves. Those two men were obviously of a rough type, and they naturally jumped at a chance like this."

"Well, I've got the box back," repeated Handforth, somewhat subdued.

"I'll admit that you did the best you could to make amends, but a great deal of damage has been done," I said. "You can't get away from it. Both Niggs and Croke know about the treasure, and they know that we've got this box in our possession. They'll try all sorts of dodges to get hold of it, and, instead of the whole thing being a secret between us six, these strangers know all about it!"

Handforth scratched his head. I was half-expecting him to hurl himself upon me, but he acted in his usual extraordinary way. He did the very thing that nobody was looking for.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "I'm blessed if you ain't right! What a fatheaded ass I was to talk about the treasure in front of those chaps! You ought to have punched my nose, without asking any questions, Nipper!"

He turned round and bent down.

"Go on, kick me!" he invited. "I deserve it!"

"As long as you know all about it, we won't say any more!" I exclaimed gruffly. "What a queer chap you are, Handy! You know as well as I do that silence is golden. You realise it now, but when it really mattered you took no notice of me. If there's any mischief done, we'll have to make the best of it; but don't forget that this whole affair has got to be kept a secret."

"Rather!" said Watson. "We don't want the whole school talking!"

"It's not much good hoping that we can keep it mum," I went on. "Handforth's bound to get jawing!"

"Look here, my son; I'll give you my word that I'll keep quiet," interrupted Handforth firmly. "When I give my word, it's good enough. I won't say a thing to anybody beyond our own circle. How's that?"

"Good enough," I replied. "We'll keep this affair quite to ourselves. There's no earthly reason why we should tell the rest of the chaps. It's more than likely that the whole business will turn out to be a frost, and then we should only look asses if we made a fuss about it!"

"But supposing a treasure really does exist?" asked Watson.

"Well, we're going to do our best to locate it," I said. "If we find a treasure—well, we'll wait until we've found it before deciding what to do. We don't want to count our chickens before they're hatched."

It was getting near tea-time when the boat was grounded against a steep little bank two meadows away from the playing fields. I looked round with interest as I stepped out.

"The flood's going down a bit," I said. "It was yards higher than this when we started. By to-morrow these meadows will be clear, I expect. A flood of this sort doesn't last very long, you know."

"Begad, quite long enough!" growled Sir Montie, as he squelched ankle-deep in the mud. "What a frightful bog! My boots an' socks are utterly ruined, an' these trousers will be useless!"

Nobody took any notice of him, and he rambled on to himself for a few moments; and we set off across the sodden meadows, and finally arrived in the Triangle. I had the brass-bound box tucked under my arm.

I'd already warned the other chaps to say nothing if we were questioned regarding the box. Evasive answers might lead to considerable curiosity, and it was impossible to tell direct lies. Diplomacy was needed.

We were just entering the Ancient House,

when a figure emerged from the lobby. It was a junior attired in Etons, which hung loosely upon his skinny frame. His legs were like sticks, his arms thin, and his hands bony.

His back appeared to be somewhat hunched, and he possessed a long, scraggy neck which caused his head to project forward. His features were sharp and foxy, with protruding eyes that had red rims. Altogether, a most unpleasant-looking junior.

He was Enoch Snipe, the new boy in the Remove.

Snipe was not popular. His very appearance made it impossible for the other fellows to like him, and, apart from his looks, his nature was that of a cringing toady. It was impossible to insult him. He took everything meekly and mildly, and seemed to have an idea that he wasn't fit to live.

"Out of the way, Hercules!" said Handforth briskly.

"I hope I have not offended you, sir!" said Snipe, in a purring tone; and shifting his eyes about uncomfortably. "It was not my intention to get in the way. I always try to please everybody!"

"About the only person you'd please is an angler!" said Handforth.

Enoch Snipe smiled. It was a smile that made one feel bad.

"I—I do not quite understand!" he said cringingly.

"No?" grinned Handforth. "Anglers are pretty keen on worms, you know, and you're just about fitted to hook on to the end of a line! That's a good name for you, Snipe—the Worm!"

The new boy rubbed his hands softly together.

"I am sorry if I displease you," he purred. "I presume you have been out this afternoon? That box looks peculiarly interesting," he added, turning his shifty eyes upon me. "Most quaint, in fact——"

"Mind your own business!" said Handforth gruffly.

"I—I hope you do not think I am inquisitive," muttered Enoch Snipe. "I know my place better than to pry into affairs which do not concern me. I regret that I mentioned the box, sir. Please forgive me."

"Take him away and drown him!" said Handforth disgustedly. "How things like this can crawl about fairly beats me! It's a wonder his mater didn't smother him before he could talk!"

Enoch Snipe wriggled.

"I cannot help being here," he said apologetically. "It was my father's wish. I will always try to please everybody. I did not mean to be inquisitive about the box. But, seeing it, I naturally wondered. That is all. Please do not take the trouble to explain how you got it."

I looked at Snipe rather hard. I was beginning to realise that he was somewhat deeper than he professed to be. He was one long apology, but he took good care to keep the subject of the brass-bound box quite fresh.

"There's no mystery about the box, Snipe," I said shortly. "We found it floating on the flood, and it looked rather too good to be thrown away. It'll come in useful for keeping odds and ends in. Would you like it?" I added, holding out the box towards him. "It's not much good to me."

Enoch Snipe backed away.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed hastily. "Please—please do not imagine that I was attempting to ask for the box! It does not interest me at all. I'm only too sorry that I appeared to be inquisitive. It is not my place to be inquisitive. I am only a new boy."

"A new insect, you mean!" said Handforth. "If you're not hurled into the flood before the end of the week, I shall be surprised. I've seen better things than you crawling about on a niffy cheese."

Enoch Snipe rubbed his hands together, and turned away. The most shocking insults did not offend him. He was certainly a worm—and the name stuck to him from that moment onwards.

He became known as the Worm throughout the Remove.

Going along the corridor to Study C, we entered, and the brass-bound box was safely deposited in the cupboard. Then we changed our muddy boots, and made ourselves quite comfortable. Tea was prepared, and at length we sat down to a hearty meal.

When the things were cleared away we fished out the box, and I made an attempt to fit the peculiar jigsaw puzzle together. Sir Montie and Tommy looked on. After a quarter of an hour of it, we came to the conclusion that it was the cutest thing of its kind that we had ever come across.

We couldn't even fit two pieces together, in order to make a start. It was so cunningly contrived that all our efforts were baffled. I had a look at the foolscap containing the cipher.

This was a most intricate jumble, consisting of disjointed letters, figures, and curiously shaped symbols. The only intelligible words were those at the bottom—"John Willard." This was obviously the old eccentric's signature.

"I'll tell you what!" I said, after a while. "I'll take this cipher along to the guv'nor. He's dead nuts on anything like this, and he might be able to puzzle it out for us."

"We don't want to let Mr. Lee into the secret," said Watson.

"Why not?" I asked. "It won't matter a jot if the guv'nor knows—or the Head, either, if it comes to that. We shall want to explore Willard's Island, and it'll be a lot better if Mr. Lee knows what our game is. He won't say a word, I'll guarantee. It'll be a lot better if we tell him."

My chums agreed, and shortly afterwards I found myself in Nelson Lee's study, telling him all about it. He listened with great interest, and took the sheet of foolscap, and closely examined it.

"Do you think it's a fake, sir?" I asked, at length.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," replied the Guv'nor thoughtfully. "Indeed it seems fairly certain that there is a serious meaning behind all this, Nipper. There has always been a

mystery concerning old Willard's money. It is not at all far-fetched to assume that he concealed it in some secret hiding-place on the island. I am disposed to look upon this cipher quite seriously. I will do my best to find the key to it."

"Good!" I said. "That's the style, sir. I'll bet you'll make sense of it before long."

He advised me to say as little as possible among the other fellows, and I told him that we had already agreed to keep quiet. He was satisfied, and after I had gone he sat down for some time pondering over the cipher.

Then he had another visitor—this time the Head himself.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Lee," said Dr. Stafford pleasantly: "Ah, puzzling over one of your little intricate problems, eh? Dear me! What an extraordinary-looking document!"

Nelson Lee passed it to the Head.

"Let's see what you can make of it," he smiled.

Dr. Stafford frowned at the foolscap sheet, and then suddenly started.

"Why, good gracious!" he exclaimed. "What is this? John Willard! Can you tell me what this peculiar document is, Mr. Lee?"

"Well, strictly speaking, it is a secret belonging to Nipper and two of the other boys," said Nelson Lee. "Nipper has handed this cipher to me in confidence—hoping that I shall be able to make sense out of it. But I am sure that he would not object to your having a look at it, Dr. Stafford."

"John Willard!" repeated the Head. "Do you honestly think that this was written by old Willard? He must have died well over ten years ago. I can remember him, of course, although I never had anything to do with the man personally. Quite a gentleman, but undoubtedly cranky."

"The boys think that this cipher is the clue to old Willard's missing fortune," smiled Nelson Lee. "It is just like the boys, of course, to jump to such conclusions. Boys are always romantic. At the same time, I must admit that their suspicions are by no means unjustified. It is most probable that John Willard's great hoard is concealed somewhere on the island. And it is by no means absurd to suppose that this document, once deciphered, points the way to it."

The Headmaster sat down, and rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Dear me!" he said. "This is most interesting. I distinctly remember the mild sensation which was caused when the old man died. It was expected that he would leave a vast amount of money behind him—but his banking account was singularly barren. There was some talk, I believe, that old Willard had been drawing large sums in gold for several years before his death—until, in fact, he had almost nothing left."

Nelson Lee drummed his fingers upon the desk.

"Is that so?" he exclaimed. "Upon my soul, Dr. Stafford, this is beginning to look more and more genuine. The fact that Willard withdrew his fortune in gold indicates that he hoarded his money up somewhere. He was quite miserly, I have heard. It would be quite sensational if this treasure in gold were discovered on a little island."

"But that is not all," said the Head. "You seem to forget, Mr. Lee, that my youthful protégé will be greatly enriched. John is a splendid boy, and I am delighted with the way he is setting himself to his lessons. He is diligent, painstaking, and we have already seen an example of his sterling courage. How splendid it would be if this fortune came into his hands!"

"You are referring, of course, to John Martin?"

"Exactly!" said the Head. "He has always been known as John Martin—but, as a matter of fact, he is Willard's only son. When the old man died he was given into the care of some people at Caistowe, who sadly neglected him. And they called him Martin, fearing that the country people would regard him askance if he used his own name. I doubt if there is one person in the district who knows that Willard left any next-of-kin."

"And is Willard junior the only relative?" asked Lee.

"Well, I believe the boy has an uncle somewhere—old Willard had a sister who married this man," said the Head. "I don't know anything about him, and it is even possible that I am mistaken. Not that it matters. If this fortune is found, it will be legally the property of John. Really, I am becoming quite as excited as the boys themselves! Do you think you will be able to decipher this peculiar message?"

"Well, I shall do my best to succeed," said Nelson Lee.

A moment or two later they were talking on the subject which the Head had originally come upon. But they were both thinking of old John Willard and the possibility of his lost fortune being found on that little island in the middle of the River Stowe.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ST. FRANK'S CADET CORPS!

MR. JOSH CUTTLE paused, and scratched his head.

"There was sodjers in the school," he said gloomily. "Why was there sodjers in the school? Ask me! Because them there young rips was up to their larks agin. But they was neat."

Mr. Cuttle looked across the Triangle with the nearest approach to approval that he could manage. He had never been a soldier himself—his bandy legs had prevented that—but he had always had a secret liking for the military.

And the spectacle he saw rather pleased him.

Between twenty and thirty St. Frank's fellows had just appeared, some of them from the Ancient House, and some from the College

(*Continued on page 25.*)

NIPPER'S MAGAZINE

No. 13. THE JOURNAL OF THE REMOVE OF ST. FRANK'S Edited by Nipper. Feb. 18, 1922.

ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE

A General View showing the Ancient House.

(Key to drawing on page 24)

PECK'S BAD BOY AND HIS "PA".

HIS PA GOES HUNTING.

Mutilated Jaw—Out West Duck-shooting—His Coat-tails Shot Off—Shoots at a Wild Goose—The Gun Kicks!—Throws a Chair at his Son.

"WHAT has your Pa got his jaw tied up for, and what makes his right eye so black and blue?" asked the grocery man of the bad boy, as the bad boy came to bring some butter back that was strong enough to work on the street. "You haven't hurt your poor old Pa, have you?"

"Oh, his jaw is all right now. You ought to have seen him when the gun was engaged in kicking him," says the boy, as he set the butter-plate on the cheese-box.

"Well, tell us about it. What had the gun against your Pa? I guess it was the son-of-a-gun that kicked him!" said the grocery man.

"I'll tell you if you keep watch down street for Pa. He says he will be hanged if he will stand this foolishness any longer."

"What! does your father say that?"

