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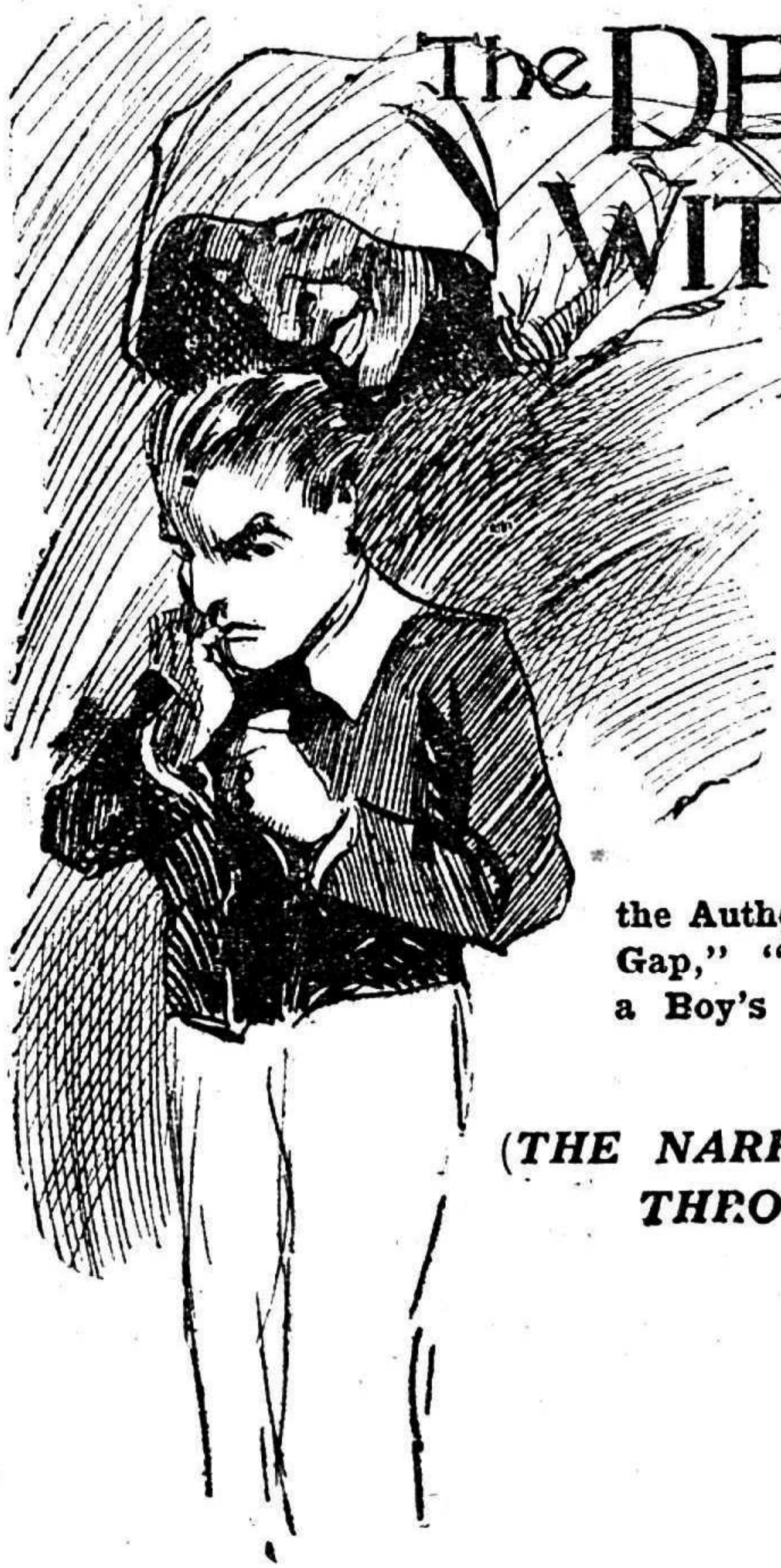
Beginning

NEXT WEEK!