"Well, I should cackle. You ought to have heard him when he came to, and spit out the loose teeth. You see, the doctor said he ought to go out somewhere and git bizness off his mind, and hunt ducks, and row a boat, and get strength; and Pa said shooting ducks was just in his hand, and for me to go and borrow a gun, and I could go along and carry the game.

"So I got a gun at the gun store, and some cartridges, and we went away out west on the rail, more than fifty miles, and stayed two days. You ought to seen Pa. He was just like a boy that was sick and couldn't go to school. When we got out by the lake he jumped up and cracked his heels together, and yelled. I thought he was crazy, but he was only cunning.

"First I scared him nearly to death by accidentally firing off the gun behind him, as we were going along the bank, and blowing off a piece of his coat-tail. He turned pale and told me to lay down the gun, and he picked it up and carried it the rest of the way; and I was offul glad, 'cause it was a heavy gun. His coat-tail smelled like when you burn a rag all the forenoon.

"You know Pa is a little nearsighted, but he don't believe it, so I got some of the wooden decoy ducks that the hunters use, and put them in the lake; and you ought to see Pa get down on his belly

First I scared him by firing off the gun behind him.

His coat-tail smelled like when you burn a rag all the forenoon.

and crawl through the grass, to get up close to them. He shot twenty times at the wooden ducks, and wanted me to go in and fetch them out but I told him I was no retriever dog. Then Pa was mad, and said all he brought me along for was to carry game, and I had come near shooting his hind-leg off, and now I wouldn't carry ducks.

"While he was coaxing me to go in the cold water without my pants on, I heard some wild geese squawking, and then Pa heard them, and he was excited. He said, you lay down behind the muskrat house, and I will get a goose. I told him he couldn't kill a goose with that fine shot, and I gave him a large cartridge the gun store man loaded for me, with a handful of powder in, and I told Pa it was a goose cartridge, and Pa put it in the gun.

"The geese came along, about a mile high, squawking, and Pa aimed at a dark cloud and fired. Well, I was offul scared, I thought I had killed him. The gun just reared up and come down on his jaw, shoulder, and everywhere, and he went over a log and struck on his shoulder; the gun flew out of his hands, and Pa he laid there on his neck, with his feet over the log.

I felt offul sorry. and got some dirty water in my hat and poured it down his neck, and laid him out, and pretty soon he opened his eyes and asked if any of the passengers got ashore alive. Then his eye swelled out so it looked like a blue door-knob, and Pa felt his jaw, and asked if the engineer and fireman jumped off, or if they went down with the engine.

"Then he got his senses and wanted to know if he killed a goose, and I told him no, but he nearly broke his jaw, and then he said the gun kicked him when it went off, and he laid down, and the gun kept kicking him more than twenty times, when he was trying to sleep. He went back to the tavern where we were stopping and wouldn't touch the gun, but made me lug it. He told the tavern keeper that he fell over a wire fence, but I think he began to suspect, after he spit the loose teeth out, that the gun was loaded for bear. I suppose he will kill me some day. Don't you think he will?"

"Any coroner's jury would let him off and call it justifiable, if he should kill you. You must be a lunatic. Has your Pa talked much about it since you got back?" asked the grocery man.

"Not much. You see he can't talk much without hurting his jaw. But he was able to throw a chair at me. You see I thought I would joke with him a little, 'cause when anybody feels bad a joke kind of livens 'em up, so we were talking about Pa's liver, and I said, 'Pa

I got some wooden ducks that the hunters use, and put them in the lake

when you was a-rolling over with the gun chasing you, and kicking you every round, your liver was active enough, 'cause it was on top half the time.' Then Pa throwed the chair at me. He says he believes I knew that cartridge was double loaded."

Mary Jane on Pleasure.

PLEASURE is a thing what ought to be took at the right time (said Mary Jane, vigorously applying her duster to the polished linoleum). In my h'opinion, pleasure ain't good for nobody unless it was took moderate like.

Them as has too much of it don't never get no benefit. Same as work. All work makes life a fair misery, that's what it does. And them as goes about a-wastin' of their time pleasure seekin' from mornin' till night, week in an' week out—why, it's just the same as hard work to 'em. They soon get fed up with life.

I sez what I means, and I ain't afraid o' nobody a-hearin' of me. I've got my h'opinions as good as the next one. There's all kinds o' pleasure as folks can take. There's pleasure what does you good, and pleasure what does you a lot o' arm. Speakin' for myself, I generally goes to the pictures.

When I has my 'arf-day—which is allus on a Thursday, as you know—I goes to the new picture pallis in Bannington. A rare nice place, too. An' I gits all the pleasure I want—and for fivepence, too. There ain't no sense in payin' more. Why, for fivepence you sits right in front, an' them as pays four times as much are shoved right at the back!

There's all kinds o' pictures what you can see. That there Charlie Chaplin feller. Now, 'e's a rare funny one, if you likes! Never did I see such a one! The antics 'e gits up to ain't really human, as far as I can see. Only last week I was a-lookin' at 'im on the pictures, an' as true as I'm a-kneelin' on this floor, 'e knocked four or five men down with a mallet, an' if they wasn't killed I'll be surprised. An' them clothes 'e wears! Pore feller, I s'pose 'e can't afford no better!

But the kind of picture I like is that sort with a nice manly 'ero, what always turns up when the villain is jest about to kidnap the 'eroine. Then they 'as a awful fight, an' the villain gets it in the neck proper. Then at the end of the fillum you sees the 'ero gettin' married to the girl, with flowers an' bridesmaids, an' everythink else. That's what I calls real pleasure, watching a picture like that.

But tastes ain't all the same, an' some folks likes to take their pleasure in a different way. My father, f'rinstance. 'E don't never go to no pictures. Soon as 'e gets 'ome from work 'e 'as 'is cup o' tea and some grub an' then off 'e goes round to the King's 'Ead, and sits in the bar parlour with 'is mug an' 'is pipe. Talkin', mind you—doin' nothink else but talkin'! That's what 'e calls pleasure. They say nasty things about the wimmen gossipin', but when men gits together in a pub they're ten times as mad!

Then again, take the 'Eadmaster—with all doo respecks, like. 'E don't never go to pictures, as far as I knows, an' I certainly ain't never seen 'im in a pub. As far as I knows, all 'e does is to sit in 'is study, a-readin'. I s'pose 'e calls it pleasure, but it would fair kill me in next to no time. It's queer how tastes differ such a lot.

As for them boys—well, I don't rightly know what to say. They're always up to monkey tricks, one way and another. But when it comes to pleasure, I'm beat. There's things they do what don't even seem human. Take football, for example. They calls it pleasure to run about in the porin' rain, a-gettin' themselves smothered with mud. They calls it pleasure to go chasin' one another for miles an' miles an' leavin' bits o' paper, litterin' up the roads an' lanes—an' comin' back exhausted so they can't 'ardly breathe. They calls it pleasure to get in the common room of an evenin' an' shout an' fight and be'ave like a parcel o' young lunatics.

In my h'opinion, goin' out ain't a pleasure at all unless you've done a lot o' 'ard work before-'and. It makes you feel as you've earned it, like. An' you enjoys yore pleasure ever so much more.

Take the time when the fair was on in the village last summer. My! I don't reckon I'll ever forget that evenin'! Such pleasure as never I saw! Swings an' roundabouts an' cocoanut shies! And what with the young fellers a-larkin' about, stuffin' confetti down me neck, an' squirtin' water in me ear—I sha'n't never forget that time. Enjoy myself? I don't 'ope to 'ave the like of it agin! An' then later on we 'ad kiss in the ring. Some saucy young sparks tried to kiss me even, but I soon put them in their places, I can tell you! I don't allow no liberties!

Takin' it all round, pleasure was made for them as what deserves it. Them as don't, never gets no pleasure. Even though they goes to pictures and theayters an' fairs, they don't rightly enjoy theirselves. Which all comes to what I sez at first. To enjoy your pleasure proper you've got to earn it. That's my h'opinion, anyways. I'm a-earnin' o' mine now!

SCHOOLBOY HOWLERS

(This popular feature will continue every week until further notice.)

It is surprising what erroneous notions and ideas some lads get hold of in connection with what would appear to be the plainest historical facts.

I was examining a second class (fifth standard) of Board school boys on certain portions of the history of the Stuart period. In dealing with the rise of Cromwell and his achievements against the Royalists with his famous Ironsides, I put the question—

"What is Oliver Cromwell said to have been before he came into prominence as a Parliamentary leader and General? What was his position originally?"

And one of the lads promptly and confidently answered:

"Why, only a brewer's traveller, sir!"

I may add that the teacher of the class told me—after my examination was over—that only a few weeks before one of the lads had treated him to an equally surprising and original piece of information, namely, that the poet Milton, Cromwell's secretary, was "at one time the son of a London scavenger!" Of course, the lad was confounding the word with "scrivenger," the latter term, doubtless, being as unfamiliar to him as the office itself.

* * *

There was a lad in the village of C— who wished to communicate to the schoolmistress the news that a certain acquaintance of hers in the next village had unexpectedly died. However, he had some sort of idea that it was the correct thing to break such news in a gentle or gradual manner. So he said to the dame:

"If you please, mum, I dunna think as Miss Susy Griggs o' the next village will live much longer."

"Whatever do you mean, my boy?" said the mistress. "Why not?"

"Well mum," he replied, with a facial contortion that was meant to represent a look of sympathy, "'cos she's just dead!"

The following anecdote exemplifies in what a peculiar manner the distinctive phases of town and country life may present themselves to the child mind.

A lad who had lived in London all his life, but whose parents had now removed to the country, was sent to the village school.

"Well, my boy," said the good dominie, "how do you like your new country life?"

"Pretty well, sir," said the ex-town youngster, in plainly qualified terms.

"Only pretty well?" queried the schoolmaster.

"Yes, sir, there's one or two things abart it I don't like."

"Indeed! Tell me one of them, my boy," said the old schoolmaster.

"Well, sir, there's the way as you gets your milk!"

"Milk?"

"Yes, sir; in London we get it from a nice clean shop, just as we get most other things; but here they drore it from a dirty old cow standing amongst the strore!"

"Hi! hi!" tittered the dominie; "and what is the other thing which strikes you as strange?"

"Well, the birds, sir."

"And what about them, my boy?"

"Well, sir, they seem to have nowheres to fly to rest theirselves, except in bits of nests in the trees. But in London they've either got nice cages and cotes to live in, like linnets and pijins, or else, like the sparrers, they live and go to sleep in the spouts and chimbleys!"

The old schoolmaster laughed merrily, and closed the interview by assuring the lad that he would soon get accustomed to his new surroundings or see them in a different light.

* * *

The lesson was on the subject of coins, and the teacher asked—

"What is to be seen on the 'head' side of a penny?"

"The King's head, else the Queen's," answered one boy correctly.

"Yes, and what do you see on the other side?"

"A woman sittin' on a bicycle."

THE PROBLEMS OF TRACKETT GRIM

The Amazing and Staggering Adventures of the World's greatest Criminal Detective and his Boy Assistant, Splinter.

By EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH.

No. 2.—THE CASE OF THE COCAINE FIEND.

SNATCHED FROM DOOM.

TRACKETT GRIM, the world's greatest detective, clutched at Splinter's arm. At the same moment he pointed with a quivering finger. His eyes were glued to the darkness ahead.

"Great heavens!" said Trackett Grim hoarsely.

He darted forward like an arrow from a bow, and Splinter dashed along in his rear. The celebrated pair were on the embankment, and the Thames lay cold and icy just near them. Fog lay thick over the whole scene.

Along the other side of the river the twinkling lights glistened clearly through the atmosphere. It was late at night in London, and the great City was hushed in sleep. Ten o'clock had just boomed out.

Trackett Grim and Splinter had come along the Embankment for a quiet walk. And then suddenly, dramatically, the detective had seen a form dash on to the parapet. And as he hovered 'twixt life and death, Trackett Grim dashed up.

"Stop!" he cried urgently.

"Too late!" screamed the figure. "Farewell—I die!"

He gave a fiendish laugh, and leapt to his doom. Splash! He struck the water, and vanished beneath the cruel waves.

Trackett Grim gazed over the parapet for one second only. Then he turned to Splinter.

"Hold these!" he rapped out curtly.

In a trice he had whipped off his coat and waistcoat. Then he unlaced his boots, and kicked them off his feet. Without another second's delay he turned, and plunged head first into the murk of the Thames.

So marvellous was his power of tracking that he instinctively felt where the would-be suicide lay. And Trackett Grim dived down—down, down, until he reached the thick mud at the bottom of the river. And there, lying cold and stark, was the man who had flung himself to death.

In another trice Trackett Grim was on the surface, carrying in his arms the pitiful specimen of humanity he had rescued.

And then suddenly the detective saw a form dash on to the parapet.

On the Track of the Drug King.

Splinter was ready, leaning over the parapet, and he helped his famous master up. And now Trackett Grim could see that his companion was a miserable, middle-aged man, with bony arms and legs, and a shrivelled up face. He was attired in immaculate evening dress, with spotlessly white linen.

"Only fools try to commit suicide," said Trackett Grim sternly.

"How—how did you know that I tried to commit suicide?" asked the man in amazement.

"I am Trackett Grim!" replied the detective grimly.

"Ah! I understand!" said the other. "No deduction is too marvellous for you, Mr. Grim. My name is Sir Peter Dope, Bart., and I could strike you down as you stand for saving me. All I want is death. Death—swift and sudden! Life is nought but agony!"

"Come, come!" said Trackett Grim, whip-

ping out his brandy flask. "Take some of this, my friend. Why is life so full of misery for you Sir Peter Dope, Bart.? You are rich—you are——"

"I must have cocaine!" hissed the drug fiend feverishly. "It is all I live for, Mr. Grim. Cocaine! It is my life—everything that is worth living for! And I have been unable to obtain fresh supplies!"

"From whom do you generally purchase the drug?" asked Grim keenly.

"He is the man who supplies cocaine to the whole world!" replied the baronet. "His name is Philip Popolis, the Bulgarian!"

Trackett Grim staggered back.

"The Drug King!" he gasped calmly. "And do you know this man, Sir Peter? I have been on his track for years, but he has always eluded me. Tell me where I can find Popolis, and I will cure you of your craving in a second!"

Sir Peter Dope bent nearer.

"Philip Popolis, the Bulgarian, arranged to meet me at nine-thirty in the Shadowland Café, in Piccadilly," he hissed. "But he did not turn up, and I resolved to take my life. Great Scott!" he added abruptly. "I remember! The appointment was for ten-thirty!"

"Good!" said Trackett Grim keenly. "It is now ten-fifteen! Come! We will away to the Shadowland Café!"

With rapid strides they strode away from the Embankment, and by great good fortune happened to meet a taxicab. At such an unearthly hour most taxis were long since put away for the night.

"To the Shadowland Café!" ordered Trackett Grim.

The Transformation.

"What is your plan, sir?" asked Splinter eagerly.

"You will see, my lad—you will see!" replied his celebrated master. "Now, Sir Peter Dope, kindly sit still. Splinter, flash out your electric torch. We have but three minutes for our task!"

Splinter flashed the light out, and then, with deft fingers, Trackett Grim made himself into a lifelike impersonation of Sir Peter Dope. The likeness was so marvellous that even Splinter could not tell the difference.

The Shadowland Café was reached, and Trackett Grim stepped out.

"Wait here," he said softly. "I will soon bring my prisoner!"

Crash! The Bulgarian brought the bottle down on Trackett Grim's head.

He entered the café, looked round, and saw Philip Popolis on the instant. The latter came forward with outstretched hand. As he did so he produced a large pint bottle from his coat tails.

"Quick!" he whispered. "Hide it away Sir Peter. "There is a pint here—sufficient to last you a couple of days——"

"I arrest you in the name of the law!" shouted Trackett Grim triumphantly.

In a trice the Bulgarian raised the bottle of cocaine. Crash! Crash! He brought it down upon Trackett Grim's head. The deadly drug swilled over the detective's shoulders—but cocaine has the effect of giving added life. And Trackett Grim was supplied with double strength and speed.

The Bulgarian rushed out of the café and dived into the waiting taxicab.

"Drive away, you fool!" he snarled to the driver. "Why, what—— Great pip!"

He staggered back, for Sir Peter Dope was beside him—and yet Sir Peter Dope was rushing after him, too! Philip Popolis whipped out his revolver, and stabbed Sir Peter to the heart.

The next second he was in the grasp of Trackett Grim.

The Drug King was captured at last, and he was handed over to the police. In the meantime Trackett Grim made a swift operation upon Sir Peter Dope, extracting the bullet and saving Sir Peter's life.

And, ten days later, the drug fiend was a strong, healthy man, no longer craving for cocaine. And Trackett Grim smiled contentedly and proudly as he gazed at the cheque for ten thousand pounds that he had received that morning.

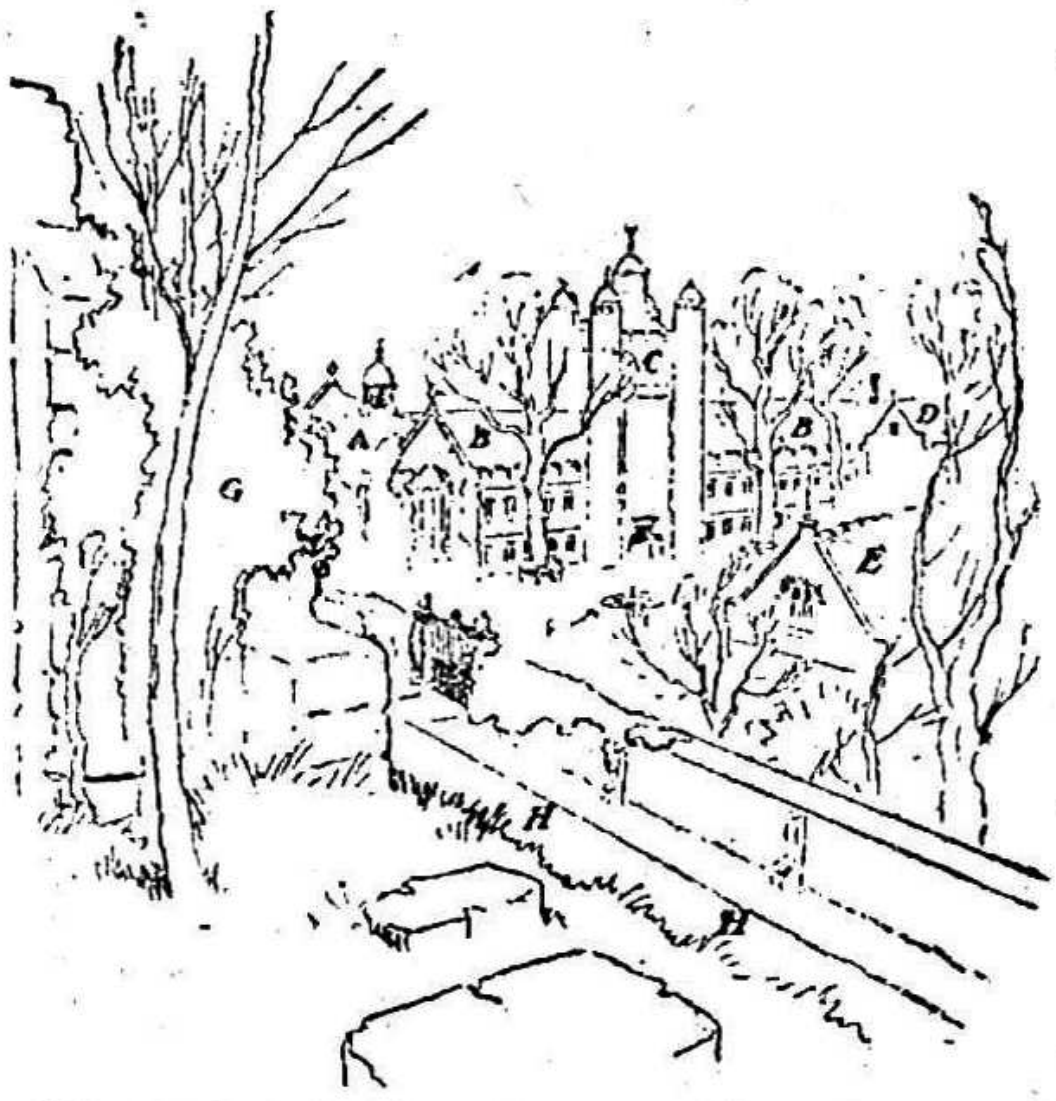
THE END.

Further Amazing Adventures of

Trackett Grim

IN

"The Black Terror of Blackheath."



KEY TO SPECIAL PEN AND INK STUDY OF ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE

(See Cover of "Mag.")

A. Chapel.
B. Ancient House.
C. Clock Tower.
D. The Headmaster's House.
E. The College House.
F. Fountain (in the Triangle).
G. Old Monastery Ruins.
H. Road to Bellton and Bannington.

All readers, old and new, will welcome with delight the series of magnificently drawn pen-pictures of St. Frank's, of which this is the first. Here have been enacted many of the stirring adventures related in the "Nelson Lee Library"—adventures that have made St. Frank's famous throughout the land. And since we may look forward to many more exciting events happening around these hallowed walls, every reader should make a point of collecting and keeping all of these drawings. Next week's picture will be a near view of the Clock Tower, showing the fountain, and all the details of this fine old historical edifice. Tell all your chums about these pictures of the old school, so that everyone can be sure of a copy for himself.

THE EDITOR'S DEN

Editorial Office,
Study C, Ancient House,
St. Frank's.

IMPORTANT.—Correspondence to the Editor of the Magazine should be addressed to the Editor, The Nelson Lee Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

My Dear Readers,—We must thank our lucky stars that we are not flooded out of Study C—I mean, of course, by the recent deluge. Metaphorically, we are in a continual state of overflowing—with MSS. and their industrious owners. I am sorry that space will not allow me to do justice to all my friends who submit copy for the Mag., if only to show my appreciation of the time each one of them must have spent in gnawing the end of his pencil in quest of inspirations, which, alas, for the many mean an early grave in the W.P.B.

A GREAT IDEA.

But let us turn from this depressing subject to the brighter prospects of camping out on Willard's Island. It's a great idea, and I am glad no one put the damper on it by suggesting that we should find sleeping quarters in our studies or in Big Hall. This probably did occur to the guv'nor, but he knew that I wanted to get to the bottom of old Willard's secret, and that it would be better for the cadet corps to master the elements of squad drill without being distracted by an audience of amused spectators. I anticipate loads of fun and considerable excitement during our stay on Willard's Island.

Au revoir, until next week,
Your sincere chum,
NIPPER (The Editor).

(*Continued from page* 16.)

House. And contrary to usual custom, they were not attired in Etons. Instead, they wore smart uniforms of khaki, with belts, and brass buttons. Their peak caps were neat and well fitting, and, altogether their appearance was ultra-smart.

Upon their shoulders, in little brass lettering, could be seen the words, "St. Frank's Cadet Corps," and they were standing together in little groups, admiring one another.

Mr. Cuttle continued watching with interest. It was the first public appearance of the cadets, and morning parade was about to take place. It was quite early—and fully an hour would elapse before the breakfast bell rang. I remained in Study C—fully dressed, of course, but for the moment I did not wish to join the others.

At present the cadet corps consisted of one platoon, and I was the commander. But Handforth had expressed a desire to drill the troops—as he called them—before I appeared.

And, as a matter of fact, I was rather anxious to see how he would shape. Handforth was just the right kind of fellow to be a sergeant—providing he kept himself in check. But I was half afraid that Edward Oswald would take advantage of his position.

"Well, it makes a change, anyway," said Pitt, as he looked down at his shining boots. "The Commanding Officer will be along soon, so you chaps had better look alive."

"Well, you're a corporal," said Jack Grey, grinning. "Do you know what your duties are?"

"Not yet," replied Pitt, calmly. "But I shall be on hand in case anybody needs arresting. It'll take some little time before we shake down. I was thinking——"

"'Shun!"

The voice came in a bellow from the steps of the Ancient House. Sergeant Handforth had just appeared. There was no doubt whatever about that. That he realised the importance of his position was obvious. He strutted down the steps stiffly, and all the cadets grinned.

Handforth had three stripes on his arm, and now and again he looked at them, as though to make certain that they were still there. He was just as smart as all the others, and he had set his cap at a rakish angle upon his head, and he was swinging a swagger cane.

"Fall in!" he thundered sharply. "Now then, you men! You'd better understand at once that there's going to be no slacking in this regiment——"

"Platoon!" muttered Church, hurriedly.

Handforth glared.

"Another word, Private Church, and you'll be placed under arrest for insubordination!" he roared. "I'm not standing any rot from the rank and file! Fall in, you silly fatheads!"

The cadets still continued to lounge about.

"Better go a bit more easily," said Pitt, with a chuckle. "They're not used to it yet, you know——"

"I don't want any advice from a corporal!" snapped Handforth. "And don't forget you've got to call me 'sir'——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sergeant Handforth went purple as the laughter rang out.

"You mutinous slackers!" he roared. "I'll show you——"

"Just a minute!" interrupted Corporal Christine. "It's not usual for the men to address a sergeant as 'sir.' They call him sergeant. It's only the officer who expects to be called 'sir,' Handy".

"That doesn't make any difference to me!" snapped Handforth. "This ain't the army—it's a cadet corps. Now then—fall in a line, and make haste about it. I'm going to put you through squad drill."

"What about the inspection?" asked Church.

"Nipper does that," said Reginald Pitt.

"Oh, does he?" snorted Handforth. "I'm doing all the inspection that's necessary! Form up, I tell you! That's right—now—from your right, number!"

"Do what?" asked Talmadge.

"Call out your numbers—from the right!" bellowed Handforth.