The Thrilling Incident in the Above Picture is taken from This Week's Grand Long Complete Story of St. Frank's:—

THE DEMON WITHIN HIM

"My boy, I am too late!" said Dr. Brett grimly. "This man is dead!"



The DEMON WITHIN HIM!

An exceptionally fine story of School Life and Detective Adventure, featuring the Boys of St. Frank's, Nipper, the popular skipper of the Remove, and Nelson Lee, the renowned Schoolmaster-detective. By the Author of "The Riddle of Demon's Gap," "The Wandering Jew," "When a Boy's Down," and many other fine stories.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE IN STUDY F!

"BY Jings!" exclaimed Jerry Dodd, of the Remove.

He was sitting in front of the fire in Study F, which he shared with Tom Burton and Conroy minor. And the Australian junior held a story book in his hand.

"I reckon this is the absolute stuff!" he went on. "The best toffee a feller could taste, and it's darned easy to make, too. What about it, Bo'sun? Shall we take a chance?"

The other occupant of the study was lolling back in the easy-chair on the other side of the fire. Tom Burton—generally known as the Bo'sun—was half asleep, but he looked up, and frowned.

"Toffee!" he repeated. "Swab my decks! The very thought of toffee makes me heave! Not to-night, Jerry. I want to lie quiet in the cabin, and——"

"That's all very well, old man, but this toffee seems jolly good!" declared Jerry. "It's a recipe in the back of this book, and I can easily get the material from Mrs. Hake. It'll give us something to do, I reckon."

But Burton protested.

"Look here, blow the toffee!" he said, sitting forward. "You're not the only one in this study, Jerry. I've got a headache—I feel rotten. You don't want to make things worse by messing the old ship up with toffee!"

"Don't be an ass!" said Jerry Dodd. "The smell of toffee will do you good. It's all very well to lie there, moping over nothing. It'll buck you up no end to smell some good old-fashioned toffee cooking on the oil-stove."

The bo'sun shuddered.

"You'd better raise your anchor, and get steam up!" he growled. "If you want to make toffee, slip into another port!"

Jerry didn't reply, but read over the recipe again. It was quite early in the evening—tea, in fact, had only just been finished.

The early December day had been exceedingly cold—freezing hard and snowing slightly. And practically all the St. Frank's juniors were in a state of great exasperation because nobody was allowed to indulge in skating.

The frost had held now for four or five days, and there was every prospect of strong, healthy ice on the River Stowe. Everybody declared that the ice was secure enough to bear the whole school, even if everybody was as big as Fatty Little.

But the Headmaster had not yet given his permission.

There had been endless discussions among the fags, the Removites, and the seniors. Dr. Stafford's popularity was at an extremely low ebb at the moment. Of course, as soon as he passed the word that skating was allowable, he would immediately become the lion of the school. But at present the very mention of the Head's name produced scowls and growls.

Why wasn't skating allowed? It was so ridiculous—so rotten! There was the ice, waiting to be used, and all the fellows were held up, just because the school had been forbidden to take advantage of the frost.

The villagers were already skating—scores of people had been seen on the ice that afternoon. But the juniors failed to remember—or at least they ignored the fact—that there had already been one or two nasty mishaps. Two village boys, for example, had broken through the ice near Judkins Corner, a tricky bend in the river. They had managed to scramble out, but only after a struggle.

It was incidents of this kind which caused Dr. Stafford to hesitate before giving official permission for skating to commence.

I was quite certain that we should have no spell on the ice until the following evening. And, after all, it was far better for the Head to be cautious. With crowds of reckless boys to deal with, he simply had to go easy.

But the juniors did not see eye to eye with him.

Tom Burton was a particularly keen skater, and he was feeling rather out of sorts, too. Indigestion was not one of his customary complaints, but there was no question that he had a touch of biliousness this evening. As Jerry Dodd had remarked, possibly the sardines were partly responsible. Jerry had been rather suspicious about them, for the tin had been opened for about a week. But as the juniors were hungry, they finished up the sardines with relish. And now Burton was feeling the effect.