"One—two—three—four—six——"

"Stop!" bawled the sergeant. "Where's Number five?"

"Give us a chance to speak!" gasped Tommy Watson, who was the fifth cadet. "I can't call out my number, I suppose, when I'm swallowing a peppermint?"

Sergeant Handforth nearly exploded.

"Swallowing a peppermint!" he stormed. "Don't you know that it's against all rules and regulations to swallow peppermints on parade? You'll take five hundred lines——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order!" roared the sergeant. "I mean, you'll be reported in the orderly room after breakfast! We can't have any eating on parade. Great pip! What's this? Look at your belt, Private Church!"

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Private Church.

"It's two inches out of the true!" said Handforth, curtly. "It's absolutely disgraceful the way some of you privates turn out for parade! Huh! Things'll have to be different to-morrow morning, or else there'll be trouble!"

He stalked up and down the line, glaring at the juniors, and swishing his cane about. When he had nearly reached the end he came to a halt and almost choked. He was standing in front of Fatty Little. The latter's uniform was somewhat tight, but this was the fault of the tailors. Fatty's measurements had been given, but a mistake of some kind had evidently been made.

"Private Little!" roared Sergeant Handforth. "Attention!"

"Don't yell like that!" said Fatty, who seemed to have the toothache.

"What's that in your cheek?" demanded Handforth.

"Num—nothing!" stammered Fatty. "That is to say, I—I'm just having a snack, you know."

"A snack!" bellowed Handforth. "And look at your pockets! Why, by George! This is going to be jolly serious for you, Private Little! I'll make an example of you before the whole brigade!"

"But—but——"

Handforth took no notice of Fatty's protests, but dived his hands into the pockets of the fat junior's tunic. He produced a dough nut, two buns, a sardine sandwich, and a jam tart.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" stormed the sergeant. "This is no laughing matter. Corporal Pitt—Corporal Christine! Come here—and move quickly!"

The two corporals, grinning, strolled up.

"What's wrong?" asked Pitt. "Let Fatty off this time——"

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "Gorging himself on parade! I've never heard of such insubordination! Private Little, you're under arrest, and you'll be brought up in the orderly room, after breakfast, on a serious charge. Take him away to the guard-room."

"Where is it?" asked Pitt.

"Anywhere—the end boxroom will do for this morning!" snapped Sergeant Handforth. "These privates have got to understand that they can't do just as they like. Buzz off! Cart him away!"

Fatty Little didn't object. He was beginning to realise, in fact, that it would be a lucky escape for him to go. And he meekly allowed himself to be arrested, and marched into the Ancient House.

"Now we can get on!" said the sergeant, grimly. "I'm not satisfied with you—I can tell you that much! This sort of thing won't do—you can't stand straight, the line looks like a ragged formation, and there's too much grinning. Now you'd better get ready, because I'm going to put you through some drill."

"Better wait until Nipper comes out," suggested Tommy Watson. "You don't know anything about drilling——"

"Do you want to be arrested, too? Be silent, or I'll give you three days C.B.! Now, lemme see—you've done the numbering, haven't you? All right, we'll get on with some drill. Form fours!"

The cadets made shuffling movements, and finished up by forming themselves into a ragged group. They hadn't done any drilling yet—not of this kind, at all events—and Handforth was treating them as though they were thoroughly proficient. Perhaps they were pulling his leg a bit, too.

"What the dickens do you call that?" stormed the sergeant. "Form into line again! You seem to be the worst one of all, Church! Stand forward!"

"Oh, don't be funny!" snapped Church.

"Silence!" said Handforth. "Now let me tell you, Private Church, that I'm not putting up with any back answers! You've only got to try it on, and I'll punch your nose!"

"It's not the place for a sergeant to inflict punishment," said Church. "All the sergeant can do is to report to his superior officer——"

Biff!

Handforth landed out, and Church howled.

"Yow—yaroooh!" he roared. "You—— better——"

"And you'll get some more if you don't speak to me respectfully!" exclaimed the sergeant curtly. "I'm going to teach you a few things about drilling, my lad. Now then—all by yourself! Form fours!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The cadets fairly howled.

"Show me how, and I'll do it!" growled Church, rubbing his nose.

"Poor old Handy!" said Pitt, who had just come up. "How the dickens can a single chap form fours? He can't make four out of himself——"

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth. "I forgot that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's enough!" bellowed the sergeant, turning rather red. "Get into line again, you babbling lunatics! You blockheaded mules! I don't wonder the Army sergeants need big voices! It's like trying to drive sense into a brick wall! Form—two deep!"

The juniors looked on without comprehending.

"Form—t'deep!" repeated Handforth fiercely.

"How can we form two deep before we've formed fours?" asked Owen major vaguely. "We're supposed to be learning—and you go and give your orders as if we know all about it!"

"As you were!" bellowed the sergeant.

"That's easy!" grinned Church. "I suppose we finish now?"

"Finish!" snorted Handforth. "Why, you fatheads, we haven't begun yet! We'd better do some marching. Right turn—the whole crowd of you! D'you hear me? Right turn! Left wheel! Mark time!"

The Cadets obeyed, and there was some semblance of order.

"Quick march!" thundered Sergeant Handforth. "And keep marching until I give the order to halt! Don't turn until I tell you to turn! Good! Right turn! Left turn!"

The last two orders were fatal. Some of the Cadets turned to the right, and some to the left, and the result was hopeless confusion, as might have been expected. Handforth was just going clean crazy when I appeared on the scene.

"You—you blithering idiots!" shouted Handforth desperately. "I can see it's no good giving lucid orders! Take that, Private Singleton, for being a hopeless duffer!"

Crash!

Private Singleton was not prepared, and he sat down violently in the Triangle. He roared with pain and fury, for the ground was by no means soft—and it certainly was not clean.

"What's the meaning of this, Sergeant Handforth?" I demanded, walking up. "That sort of thing won't do——"

"What won't do?" demanded Handforth, glaring.

"It's no part of your duty to use violence against the Cadets!" I said sternly. "If you have any complaints to make, you must report to me. I can't allow anything of this kind."

Sergeant Handforth looked me up and down pityingly.

"Oh, you can't allow it?" he asked. "That's a pity! And who the dickens do you think you are! Nobody—a blessed figurehead! You're just the lieutenant of the platoon! I'm the sergeant—and I do all the work! If you think you're going to bully me, you've made a bloomer——"

"Silence!" I commanded. "Look here, Handforth, we'll drop this Cadet business for a minute. Let's be ourselves. And let me tell you that your stripes will be taken away unless you alter."

"Who'll take 'em away?" sneered Handforth.

"I will!" I replied curtly. "In future, you mustn't lay a finger upon any of the fellows. It's absolutely outrageous for the chaps to be bullied and knocked down by the sergeant! If any of them are cheeky, or insubordinate, your duty is to report them to me. Is that quite understood?"

"No, it isn't!" snapped Handforth. "I've got a few words to say! I'm in command of this Cadet Corps—practically speaking, anyway. And you're not going to order me about——"

"That's enough!" I interrupted.

"What!"

"Silence!"

"Rats!" said the leader of Study D. "If you think I'm going to be silent because you say so, you've made a bloomer! And if it comes to it, I'll jolly soon show you who's who! See that?"

He poked his fist under my nose.

"Put it down!" I said grimly. "If you dare to touch me——"

"Dare!" bawled Handforth. "Take that!"

Biff!

I saw about twenty stars, and crashed over backwards. Handforth had punched me on the nose with tremendous force. He had got his blow in before I could put up any sort of a guard. I picked myself up dazedly, and found the Cadets looking on, grinning with great amusement.

"It was your own fatheaded fault!" growled Handforth;

In spite of the pain, I couldn't help seeing the humour of the situation.

"You tame maniac!" I exclaimed, tenderly rubbing my nose. "For two pins, I'd tear your stripes off, Handy! Don't you know that it's one of the biggest crimes in military circles to strike a superior officer?"

"You dared me!" said Handforth gruffly.

"That's nothing to do with the matter," I said. "On this occasion I'll overlook it, because you know as much about the business as the gatepost. But if you lay a finger on me again—or on any of the Cadets—you'll be reduced to the rank of a private in two minutes. That's final!"

"Why, you ass——"

"Final!" I repeated firmly. "I've been made the Commanding officer of this Cadet Corps, and there can't be two commanders! I'll give you another chance, Handy, but only one more! Remember what I've said, or you'll find yourself degraded! Now let me get on with the drilling!"

For several seconds Handforth seemed to be choking. But he had sense enough to realise that I was serious. And the prospect of being reduced to the ranks rather appalled him. He was aware, also, that he had overstepped the mark by knocking me down.

So he pulled himself together, and remained silent.

And after that, under my command, the platoon did fairly well. I instructed the fellows exactly what to do, and by the time the breakfast bell rang harmony had been restored.

But there was to be more trouble with Handforth yet!

CHAPTER VII.

THE DISORDERLY ROOM!

"ANYTHING to report, sergeant!"

Breakfast was over, and I was sitting in formal state in the orderly room—which was, for the time being, Study C. I knew quite well that there were two or three matters to report, but it was formal to put the question.

Sergeant Handforth had just come in. He saluted with a bad grace—he seemed to think it was undignified.

"Three cases!" he said shortly.

"Three cases—what?" I asked severely.

"What do you mean—what?" asked Handforth. "One is Fatty Little, and another is Watson, and the third's Church——"

"I'm not asking you what the cases are, but I'm just trying to remind you that it's your duty to address me as 'sir,'" I explained. "As your commanding officer, it's due to me——"

"Rats!" said the sergeant. "I'm not going to call you 'sir,' you fathead! You're no better than I am——"

"Oh, why did I ever make you a sergeant?" I asked groaning. "My dear ass, I'm not giving myself airs, and I don't want to make myself important. But it's simply the custom for the commander of a platoon to be addressed in a manner suitable to his dignity. I don't require it myself—but my position does. That's all. If we're going to run this Cadet Corps in a proper way, we've got to do things as they ought to be done."

"You're mad!" said Handforth bluntly. "Still, I'm not going to argue about it. The first case I've got to report is concerning Private Watson. At present he's in the guardroom, under arrest."

"But he wasn't under arrest before breakfast," I said.

"No, sir," replied Handforth reluctantly. "I arrested him ten minutes ago."

"For what reason?"

"He had better answer the charge himself, sir," said the sergeant. "Corporal Pitt, go at

once and bring Private Watson into the Orderly Room!"

Corporal Pitt saluted, and vanished. He soon returned, accompanied by Tommy Watson who was looking decidedly indignant.

"What's all this rot about?" he asked.

"You mustn't speak like that in the Orderly Room," I said severely. "It's your duty to wait until you are addressed, Private Watson. Now, sergeant, let me hear the charge against this prisoner."

Handforth cleared his throat.

"The accused is guilty of a serious offence," he said. "While on parade I discovered him engaged in the disgusting practice of eating peppermints. The fathead was so full up with peppermints, in fact, that he couldn't answer his number when his turn came."

I gazed sternly at the accused.

"What have you to say, Private Watson?" I demanded, with a private wink.

"I've got to say a lot!" retorted Watson indignantly. "The sergeant is a silly ass, and he ought to be boiled——"

"That's no way to speak of your sergeant!" I interrupted curtly.

"If he acted like a proper sergeant, I'd speak of him in a proper way," said Tommy. "But he must be absolutely mad to put me under arrest for eating sweets! There's no other complaint against me!"

"We will see!" I said. "Have you any other report to make concerning the accused, sergeant?"

"No, sir," said the sergeant.

"How is it that Private Watson was not placed under arrest at the time of the offence?" I inquired.

"That's quite right, sir!" said the prisoner. "Sergeant Handforth warned me, and threatened me with arrest if the offence occurred a second time. Then, directly after breakfast, I find myself seized and thrown into the guard room!"

"Is this correct, sergeant?" I asked.

"Quite correct, sir," said Handforth. "I realised that it had been my duty to arrest Private Watson at once——"

"That is sufficient!" I interrupted. "The charge is thin and, indeed, quite absurd. There will be no punishment inflicted. Private Watson, you may leave the Orderly Room as soon as you like."

Private Watson saluted.

"Very good, sir!" he said crisply. "But I'll stay here, if you don't mind!"

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Handforth, glaring. "I bring a prisoner in here, and all you can do is to dismiss him——"

"It is not your business to criticise the actions of your superior officer," I broke in "Now, sergeant, what is your next charge

(*Continued on page 29*)

(*Continued from page 28*)

We haven't got much time, you must remember, so you'd better put a hustle on."

"Corporal Pitt, take Corporal Christine and fetch Private Church!" said Handforth fiercely. "By George, I'll soon show you whether I'm going to be made an ass of! I've got a very serious charge to bring against Private Church."

Church soon appeared, but he didn't look particularly depressed. He was grinning, and the two corporals were grinning. Church saluted as he came opposite my table, and he smiled at Handforth.

"What is your charge against the accused?" I asked.