Usually he was one of the sunniest juniors in the Remove—good-tempered, amiable, and always smiling. But even a fellow of this disposition can be irritable at times. After all, irritability is a human weakness which we all possess. We can't be angels.

And the sunny Bo'sun was prepared to snap at anybody just now. In one way, his mood was not very much different from the mood of many other fellows. There had been so much exasperation over the skating that tempers were rather on edge generally.

Handforth, for example, had punched at least a dozen noses since afternoon lessons had finished. De Valerie, usually so good-tempered, had picked up a quarrel with the Hon. Douglas Singleton—absolutely over nothing. And both of them had gone off in a huff.

About the only fellow who remained serene, happy, and smiling was Archie Glenthorne. It took a very great deal to upset his cheerful urbanity. And he wasn't very keen on skating, anyhow.

In Study F, Jerry Dodd laid his book down, and rose to his feet. He felt that he had to do something to pass the time, and it struck him that making toffee was a really terrific wheeze.

He left the study, but came back after about ten minutes, armed with several bags and a huge enamel saucepan. The latter had been borrowed, without permission, of course, from a fifth form study.

"Here we are!" said Jerry genially. "All the giddy ingredients, chum! Sugar, syrup, desiccated cocoanut——"

"Bust my topsails!" growled the Bo'sun, sitting forward in his chair. "You're not

going to make that toffee in this study, are you?"

"Sure!"

"It's a pity if you can't go to the galley!" said Burton, with a glare. "My head's aching like thunder, and I'm not feeling at all bright. Be a good sort, old mate, and take the old materials into another dock!"

"How the dickens can I?" asked Jerry, as he commenced operations. "How can I invade another chap's study, and start making toffee? Be sensible, for goodness' sake! Your head's not so bad, and if it is, take my advice, and have a walk round the Triangle. It seems to me that your head needs a cooler!"

Burton was only exasperated the more.

"By the Blue Peter!" he growled. "I've got as much say in this cabin as you have, and I don't want that toffee made——"

"Oh, blow you and your objections!" interrupted Jerry lightly. "Don't be such a blessed growler, Bo'sun! What's the matter with you? You're not the kind of a chap to be nasty like this."

Tom Burton subsided, and got out his school books. The gentle reproof from Jerry saved him from continuing the argument. Accordingly, in a few minutes the two juniors were busy at their strangely assorted occupations.

Jerry Dodd crouched in the fireplace, stirring a sickly looking mixture within the saucepan. And Tom Burton sat at the table, wrestling with algebra. And the fact that algebra had to be done during this particular evening's prep. did not tend to make the Bo'sun any the better tempered.

He hated algebra like poison.

And he growled to himself as he worked. Everything, in fact, seemed to be conspiring to irritate him. His head didn't feel any better, and he had a kind of lump in his chest which threatened all sorts of sinister things. And to make matters worse, the smell of the cooking toffee soon began to pervade the small apartment.

"Bust my main decks!" groaned Burton, after awhile. "The stuff smells like bilge!"

"Like what?" demanded Jerry.

"Oh, nothing!" said Burton gruffly. "I wish you wouldn't make the stuff here, that's all! How can I do my prep. with that ghastly smell in the air? Why don't you open the portholes?"

"Open the window!" said Jerry. "Why, you ass, it's freezing like thunder outside, and there's a stiff wind, too. We shall have the snow blowing in——"

"Snow's better than that stink!" declared Burton.

"Stink!" roared the Australian junior. "Why, you ill-tempered rotter, this toffee smells absolutely topping! Why the dickens can't you be a little bit more civil?"

Again Burton subsided. He felt very sorry that Conroy minor wasn't here. Things might be better then. But Conroy minor was suffering from a very severe cold on his chest, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself in the school sanitorium. He was having apples, and grapes, and all sorts of choice delicacies, and the other fellows envied him greatly.