"Insubordination and disrespect!" replied the sergeant. "I have to report that Private Church called me an idiot and a fathead. Furthermore, he referred to me as a babbling lunatic!"

"What have you to say?" I asked, turning to the prisoner.

"Nothing much, sir," replied Church. "What the sergeant said is quite correct."

"You admit that you called him an idiot and a fathead and a babbling lunatic?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is very serious," I exclaimed. "Don't you know, Private Church, that it is an act of gross insubordination to insult your sergeant to his face? What you say behind his back is nothing to do with the question——"

"Just a minute, Lieutenant!" interrupted Private Church. "I had better explain that the alleged offence occurred while all the Cadets were off duty."

"Oh!" I said. "I was under the impression that it had taken place while you were on parade."

"No, sir."

"That makes a difference——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Church. "There's another thing, sir. Before I referred to Sergeant Handforth in the terms that have been mentioned, he not only used violence towards me—he punched my nose—but he told me that I was a blithering ass, a brainless worm, and several other choice names of a similar character. I merely retaliated in kind!"

The sergeant stared at his study mate.

"You—you sneaking rotter——" he began.

"That's enough, sergeant!" I broke in. "The case is dismissed."

"Dismissed!" roared Handforth.

"Yes."

"But——"

"Seeing that the offence took place while the Cadets were off duty, it thereby becomes no offence whatever," I said. "Furthermore, the charge completely falls to the ground by the fact that you used violence towards the accused. If you can't bring better charges than this, you'd be well advised to bring none at all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and Tommy Watson roared.

"You—you cackling fatheads!" bellowed Handforth, whirling round.

Biff! Crash!

"Yow—yarooooh!" hooted Watson.

"Gug—gug—grooooh!" groaned Church.

"And if you yell like that again you'll get some more!" said Handforth. "If you think you can cackle at me, you've made a mistake!"

Church and Watson had received two choice punches, and they knew it. I rose to my feet, and shouted at the top of my voice in order to restore order. I gazed at Sergeant Handforth angrily.

"Sergeant!" I rapped out. "How dare you? You'll please understand that this is the Orderly Room—not the Disorderly Room! And I have already informed you that you have no right whatever to inflict punishment. One more exhibition of this kind and your stripes will be removed."

"The rotters were laughing at me!" snorted Handforth.

"That is no excuse for violence," I replied. "Why, Great Scott! This Cadet Corps will be a ragtime affair if we go on like this! We've got to conduct it properly, or not at all. I don't think you'd better bring your other prisoner in. He's probably as guiltless as these two——"

"Wait until you hear the charge before you start jabbering," said the sergeant disrespectfully. "A jolly fine commanding officer, ain't you? Corporal Pitt, attention! You long-eared ass! Don't forget that I'm talking to you!"

"Keep your hair on, sergeant!" grinned Pitt.

"Bring Private Little here at once!" said the sergeant.

Pitt looked at me, and I nodded. He saluted, and took his departure, and presently returned with Fatty Little. There were several crumbs on Fatty's tunic, and he was still munching as he entered the Orderly Room. He made a fat salute, and grinned.

"What's wrong here?" he asked cheerily.

"That is not the way to speak to me!" I said severely. "Sergeant, what is your charge against the accused?"

Handforth lost no time in stating the charge. He explained that Private Little had had the unparalleled audacity to appear on parade with his pockets stuffed with doughnuts and cakes. Furthermore, Private Little had actually been feeding his face at the time.

"Is this true, Private Little?" I demanded.

"Do you think I'm telling lies?" snorted the sergeant.

"True?" said Fatty. "Well—er—I suppose it is, in a way of speaking. Hang it all, I was only just having a snack, sir. No harm in that that I can see. The sergeant had the nerve to take my grub away——"

"The sergeant was quite correct in doing thus!" I broke in. "I must reprimand you very severely, Private Little. To appear on parade with your pockets stuffed with food is an offence which cannot be overlooked. Let me warn you that if such a thing occurs again you will be punished."

"What about punishing him now?" asked Sergeant Handforth.

"This is the first offence, and I think a reprimand will meet the demands of the case. No, sergeant, you need say no more. And in

future I should advise you to remember that your position has a certain dignity. It does not enhance that dignity to go about punching noses. Whether you retain your stripes is a matter entirely concerning yourself. But unless you behave differently in future you will be sent down to the ranks, and Corporal Pitt will be promoted to your position."

Handforth almost staggered.

"Well I'm blessed!" he said. "I came here to bring charges against the prisoners, and all I get is a roasting on my own account! That's a fine thing! As for Pitt, he could not——"

"That will do!" I interrupted. "Dism'ss!"

Clang! Clang!

"But I'd like to say——" began the sergeant.

"No time to say it!" I interrupted briskly. "There goes the first bell for lessons, and we shall have all our work cut out to change in time. We're ourselves once more—not Cadets. Handy, you're free to punch as many noses as you like now—but I'd advise you to wait until you get that uniform off.

Upon the whole, the Cadets were quite a success. Things had not gone very smoothly, perhaps, but after a little practice all this would be changed. For the first morning we hadn't done so bad.

We little realised how largely the Cadets were to figure in the events of the near future.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PLOTTERS.

"GOLD!" said Captain Joshua Niggs impressively. "That's what we're arter, Ben. Don't make no mistake about it—there's a blamed hoard of gold on that there island, or Niggs an't my name!"

Mr. Ben Croke grunted.

"I ain't so sure," he said. "Strike me timbers! It don't do to be certain o' things like that, Cap'n. I'm an old 'and, an' I bin took in afore. Hidden treasure ain't the kind o' thing that comes our way."

"It ain't come our way yet, but there's no tellin' but what it might!" said the captain. "O' course, if I wasn't hampered with you, Ben, I'd be all right. But it's durned difficult tryin' to do anythin' when I've got a poor old feller with me what's nigh on the point o' death. Why you don't go into a 'ome, beats me. Why, you ain't got another six weeks to live! Your days are over, Ben!"

"Queer, but I was thinkin' just the same about you, cap'n!" said Mr. Croke. "Mind you, you've got size, which I ain't. Mebbe I look used up, but you can't allus go by looks. What's the good of a feller with a big body, an' a heart what's nearly stoppin' every minnit?"

"If you're speakin' about me——"

"Bust my buttons! Who else should I be a-speakin' of?" asked Ben Croke. "That's where your trouble is, cap'n. Your heart's that weak it don't beat sometimes! Any day I'm expectin' you to peg out sudden like. It's the big men what allus goes off like that!"

"We don't want no more talkin' about ourselves!" exclaimed Captain Niggs gruffly. "I'm a fool to keep you as my mate—but there, I allus was a soft idjit. I can't a-bear to think of you peggin' out all by yourself. About this 'ere treasure, old mate. Jokin, aside, I reckon that it seems to be a likely chance. Just think of all the facts."

"Ain't I been thinkin' of 'em since yesterday?" asked Ben.

"I didn't know as you was capable of thinkin' proper," said Captain Niggs. "Your brain is past that sort o' thing, Ben. Still, you don't do so bad, for an old 'un."

The two men were walking slowly along Bellton Lane. They were going in the direction of St. Frank's. They had left the flooded region behind them, but the lane was in a terrible condition, and walking was extremely difficult, owing to the ruts and gulleys and loose stones.

It was evening, and would soon be getting quite dark. The barge master and his mate had obtained rooms at the White Harp Inn—a decidedly questionable little public-house on the outskirts of Bellton.

Neither of them knew exactly why they were walking to St. Frank's. But they were drawn in that direction—probably by the fact that the brass-bound box was in the school. They badly wanted the contents of that box. For they were certain that the jig-saw puzzle and the cipher formed the clue to old John Willard's missing fortune.

"Just think of the facts!" repeated Captain Niggs. "I've bin talkin' to old Porlock, of the White 'Arp. A sensible feller, 'e is, Ben, and 'e knows all the local news for years back. He was here when old Willard died. An' he says that there's allus been a mystery about Willard's money. But nobody don't seem to suspect that the old chap was a miser, and buried his gold."

"How do we know he did?" asked Mr. Croke.

"'Ow do we know?" repeated Niggs. "Ain't it obvious? But there, your brain ain't capable of graspin' the thing. Them boys found that brass-bound box. It come from a secret passage in the middle of the earth—provin' as clear as anything that it was hid there. Of course, we ain't certain about this, but I reckon it's a good chance to make a pile o' money. It may come to nothin'—but, on the other 'and, it's just as likely to come to a whole lot. If we can only get hold o' that box, we shall be all right."

"If I was workin' alone, I might do it!" said Mr. Croke. "But it's awkward workin' with a man who might fall down dead any minit. We've got to get that box out o' the school——"

"Hold on, mate!" said the captain. "One o' them kids is comin' along now. We'll step back agin this stile now, an' be smokin'. We don't want the young shaver to get suspicious."

The junior who was approaching was coming along in an aimless kind of way. He was hunched up, and as he walked he rubbed his hands together like an old miser. The junior was, of course, Enoch Snipe, of the Remove.

He came opposite the stile, and paused.

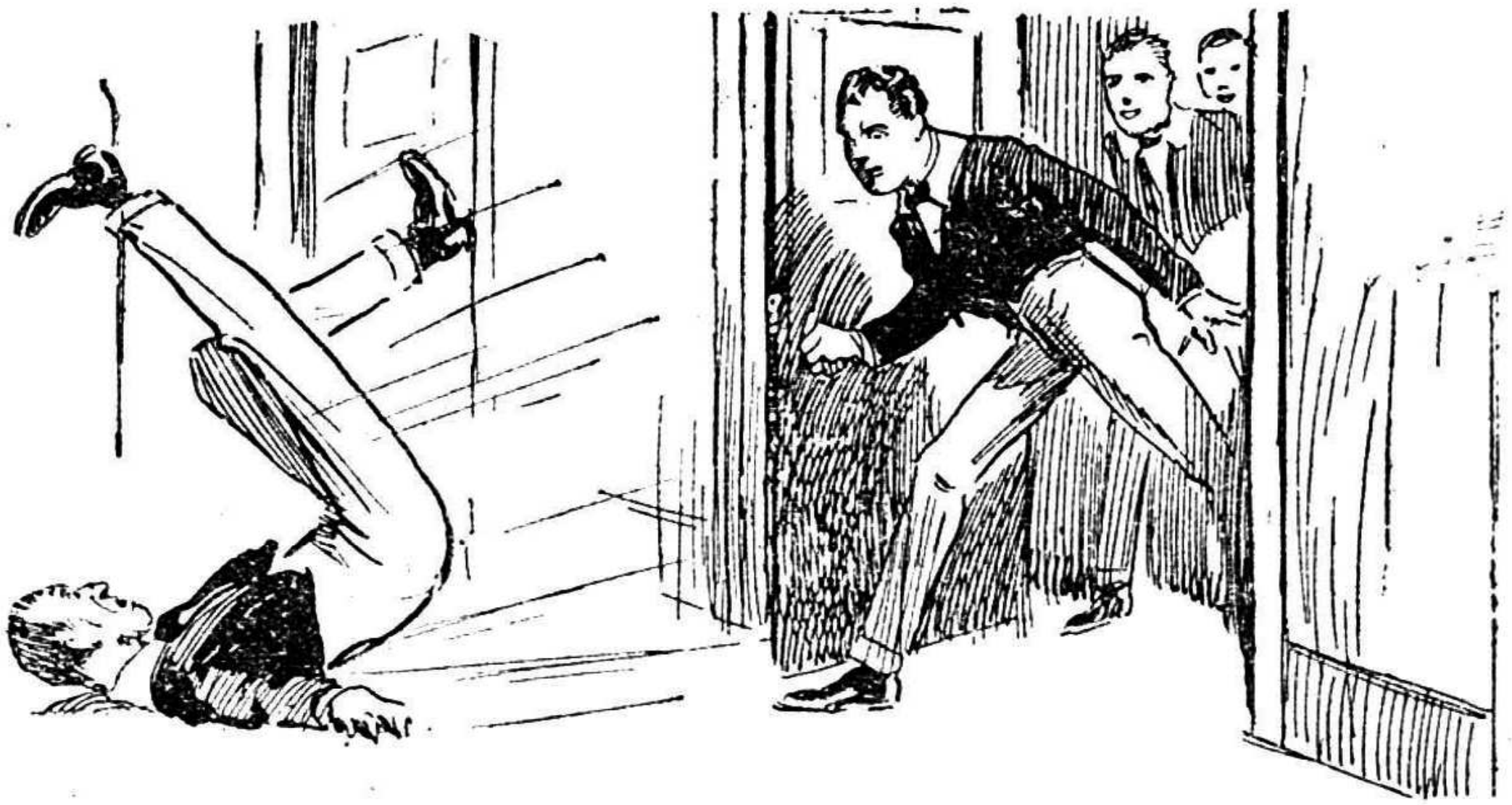
"Good-evening!" he said purringly.

"Ev'nin', young gent!" said Captain Niggs. "The weather seems to be clearin' up a bit don't it? But what with these 'ere floods, I reckon it's goin' to be a difficult time for some folks."

"We have our own troubles," said the Worm. "Surely we cannot worry about other people's? I dislike St. Frank's intension I'd like to ask. Did you 'appen to see a queer-lookin' box that was brought in by some o' the boys yesterday?"

"Do you mean a box with metal bands round it?" asked Enoch Snipe.

"Yes, that's the one, youngster!" said Captain Niggs. "Now that there box, strictly speakin', belongs to me. Y'see, it floated off my barge during the storm. It don't contain anything valuable—nothing except some funny-shaped bits of wood and some foolscap paper. They're no good to anybody else, but I need 'em. Now, if you could get hold o' that box in some way or another, an' take out them bits o' wood and pieces of paper——"



I took hold of Enoch, hustled him to the door; then we hurled him out with all our force. He went flying into the passage, all arms and legs.

tensely. I think all the boys there are positively hateful!"

"You don't seem to get on well with 'em, eh?"

"No. I do not," said Snipe. "I am glad to have a little chat with a stranger. I hope you do not mind my addressing you. I have no wish to intrude. It is not my place to push myself upon you——"

"That's all right, young shaver!" said Captain Niggs, taking the measure of his young companion. "I'm mighty sorry that the young gents don't get on well with you. Mebbe you're fairly new here?"

"Yes, I have only been at St. Frank's for a few days," replied Snipe. "I wish my father had not sent me here. I am trying to think of some way in which I can get my own back for the way I have been treated."

Captain Niggs nudged Ben, and removed his pipe.

"Mebbe you could 'elp me a bit, young 'un," he said. "What I'm going to tell you now is strictly privit. First of all, there's a question I'd like to ask. Did you 'appen to see a queer-lookin' box that was brought in by some o' the boys yesterday?"

"But if the box belongs to you, why do you not ask for it?" inquired Snipe.

"Y'see, I can't very well do that," said the captain. "The young gents might not believe me, an' I got nothin' to prove it. An' I wouldn't like to cause any bother. I dessay you could lay your 'ands on them things easy. Me an' my mate will wait out here. It'll be worth a quid if you do this."

The Worm rubbed his hands together.

"Very well!" he said softly. "I will see what can be done. Yes, I think it is quite possible that I shall be able to help you. But you are quite sure that the box is yours?"

"Oh, certain!"

"That is just as well," exclaimed Snipe. "I should be horrified at the thought of taking something which is not your property. You may have to wait here for quite a long time——"

"I'll tell you what," interrupted Ben Croke. "We'll stay 'ere for an hour. If you can't do nothin' in that time, just come along an' tell us so, an' we'll wait till to-morrow. But mebbe you can get 'old o' them things straight off."

The Worm smiled his peculiar smile.

"Yes, perhaps so," he purred. "We will see. I will do the best I can."

Without another word he turned, and walked up the lane. His shifty eyes were glinting in a peculiar way. Not for one moment had he been deceived by what the men had been telling him.

He knew well enough that the brass-bound box was not their property. But the very fact that they had offered him a pound for its contents indicated that "those bits of wood and the piece of paper" were worth something. Enoch Snipe was determined to look into matters.

Although he tried to keep it hidden, he was intensely curious by nature. And ever since he had first seen that box he had been worrying about it—wondering what it could contain. But now he had received a clue. The box was of importance!

He soon reached the school, and made his way into the Ancient House, and along the Remove passage.

He already knew that Study C was occupied, for he had noticed the lighted window as he crossed the Triangle. The dusk was thick, and tea was being prepared in most of the junior studies.

However, he was patient, and he decided to wait until an opportunity occurred. As it happened, his chance came at once. While he was in the passage the door of Study C opened, and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West emerged. They switched the light out after them.

"According to what I hear, we're in for a jolly decent spread in Somerton's study," said Watson. "Nipper's there already. We're to be the guests of honour, my son. I can do with some decent grub, too. I'm famished!"

"Dear old fellow, I am quite hungry, too!" said Sir Montie.

They passed out of the passage, and Enoch Snipe's eyes glittered. Never for an instant had he suspected that things would be so easy. Study C was empty! And it would probably be empty for fully an hour.

The Duke of Somerton, in fact, had invited my chums and me to a big spread in his own quarters. Somerton was generally lavish in his spreads, and we had accepted the invitation with alacrity.

Snipe wasted no time.

He moved silently and stealthily along the passage, opened the door of Study C, and slipped inside. Then he switched the light on. One swift glance round told him that the brass-bound box was not in sight. There was only one place where it could be—the cupboard.

Snipe passed across to it, and breathed quickly when he found that the door was unlocked. He opened it, and there, on the shelf, lay the box of mystery. His red-rimmed eyes gazed upon it greedily.

But before he could even reach a hand out

(*Continued on next page*)

towards it, the study door burst open, and Tommy Watson strode in. I was close behind him, with Sir Montie.

"Look for your giddy self!" exclaimed Watson indignantly. "The book isn't in this study, and never has been——"

Watson broke off suddenly as he caught sight of the Worm.

"Hallo!" he said. "What the dickens are you doing in here?"

Enoch Snipe stood cringing before us. His face was rather more pasty than usual, and he attempted to smile. He had succeeded in shutting the cupboard door—but not before I had observed the action.

"I—I—forgive me!" said Snipe humbly. "You see, I came here to borrow a little, crockery, but—but as you were not at home I presumed to see if I could find a cup or two. I—I apologise! I did wrong, I know, and I hope you will forgive me. I don't know what I could have been thinking of."

Tommy Watson stared.

"All right, you ass, don't grovel at my feet!" he said. "You're welcome to a few crocks, if you want them—as it happens we're not having tea here to-day. Help yourself to what you want."

"Oh, thank you, you are too kind to me," said the Worm. "I do not deserve to be treated so well."

"Oh, cut out that stuff, for goodness' sake," said Watson gruffly. "You make me sick with your crawling, cringing ways! Why the dickens can't you be like the other chaps?"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "I don't think Snipe came here to borrow crockery."

"Dear old boy, are you accusin' him of lyin'?" asked Montie.

"I am," I said. "Snipe has tea in Hall—always. What does he want crockery for? And aren't there plenty of studies fully occupied where he can go to? He's pretty good at lying, I believe, but I've bowled him out."

"Please, I—I was thinking of——"

"Don't think of any more lies, anyhow," I broke in grimly. "You came here, prying after that old box. You can deny it if you like, but I sha'n't believe you. Perhaps you'd like me to open the box for you?"

I pulled at the cupboard door, brought the box out, and opened it. It was, of course, quite empty. Snipe cringed away, hunching up his shoulders, and rubbing his hands together.

"Really, I—I did not know the box was there," he said timidly. "I am sorry that I intruded, and I hope that——"

"Apologies are no good," I cut in. "We're going to teach you a lesson, you worm! You came here prying, and you're going to get your reward."

I seized hold of Snipe, and he shuddered.

"Please—please don't touch me!" he whined pitifully.

"The chap makes me sick!" I snapped. "Open the door."

Sir Montie obliged, and Tommy Watson and I took hold of Enoch, hustled him to the door; then we hurled him out with all our force. He went flying into the passage, all arms and legs.

He landed with a crash, groaning and screaming. As it happened, a collision was only just averted, for John Martin was passing at the time. He paused, and looked on with interest.

"There seems to be some trouble," he said, smiling.

"There is—for that caterpillar," I replied. "You can slink off, Snipe."

Snipe slunk off. It was only by chance that we had come back to Study C. I had asked my chums to bring a book, but they had not been able to find it, so I came along to show them where it was."

John Martin was about to move on when he suddenly paused, and a puzzled expression came into his eyes. I saw that he was looking at the brass-bound box, which stood in full view upon the study table.

"What—what is that box?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, that," I said. "Nothing much. We found it floating in the water, and picked it up, that's all."

"May I look at it?" asked John.

"Certainly."

He came inside, and looked at the box closely. We didn't mind his doing this, for the contents were absent. That is to say, the jigsaw puzzle and the pieces of foolscap had been removed to a safer place. We watched John Martin curiously, for he was still looking very puzzled.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Watson bluntly.

"It seems funny, but I've got a hazy idea that I can remember this box," said John. "It's a peculiar box, and you don't often see one like it. I seem to recollect seeing it when I was quite a kid. You know how we sometimes have little glimpses of what we did when he were toddling about. Well, I can remember playing with a box exactly like this years and years ago."

"It's quite likely," I said. "I don't suppose this is the only box of its kind in the world."

"No, of course not," said John, smiling. "Thanks. All the same, I can't quite make it out."

He passed out of the study, and that puzzled frown was still upon his face. He couldn't understand why this curious old box had such a strange effect upon him.

And I was puzzled, too.

CHAPTER IX.

A GREAT IDEA!

DR. STAFFORD cleared his throat.

"I have just a few words to say, boys, before you dismiss," he exclaimed, in his deep voice. "The situation is somewhat difficult at St. Frank's just now owing, as you know, to the recent catastrophe in the Ancient House."

It was morning, and prayers were just over in Big Hall. It was not usual for the Headmaster to address the school at such times, and we wondered what was coming.

"For two nights many boys have slept in considerable discomfort, owing to the lack of adequate accommodation," went on the Head. "That, of course, cannot continue. It will be several weeks before the Fifth Form dormitory and the Remove dormitory in the Ancient House are again ready for habitation. Mr. Stockdale and Mr. Lee have performed wonders in the way of making you all as comfortable as possible. Temporary quarters have been found for about thirty boys. But this leaves an equal number who are not comfortably accommodated."

The Head paused, and we waited eagerly for his next words. The juniors were most concerned, for they felt that the announcement which was coming affected them more than anybody else.

"Under all the circumstances, I have been reluctantly compelled to decide upon a course which is not entirely to my liking," went on Dr. Stafford. "However, in the absence of a better scheme, I must adopt this one. Thirty boys belonging to the Remove will leave St. Frank's this afternoon."

"Leave St. Frank's, sir!"

"Oh!"

"Do you mean that we shall be sent home, sir?"

"Oh, ripping!"

"Please keep order, boys," went on the Head. "No, I do not mean that thirty of you will be sent home. I could not possibly allow you to neglect your education for a month or five weeks. I have made arrangements with the Headmaster of Yexford College, where there is room to spare. Thirty juniors will depart for Yexford this afternoon."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Yexford!"

"How absolutely rotten!"

"I realise, of course, that you will not like this arrangement," continued Dr. Stafford. "But circumstances compel me to send you away. I am doing everything I can to make your stay at Yexford as congenial as possible. A list of the boys to go will be posted up on the notice-board before morning lessons are over. That is all, boys, you may dismiss."

The school dismissed—the seniors grinning and the Remove fellows looking utterly dismayed.

"Well, this is the limit!" exclaimed De Valerie indignantly. "Yexford! They've got a rotten crowd there, and I've heard that the place is nothing better than a hole. I hope to goodness I'm not picked to go."

"We've got to take our chance," I said. "The samples of Yexford fellows we've seen have not been particularly brilliant, but we mustn't be too hasty. Yexford may be all right, and it'll be a change, anyway."

"I'm not going!" snorted Handforth.

"Not likely," agreed Church. "Why, one of the Yexford fellows told me that the grub's rotten, and juniors haven't got any studies at all. The place is like a barracks, and all the rooms are whitewashed, and there's no comfort of any kind. It's worse than a council school. No wonder it's half empty."

Remarks of this kind were general.

Dr. Stafford was criticised, but not harshly. For the fellows had sense enough to realise that in a difficult position the Head had to do something. And Yexford College seemed to be the only place where there was room to accommodate the thirty juniors.

Owing to the damage in the Ancient House, it was impossible for everybody to be provided with sleeping quarters, and so the Head had formulated this plan, knowing full well that it would be unpopular.

I went to Study C with my chums, and both Tommy and Montie were looking very thoughtful.

"Well, dear old fellows, there's no sense in being pessimistic," exclaimed Sir Montie. "Begad! Some people have to suffer frightful things, you know. Bein' at Yexford for a month won't do us any harm. An' there's always the possibility that we sha'n't be among the thirty who are chosen to go."

I nodded.

I think the guv'nor will have something to say about that," I said. "We can consider ourselves fairly safe, my sons. But that doesn't make any difference to the general position. I'm thinking about the other chaps. It'll be rotten hard luck for them to——"

I broke off, and my face flushed as an idea came into my mind. At first it seemed ridiculous—impossible. But then, as I continued to think about it, the plan took a fair hold on me.

"Thirty!" I said dreamily.

"Eh?"

"Thirty," I repeated.

"That's what the Head said, anyway," exclaimed Watson. "There'll be the bulk of them chosen from the Ancient House, I'll bet. But what's the matter with you, you ass? Don't look at me like that!

"Thirty fellows have got to go," I said slowly.

"Don't keep repeating it, you giddy parrot."

"There are thirty cadets," I added significantly.

"What?"

"Begad!"

My chums stared at me blankly.