"She's getting on first-class!" said Jerry Dodd, as he gave the toffee a stir. "Now lemme see. It's got to simmer gently for about twenty minutes, with an occasional stir. I might as well be doing my prep."

The Bo'sun snorted, and again wrestled with algebra.

Certainly, he had a good and sufficient reason for being irritable. For Study F was already filled with a kind of bluish haze, and the smell of the cooking toffee could have been cut with a knife. It caused a choky feeling in the throat.

And anybody who has felt bilious, even in a slight degree, will easily sympathise with Tom Burton in his present ordeal. But Jerry Dodd was feeling fine, and all he wanted was to see the toffee done, so that he could sample it.

He was soon busy with his prep, and five minutes elapsed. By this time Jerry had become immersed in his own algebra, and he was not in quite such a good temper. Furthermore, he had forgotten all about the toffee.

"Swab my decks!" said Tom Burton suddenly. "The cargo's afire! What's all this smoke coming out of the hatches?"

"Eh?"

"Your toffee——"

"You—you ass!" roared Jerry, leaping up. "It's burning!"

"Who's looking after the toffee—me or you?" snapped Burton. "Why, what—— By my compass! Look what you've done! Look at this exercise-book! You've upset the inkpot!"

"Can't help your troubles," gasped Jerry, as he tore the saucepan off the fire. "Oh, by jings! The stuff's ruined—burnt to a giddy cinder! I say, chum, this is too bad! You might have told me before——"

Burton was absolutely exasperated beyond measure.

"How did I know?" he shouted. "You shouldn't be such a silly swab as to start making toffee down in the cabin! I told you not to, didn't I? It's a wonder the skipper hasn't been along, to ask you about all this smoke."

"Ruined!" said Jerry, in a hollow voice, as he gazed disconsolately into the saucepan. "Just look at it—absolutely burnt up! This is what comes of leaving the stuff on the fire."

"Don't bring it here!" said the Bo'sun tartly. "I don't want to see the stuff!"

"I reckon you ought to have one look!" said Jerry. "Then perhaps you'll be able to understand what my feelings are like. Sniff it!"

Rather inconsiderately, he held the saucepan under the Bo'sun's nose. A choking mass of thick smoke smothered Burton—smoke which reeked horribly of burnt sugar

and treacle. In his present condition, it caused him to heave violently. He fought for breath."

"Shiver my bulwarks!" he roared. "It's poison!"

He pushed his hand out at random, caught Jerry Dodd on the forearm, and the next second there was a squelching, gurgling thud. The saucepan fell out of Jerry's fingers.

"Oh, help!" gasped the Australian boy.

Before either of them could recover the saucepan, it was on the table. And the fearful mass of burnt, liquid sugar poured out over Tom Burton's schoolbooks. All the work he had completed was irretrievably ruined. Not only this, but his algebra book was spoilt, and a Greek dictionary damaged beyond repair.

Burton jumped up, furious.

"Look what you've done now!" he shouted thickly. "You—you——"

"I say I'm awfully sorry!" gasped Dodd. "But it was your fault, you know! You hit my arm, chum, and——"

"Yes, but you held that saucepan under my nose, and nearly choked me!" roared Tom Burton. "By water-spouts! Look at my books, look at all my work! What's the skipper going to say when he sees that? I shall get shoved in irons!"

"No, you won't," said Jerry. "I'll explain——"

"That doesn't make any difference to the work I've done, does it?" snapped the Bo'sun. "You, and your durned toffee! I'm sick of you! I wish you'd clear out of this ship, and go into dry dock!"

"Don't you want me in this study?" demanded Jerry hotly.

"No, I don't!"

"Well, I'm not going to clear out because you order me to do so!" shouted Jerry. "It's as much my study as yours! Understand? I'll make all the toffee I like, and I'm jolly glad I spilt it over your books!"

They stood there, quivering, glaring at one another.

For the peaceful Bo'sun and Jerry Dodd to squabble like this was almost unheard of. But even the best of friends will have a tiff now and again—and it was soon to be proved that such tiffs are rather catching. With the whole Remove in an irritable frame of mind, this was not very surprising.

"I'm sick of the whole thing!" said the Bo'sun, at last. "I've had a rotten headache, and yet you persist in making that ghastly toffee! All right—make it! I'll clear into some other study, and you can make toffee as long as you like! I'll shift into another berth!"

Jerry Dodd breathed hard.

"Not likely!" he snapped. "If anybody's going to shift, it'll be me! If I stayed in this study I should be thinking of you all the time, and that would make me feel bad! I'd rather get into fresh company. You can keep the study yourself, and be hanged to you!"

Jerry picked up the saucepan, threw it in the fender—incidentally leaving a trail of toffee over the floor, and strode to the door. Burton moved forward in a kind of last-minute effort to discuss peace.

And as he did so, he trod on a blob of liquid toffee, skidded violently, and sat down in another blob. That settled it. He got to his feet, quivering, with rage and sticky with toffee.

"Thank goodness you're going," he shouted. "By the cook's galley! I've never been so pleased in my life to see a fellow's stern! You'd better steer for another dock, and stay there!"

"I shall!" snapped Jerry Dodd curtly. "I'm not coming back here again, anyhow. By jings! This is the first time I knew you could be such a rotter!"

He went out and slammed the door with a crash. On the morrow, in all probability, when the ruffled tempers had been smoothed, both he and Bo'sun would grin hugely over the whole affair.

But my purpose in setting it down here really concerns quite another matter. For this tiff between the chums of Study F was destined to lead to something far more grave and serious than a mere study squabble. And it will also prove how easy it is for one quarrel to cause another between different parties.

Under ordinary circumstances, Jerry Dodd would have gone back to Study F in about an hour. And he and the Bo'sun would undoubtedly have squared things up. A few grunts, a growl or two, and they would have passed the rest of the evening together in grumpy silence. And on the morrow smiles would manifest themselves again.

But it so happened that Jerry Dodd ran into somebody as he strode fiercely down the passage. At the moment, Jerry was filled with a fierce determination to have absolutely nothing more to do with Burton, and to cut him dead if he ever tried to open negotiations for peace.

Then, as he turned the corner of the passage, he came face to face with an inky, baggy-trousered junior, with frowsy hair and an extremely crumpled collar. Needless to say, this untidy specimen of humanity was no less a person than His Grace the Duke of Somerton.

The schoolboy duke cared nothing whatever for his appearance. He was the most untidy fellow one could imagine.

"Hallo!" he said, as he bumped into Jerry. "Why, what the—— Who's been biting you, Jerry? You look frightfully fierce!"

Jerry Dodd glared.

"Don't talk to me, chum!" he snapped. "I'm wild!"

"You look it," said Somerton. "But what's happened?"

"That blessed son of a sea captain has been irritating me all the evening!" said Dodd. "We had a squabble at last, and

I've cleared out—I wouldn't stay with the Bo'sun for another minute! I'm going to find some other study!"

Somerton whistled.

"As bad as that, eh?" he said sympathetically, "Oh, you'll soon make it up."

"Never!" said Jerry Dodd with fierce emphasis. "Never!"

CHAPTER II.

NOT HAVING ANY.

SOMERTON smiled.

"I've heard fellows talk like that before," he remarked. "But you'll change later on. Why, the Bo'sun's one of the best fellows in the Remove. I've never seen him in a temper——"

"Haven't you?" grunted Jerry. "Go and look at him now!"

"I'd rather not, thanks," said the duke calmly. "I hate seeing a chap in a temper. It makes me get wild myself. But how did it all happen?"

Jerry Dodd explained. And, being perfectly human, he told a somewhat one-sided story. In fact, judging from what Jerry Dodd said, Somerton could not be blamed for looking upon Tom Burton as a most unpleasant, contemptible kind of a worm. Jerry, himself, would be the first to admit his exaggerations later on—but at the present moment he even believed them himself.