"Thirty cadets," I repeated. "The exact number, my sons. By Jove! What a wheeze, what a stunner——"

"Are—are you suggesting that the Cadet Corps should go to Yexford?" yelled Watson indignantly. "You potty ass! Oh, yes, it's a stunner all right. If that's what you call a joke, you'd better bury it."

I smiled sweetly.

"No, I'm not suggesting that we should go to Yexford," I said. "But what's wrong with the idea of us camping out?"

"Camping out?"

"Yes, near the school, so that we can attend lessons as usual."

"But—but that's impesssible!" panted Tommy. "You—you see, we can't camp out in February. We couldn't go under canvas."

"I'm not suggesting that we can, although even that would be possible," said I. "Look here, you chaps, I think this wheeze will work if we get permission. And there's no reason why the Head shouldn't let us carry on. It's only the sleeping quarters that are scarce. There's plenty of room for us to go about our ordinary business."

"But what are you getting at, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"Simply this," I replied tensely. "Why shouldn't the Cadet Corps have a jolly good start, so to speak? My idea is for us to go into camp somewhere near by. By Jove! Willard's Island!"

Tommy Watson gasped.

"Wil-Willard's Island!" he stuttered.

"The very place!" I went on. "Why, that old building is absolutely IT. Parts of it aren't roofed in, I know, but with canvas and waterproof sheets we could work marvels in a few hours. A few oil-stoves——"

"Oil-stoves ain't necessary, old boy," interrupted Sir Montie. "There are proper fireplaces an' chimneys already fixed."

"Yes, that's right," I said. "We shall only need some fuel and some cooking utensils and sleeping blankets, and things like that. We can have a regular camp, with sentries and the whole caboodle. We can camp out on the island, sleep there, and practically live there. But we shall come to the school for lessons, just the same as usual. We'll make Fatty Little chief cook, and it'll be jolly fine experience for the cadets. And I've just thought of something else."

"I'm past thinkin'," said Sir Montie faintly.

"There's the treasure," I said, looking keenly at my chums. "That's the most important thing of all. We shall be right on the spot, and we can look for that treasure. Of course, only six of us know about it, but we can easily do our searching on the quiet. Let's go and tell the other chaps."

We did so, and there wasn't a single cadet who opposed the idea. They were, in fact, wild with enthusiasm about it. It solved the whole problem. All we should need would be a little capital to buy the necessary camp equipment. And surely the school would provide that?

I rushed off to Nelson Lee, and put the scheme before him. At first he poo-poohed the idea, then he began to think seriously about it, and, finally, he came to the conclusion that it was the best solution to the problem. And he went off to Dr. Stafford to hear what the Head had to say.

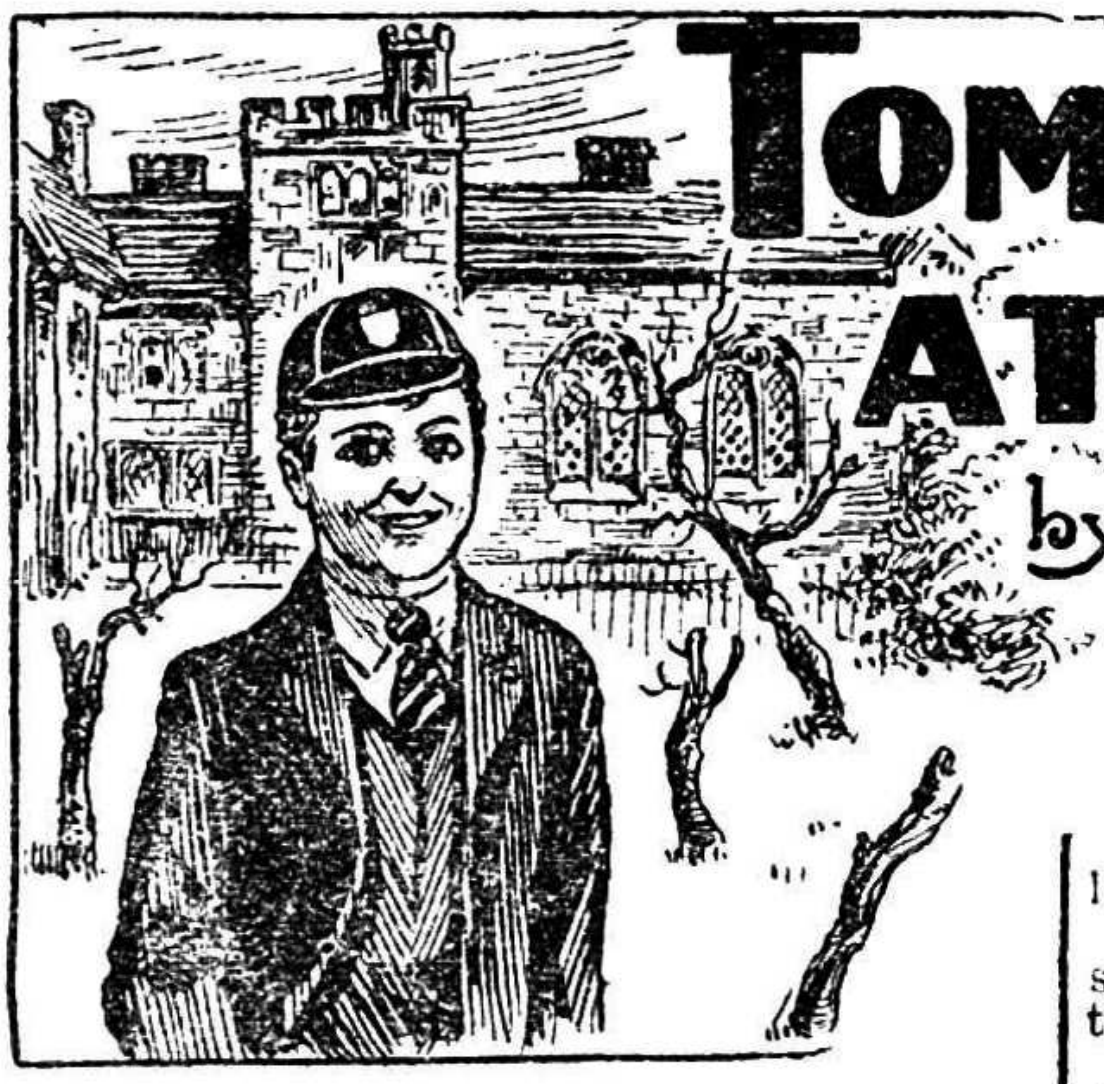
It was an anxious time for us, waiting.

But at last Nelson Lee returned. And he informed us with smiling face that Dr. Stafford thoroughly approved of the scheme, and, moreover, had agreed to supply everything necessary for the camp. The Head, it seemed, favoured the Cadet Corps, and he could see that this was a good opportunity to see the Cadets squarely on their feet.

The excitement in the Remove was tremendous., for on the morrow the St. Frank's Cadets would go into camp.

And, as it turned out, this move was to be fraught with many thrills and excitements. And we had by no means seen the last of those peculiar characters, Captain Joshua Niggs and Mr. Ben Croke.

THE END.



TOM TARTAR AT SCHOOL

by HARCOURT BURRAGE

(The World's Most Famous School Story).

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Tom Tartar arrives at Mr. Wrasper's school where discipline is maintained by moral force only. Tom makes several friends and a few enemies. He is initiated into the "Eagles," a party opposed to the "Cuckoos," or the rotters of the school. Tom learns that Sir Claude Freshley, an influential resident of the neighbourhood, has been nearly murdered by some mysterious ruffian. He discovers the villain to be Posh Powner, the poacher. In attempting to waylay the poacher, Tom is fired at by Rosy Ralph, Powner's son.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER XXIII.

Saved by Lottie.

IT seemed to Tom as if all things near him had been blown into a thousand pieces.

He felt himself thrown outside, and dimly saw Posh Powner leap up, strike at Noddy Berrill, and flee away.

This was the matter of a moment or two, and then he felt a small hand clasp his, and a scared, pretty face bent over him.

It was that of Lottie Fenn, and it flashed upon him that it must be a vision, the creation of a brain disordered.

He felt no pain, but he felt sure he was wounded, perhaps mortally, for he had seen the barrel of the gun thrust close to him.

"Oh, Tom, speak to me! You are not dead!" cried Lottie.

Then light and full reason came back to him, and he looked into her eyes and smiled.

"No, Lottie, not dead yet, but I don't know how it is that I am not."

"I can tell you," cried Noddy Berrill. "The young lady came up, and pushed the gun aside just as that young demon pulled the trigger."

So it was Lottie Fenn who had saved his life! Tom looked at her with grateful eyes.

"I don't know how you came here," he said, "but—but it was jolly plucky of you to——"

"Oh, don't say anything about it," Lottie interposed, with a shiver. "I shall never forget it! I had been into the village to take a custard to one of Miss Smatterly's pet patients and I saw you and your friend here enter the wood. I thought you were up to mischief, so I followed just to see what it was, intending to run back and tell the other girls, to make them laugh, you know. But, oh, it was so different."

She put her hands before her eyes and shivered again.

Tom was put on his feet now.

"It's all right, Lottie," he said gently. "There's no harm done. Forget all about it."

"I can't forget it," she said, "I was mad at the moment, and hardly knew what I did, I saved you, Tom, and I am so glad."

Her girlish, artless manner was very pretty, and Noddy Berrill wished that some girl like her would come along and save his life some day, or let him save hers, anything so that there might be a similar understanding to that which now existed between Tom and Lottie.

Standing near was another spectator of the scene, Rosy Ralph.

The empty gun lay upon the ground, and the wild-eyed boy stood like a statue near it with a fixed gaze on Tom.

Remorse unutterable, unfathomable, was written on his face, and as Tom turned to speak to him, he spread out his arms and moaned.

"I fired that there gun," he said hoarsely, "and but for the young leddy I'd have killed you. You may kill I now. Do it, master Tom! You've been so kind to I, and it be better for me to be dead."

"Ralph," said Tom, "you need fear nothing from me. What you did you did for that worthless father of yours, and I forgive you."

"Then I'm not to be took to the lock-up?" said the boy.

"No, and what has happened here must be kept a secret," returned Tom. "It would never do for you to be talked about," he went on, addressing Lottie Fenn. Then, turning to Noddy Berrill: "Noddy, I can trust you to keep a still tongue?"

"Rather," replied Noddy, "I won't breathe a word about it."

"We had better part, now," said Tom. "Ralph, you may go."

The half-demented boy did not stir, he stood still shivering and muttering:

"How could I ha' done it—how could I ha' done it? Oh, feyther, feyther, may I never see you again!"

"I'll take him home," said Noddy Berrill. "There isn't much fear of finding Posh Powner there. Good-bye, Tom."

They shook hands, and Noddy, raising his cap to Lottie, led Rosy Ralph away.

Together, Tom and Lottie made their way out of the coppice. Then, after he had again expressed his gratitude to the girl, Tom parted from her, and ran as hard as he could back to the school.

He arrived only just in time, for the breakfast bell was ringing as he entered the dining-hall and dropped into his usual seat at table.

No one would have judged from his demeanour that he had just had the narrowest escape in the world from being shot dead. He ate a hearty breakfast, and when the mead was finished, drew Sam Smith into a quiet corner for a chat.

"Where have you been this morning?" Sam asked curiously.

"Into the fir coppice," replied Tom. "It appears that, since Miss Smatterly gave him the sack, Diggles has been living in that old hut like a wild man of the woods. I went with Noddy Berrill to have a look at him."

"And did you see him?"

"No; but I saw somebody else."

"Who?"

"I'll tell you, Sam; but you must give me your word that you won't let it out to anyone else."

Sam readily agreed to keep secret anything which his chum told him; whereupon Tom recounted what had happened, and how, thanks to Lottie Fenn, a tragedy had been narrowly averted.

"By Jove!" commented the astonished Sam, "that was a close shave, and no mistake!"

"It was so," agreed Tom. "However, miss is as good as a mile! And now, Sam, what about that other affair? We've got to do something to stop it, you know."

"You mean the secret marriage of Foster Moore and the younger Miss Smatterly?"

Tom Tartar nodded.

"If we only knew," he said, "how soon Moore intends it to come off, we might plan out some way of——"

"He doesn't intend to wait very long!" interrupted Sam excitedly. "That explains the parcel!"

"Parcel?" echoed the puzzled Tom. "What parcel?"

"Why, the one which came for Foster Moore by parcel-post this morning! I was near the door when old Grimes delivered it with the letters, and I happened to notice the label. It was the printed label of Copplestone's, the big London ready-made tailors', you know. That can mean only one thing. Moore's laying in some new togs—new togs for the wedding!"

"It certainly looks like it," said Tom. "Now the question is, what can we do? It wouldn't be any good to write to the sisters. I wonder who's the go-between?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why letters must pass, and as they would never be mad enough to trust to the post, somebody must carry them."

"I've seen Moore and Wooden Jerry talking together several times lately," said Sam thoughtfully.