"And did the Bo'sun really say all those things?' asked Somerton at length.

"Yes, the rotter!" growled Jerry. "But what else can you expect. After all, he was only brought up on a blessed sailing ship. He's always been all right up to now, but you can never tell with a fellow. I'm sick of him—I'm going to find some other study."

Somerton looked thoughtful.

"That's all right," he said. "What's the matter with Study M?"

"How do I know?" growled Jerry.

"I mean, why don't you come in with De Valerie and me?" asked the duke generously. "There's plenty of room there, and there's no reason why you shouldn't join us. We'll be only too glad to welcome you."

Jerry looked up keenly.

"By jings!" he said. "That's jolly decent of you, Somerton. Yes, rather! I'd love to share a study with you two fellows."

"Good!" said the schoolboy duke. "Then it's settled."

It was just like Somerton to make such an offer. He was thoughtless, good-tempered, and always ready to do anybody a favour. He had come across Jerry, and Jerry was homeless. The only possible thing to do was to offer his quarters in Study M. Why not? There was plenty of room.

"I thought about going into one of the other studies, down the lower part of the passage," said Jerry. "But I'd ten times rather be with you and De Valerie. Thanks awfully, Sommy. You're a brick!"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Somerton. "What about your things?"

"Things?"

"I mean your books and personal belongings."

"Oh, yes, we shall have to shift them, shan't we?" said Jerry slowly. "Of course, I shan't be going back to Study F—that's certain. I've finished with Burton for good. All right—I'll trot along and gather up the chattels."

"I'll come with you."

They turned into Study F, and found Tom Burton painfully clearing away traces of sticky toffee from the table and from his books. The unfortunate Bo'sun was smothered and he was not feeling any better tempered.

The sight caused a bit of a pang to enter Jerry Dodd's heart. Even then a reconciliation might have come about—but the Bo'sun's first words positively closed the door to any such settlement.

"Who told you to come back?" he snapped fiercely. "Haven't you caused enough trouble already? Clear out of this cabin, and keep out! I'm sick of the sight of you!"

Jerry Dodd steeled himself.

"Keep your hair on!" he snapped. "I've only come here to fetch my books! I wouldn't stay in this study for a fortune! I'm rather particular about who I mix with!"

Burton opened his mouth to speak, but the duke grasped his arm.

"It's no good rowing!" he interrupted. "Turn the tap off, for goodness sake! By what I can hear, you've been a bit of a beast to-night, Bo'sun. I'm surprised at you—I thought you were a different kind of a fellow!"

Tom Burton nearly choked.

"Why, you—you—— Bust my mizzen!" he gasped. "What's this land-lubber been saying to you? It was his fault all along, the slab-sided swab! Comes into the cabin, making toffee, and——"

"Yes, I know all about it!" interrupted Somerton. "Anybody's entitled to make toffee. You can't get away from it, Bo'sun, you've got a pretty rotten temper when you like. I'm disappointed—that's all."

"Come on!" said Jerry Dodd. "I'm ready."

And so, before the Bo'sun could even make an attempt to tell his side of the story, the pair passed out of the study. They went down the passage without saying a word, and in a few moments arrived at the door of Study M.

Just as they were about to enter, three juniors appeared from the lobby, and they seemed to take quite a large amount of interest in the duke and his companions. The three juniors came along briskly.

"Hallo! What's this?" demanded Edward Oswald Handforth. "Who's moving?"

"I am," said Jerry.

"What the thunder for?"

"Because I choose to!"

"You—you Australian rotter!" roared Handforth warmly. "Because you choose to. That's no answer. I want to know——"

"And why do you want to know?" demanded Jerry. "Because you're inquisitive—that's all. It's none of your business, and you can go and eat coke!"

Jerry Dodd strode into Study M, and the Duke passed after him. The door closed, leaving Handforth glaring at it. He was about to enter when Church and McClure seized him.

"Leggo, you fatheads!" said Handforth, twisting round.