"Then most likely Wooden Jerry's the go-between," Tom replied. "We must watch 'em. You keep an eye on Jerry, and I'll attend to Moore."

And the bell ringing at that moment, they went in to morning school.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The "Madness" of Diggles.

IT was at the close of morning school that Mr. Wrasper made an unexpected announcement.

On the morrow, owing to its being Mr. Foster Moore's birthday, a whole holiday was to be granted.

He was going away that night to spend the next day with some persons vaguely spoken of as "distant friends."

Some of the boys cheered the announcement but the greater part were simply dumbfounded.

Not so, however, was Tom Tartar and his more intimate friends.

They knew the meaning of it, and when they were free from their morning duties they hied away to a quiet spot, where they could talk things over.

There were Tom, Sam Smith, Lawrence Turrell, Cautious Johnny, and Willie Gray, all now in the secret of the tutor's intentions towards the younger and simpler Miss Smatterly.

"Birthday!" said Sam Smith, scornfully. "It's the first time we ever heard of such a thing here."

"I don't believe the brute has a birthday!" exclaimed Turrell.

"Birthday or not," said Tom, "I fancy we all know what is intended. Moore will go away to-night, and he won't go far, because that foolish woman is to join him in the morning. The first thing will be to find out where he goes to, and I think I had better undertake that. Of course, I don't like playing the spy, but it's got to be done."

It was impossible to arrange more just then, and after a few general instructions from Tom, the conference ended.

There was three-quarters of an hour before the dinner-bell would ring, and Sam Smith proposed to Turrell that they should go off quietly, and have a look at Diggles in the wood.

Turrell assented, and having watched their opportunity, he and Sam got away unobserved.

A little doubling about brought them safe to the Fir Coppice, and they plunged into it with light hearts, as lively as two terriers bent on drawing a badger.

They knew the wood thoroughly, and the hut where Diggles was reported to have taken up his abode.

They expected to find him there, and were not disappointed.

When they came in sight of the hut, he was standing by the open door, "got up," as Sam said in an undertone, "for the occasion."

His upper clothes were all in disorder, and he had straws stuck in his hair, after the approved manner of stage maniacs. His eyes were very wide open, and he was gesticulating violently.

"Hallo, Diggles! How are you?" cried Sam.

"Keep off, don't come near me," cried Diggles. "I'm the king of the Cannibal Islands, I am. I eats boys."

"Do you, though?" laughed Sam. "Well, you'd better not tackle me. I'm tough, and there's nothing on my bones to speak of."

"Keep off, I say!" yelled Diggles, as the boys advanced, "do you want to be killed? Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Ha, ha!"

His manner was intended to be very terrifying, but the boys were not dismayed.

Despite the frenzied actions of Diggles, they coolly advanced, until they were within a few feet of him. Then he suddenly backed into the hut, and closed the door.

It was a rough structure, and the only thing in it that could be called a window was a small square opening with a shutter that opened outward on hinges, and could be secured by a bolt inside.

Sam made a rush for it, to get a peep into the hut, but Diggles was too quick for him.

His hand flashed out of the opening, the shutter was drawn to and bolted in a twinkling.

"Gone to earth," said Lawrence Turrell, laughing.

"Come away," said Sam, who seemed to be strongly excited. "I think I have discovered something. Did you see what was inside?"

"No, I saw nothing."

"Well, I did! There are two beds made up in the hut! It's just occurred to me that one of those beds may be for Foster Moore. Come along, Larry. The sooner Tom hears of this the better."

And the excited Sam dashed off through the coppice, followed by the no less excited Turrell.

CHAPTER XXV.

Tom Gets busy.

EVENING had come, and shortly after tea Foster Moore was seen to leave the school, carrying a small leather bag with him. He was wearing a brand-new frock coat, light-grey trousers and a tall hat.

But the gay attire didn't improve him at all. "Looks more of a ruffian than ever," Tom said.

"Yes, like a prizefighter disguised as a gentleman," added Sam Smith.

The boys were all out in the playing-fields; for as there was to be no school on the morrow, no prep. had to be done.

"I think I'll run over to Miss Smatterly's, on the chance of seeing Lottie," said Tom. "Perhaps she will be able to tell me something about Miss Hatty."

After Tom had gone, groups of "Eagles" and "Cuckoos" began to fraternise for once in a way, and various suggestions were made for killing time. It was McLara who made a proposal which found general acceptance.

"Let's make Jerry run the gauntlet," suggested the cautious one. "He's always sneaking, and making mischief. We've heaps of old scores against him waiting to be paid off."

"He is at work, weeding the garden," said Chucks, "or he was a few minutes ago."

Off went the boys in a body to the kitchen garden, and there, sure enough, was Wooden Jerry.

But, instead of weeding, he was seated on his barrow, smoking a short pipe.

On seeing the boys troop in he rose up and bawled out:

"Out o' this, you young rips. You've no right in this garding. Get away! I won't have you here!"

They dashed up, and surrounding him like a troop of soldiers, enclosed him in.

"Here, what's this?" he asked, turning pale.

"You've got to run the gauntlet," said Sam curtly, "just like any other sneak, you know."

Wooden Jerry knew what running the gauntlet meant. He had run it on several occasions, though not of late.

The boys formed into two lines, with knotted handkerchiefs in their hands, and the offender had to make his way down the human lane, and take all that was given to him.

Any attempt to break the line was sure to lead to a general rush being made upon him.

"What d'ye mean by sneaking?" Jerry

asked, with trembling lips, "I'm about the best friend you've got."

"You've got to run!" was the answer in a chorus.

"I won't!" declared Jerry, as he lay down on the gravel path. "Now, you won't hit a man when he's down."

"This path wants rolling," said Sam. "Boys, get the roller. Look out!"

Wooden Jerry had suddenly sprung up and made a bolt for safety. But Sam's warning was in time, and they were down upon him swift as a flock of young hawks.

Well, Wooden Jerry deserved all he got, and a little over perhaps. He wriggled and howled a good deal, and when they let him go he felt very warm and "tingly" about the back and shoulders.

"I'll be even with you for this," he threatened, when he got away to a safe distance; "so look out, some of you!"

Then he disappeared into the house, and was seen no more that night.

Tom came back at eight o'clock, and had a little chat with his friends. He had somehow managed an interview with Lottie Fenn, and had learned from her that the younger Miss Smatterly was in very low spirits, and had been seen in quiet places weeping alone.

"She doesn't want to go away, you see," said Tom; "but Foster Moore has got her fairly under his thumb, and she's afraid to disobey him. But, all the same, there won't be any wedding to-morrow!"

"What! Have you stopped it?" exclaimed Sam.

"No," answered Tom; "but I jolly well mean to!"

And not another word would he say on the matter just then.

At the usual time the boys went to bed. Sam Smith overslept himself, and was one of the last to go downstairs in the morning. He looked about for Tom, but failed to find him.

"Wonder where he's got to?" mused Sam.

An hour passed, and breakfast-time arrived. Just as the meal was commencing, Tom appeared.

"It's all right," he whispered to Sam Smith. "I've put a spoke in Foster Moore's wheel! The wedding is off!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Missing Bridegroom.

IT was half-past eight that morning when Miss Hatty Smatterly stole out by the back gate of the girls' school, and softly closed it behind her.

She wore a veil which hid the tears that were coursing down her cheeks, and she was trembling from head to foot.

"Oh! to think that it should come to this," she moaned softly to herself. "I dare not break my promise now! Oh, why did I ever meet him? Why did I ever listen to him at all?"

The poor deluded lady was in great trouble. True, her elder sister had not always been kind to her, and had been wont to rule her as if she were a mere child; still, on the whole, they had got on happily enough together.

And now she was deceiving that sister.

In obedience to the commands of the man who had obtained great power and influence over her, she had shammed sickness this morning, and was running away, perhaps never to return!

And yet she did not love Foster Moore. She had listened to him first of all at the dictates of vanity, and finally in obedience to threats. She was absolutely in terror of the man.

Down the lane she went, and presently turned into the high road beyond the village. About half a mile along this, a fly was waiting for her. This conveyance had been hired from a distant town a few days before by Foster Moore. He was to have been here to meet his intended bride, but the driver had seen nothing of him up till now.

"It is very strange!" said Miss Hatty.

"Yes, it's uncommon strange," assented the coachman; "for, accordin' to arrangements, the gent ought to have been here half an hour ago."

Miss Hatty got into the fly and sat there for a quarter of an hour. Still the bridegroom did not come.

Another quarter of an hour passed, and then Miss Hatty began to feel mildly angry and insulted. How dare he treat her in this fashion? Had he, after all, only been trifling with her? Had he played a despicable trick on her?

"The mean, unmanly coward!" she muttered to herself. "I will wait no longer! I will go home, and Heaven grant I may never see that vile wretch again!"

She stepped out of the fly, and as she did so gave a little cry of fear and amazement.

For approaching the spot, with swift, almost manly strides, was her elder sister

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Priscilla grasping her inevitable huge umbrella firmly by the handle.

Miss Hatty waited with downcast head to receive the torrent of reproach which she thought was coming.

But no reproaches were uttered. Instead, the elder Miss Smatterly came up and folded Hatty in her arms!

"I am in time, thank Heaven!" she exclaimed. "Come home, you poor innocent child! Will you never be a woman?"

That was all she said to Hatty, now weeping again.

Turning to the flyman, she looked at him in a way that made him shiver in his seat, and said:

"You won't be wanted to go to church this morning, so you had better drive us home."

"Very well, marm," he said meekly.

They got in, and he, having turned his horse's head towards the village, drove off at a quick pace.

As they neared Peddleton they saw a crowd of people gathered together and swaying to and fro as a mob sways with fighting men in their midst.

The flyman became white, and turned his face towards Miss Smatterly.

"Go on!" she said, "leave all to me."

Suddenly the crowd parted, and Diggles, in tatters and wild-eyed, broke from its midst. He uttered a loud whoop and came bounding towards the fly.

"I've been hammered till I'm sore all over," he shouted, "and I'll have the life of somebody."

He caught sight of the two ladies in the carriage, and yelled like a wild Indian.

Miss Hatty cowered down, but her sister sat quite still until Diggles came within striking distance, and then, rising up, she smote him with her umbrella with the force of a battle-axe.

He went down on his back, and all the madness, real or feigned, was knocked out of him.

"Here what are you doing, missis?" he roared.

"Stop!" cried Miss Smatterly to the flyman. He stopped. "Come here, Diggles, you abominable villain."

Diggles got up and came a little nearer, but he kept out of the reach of that formidable umbrella.

The villagers, about a score of them, came running up and formed round, but they, too, kept out of the way of Miss Smatterly's weapon.

"Now, Diggles," she cried out. "Where is that villain, Foster Moore?"

"Don't know, missis," roared Diggles. "He's been a-knockin' me about as if I were a stuffed image. As if I could get outside and screw the door and window up!"

"What door and window are you speaking of?"

"Them of the hut in the wood, missis. He was there all night. He slept in the place."

"So he was screwed up," said Miss Smatterly, grimly. "Who did it?"

"We don't know, missis, but Mr. Moore thinks it was young Tartar."

"And who let you out?"

"We found an old axe at last, under the bed, and chopped the door down. By that time he was nearly as tattered as I am, for he went to work like a madman. So he warn't fit for no wedding, and he's gone off raging."

"That will do," said Miss Smatterly, laughing. "The reptile has been rightly served. Coachman, drive on! Hatty, look up and smile! You have been spared from a terrible fate. Rejoice!"

The carriage drove on towards the school, and Diggles was left once more to the mercy of the villagers, who again surrounded him.

"Let's duck him," roared one.

The idea was acceptable to the rustic mind, and they at once proceeded to carry it out.

Fortunately for Diggles, however, the horse-pond was some distance away, and ere his captors could convey him thither Tom Tartar and half a score of his chums came upon the scene.

They were going to the quarry to witness some blasting that had been arranged for that morning.

Noddy Berrill had sent word that it would be worth seeing, and they had not much time to spare.

But Tom did not like to see public indignation carried too far, and he asked the bearers of Diggles to put him down.

"We won't; we'll duck 'im!" they cried.

"Nonsense," said Tom; "he's not worth taking so much trouble about. He's only a fool and a tool. Let him go."

Tom's cheery face and bright manner had a soothing effect on the rustics.

They cooled down a bit, and put Diggles on his feet.

"Hold him there a moment," said Tom. "Now, you Diggles, don't you think you ought to be ashamed of yourself?"

"It warn't my fault," cried Diggles. "I only wanted a bit to keep quiet, and Mister——"

"No names!" interrupted Tom, sternly. "Let him go now, and if he shows his face in the village again to-day you can do as you like with him."

Diggles was set free, and he cleared off as quickly as he could.

Some of the villagers ran after him howling, but those who remained put certain questions to Tom, which he would not answer.

"It is not my affair, nor yours," he said, "so don't bother. Come on, boys. We must run now, if we are to get to the quarry in time."

(To be continued.)

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