"Oh, don't go and start a row, Handy!" said Church. "Can't you see that Jerry's in a rotten temper? I suppose he's had a tiff, or something. You don't want to make things worse. This is where diplomacy is needed—as you always have been a diplomatic kind of chap!"

This, of course, was quite contrary to the truth. All the diplomacy in Study D came from Church and McClure—and they needed it. But Handforth paused and nodded.

"Yes, you're right!" he agreed. "It wouldn't do to fan the giddy fire, would it? Of course, I never really intended butting in. A tactful chap like me knows better than that, I should think!"

"Rather!" said McClure promptly. "Let's go to the common room. I hear that Nipper's got some special wheeze on this evening."

Handforth agreed, and off they went—which was just as well for the peace of Study M. Because the air in that apartment was pretty heavily charged already.

Jerry Dodd and Somerton had marched in, and they found that Cecil De Valerie was seated at the table doing his prep. And it was not at all remarkable that De Valerie was a bit irritable, too.

He was a keen skater, and he had chafed at the Head's ban. Furthermore, he loathed algebra with a loathing which was something solid. And to be disturbed in the middle of it was the worst thing of all.

He kept quiet—he didn't want to start any squabble. But he thought it was rather unreasonable of his study chum to bring a visitor in at such a time. The least they could do was to be quiet while he was wrestling with his problem.

But they weren't quiet.

"Here you are!" said Somerton. "Plenty of room here. This is a pretty big study, you know, and you'll be as safe as anything. We've got an extra chair, and the table's big enough for a dozen."

Jerry Dodd looked round with approval.

"Yes, it's bigger than my old study," he said. "It's jolly decent of you chaps to let me come in, I must say. Good for you, chums! Let's hope we pull well together."

"No question of that," said the duke. "What's the matter with that fathead over there? He's let the fire down, and he's scowling at the table as though he hated it."

De Valerie looked up.

"Can't you chaps stop jawing?" he demanded tartly.

"Sorry!" said Jerry. "Algebra?"

"Yes, confound it!"

Somerton poked up the fire, and De Valerie was just about to settle down to his work again when he glanced sharply at the other end of the table. His attention had been attracted by a miscellaneous pile which lay there—books, papers, football boots, an inkstand, and one or two other odds and ends.

"What the dickens are those things?" asked De Valerie frowning.

"They're mine!" replied Jerry.

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"But what are they doing in here?"

"I just fetched them along——"

"Don't be an ass!" interrupted De Valerie impatiently. "Can't I see you just brought 'em along? But what for? What on earth do you want to bring a pile of things like that for into this study?"

"Keep your hair on!" put in the Duke of Somerton. "It's all right. Jerry's had a bust up with Burton. In fact they've quarrelled in the most unholy manner, and sparks have been flying like dust!"

"That's no reason why Dodd should pile his rubbish into this study!" said De Valerie.

"I suppose the algebra has got on your nerves," said the duke soothingly. "It seems to have made you a bit dense. Dodd's coming in here with us—I told him that we'd welcome him with open arms as a study mate."

Cecil De Valerie laid down his pen.

"Oh, did you!" he said sharply.

"Yes. I didn't see——"

"I don't want to be nasty, but I think it was confoundedly thick of you!" interrupted De Valerie. "It's quite enough to have two in this study—there's no room for a third. Goodness knows, I'm not mean or selfish—but I'm jolly well going to put my foot down against any outsider pushing his way in here."

But for the algebra, De Valerie might have put the thing a bit more delicately. But he didn't, and Jerry stood there, flushing rather deeply. He wasn't receiving the welcome he had imagined.

"I don't want to push my way in," he said warmly. "It was Somerton's idea, anyhow. He said that you'd be delighted."

"I'm not delighted!" exclaimed De Valerie. "And what's more, I won't have it. This is my study, just as much as Somerton's. I hate being unpleasant, but a fellow's got to put his foot down sometimes."

The duke sighed.

"Oh, my hat!" he said. "Another row now! They've just had one in Study F—a

proper bust up! And now I'm jiggered if you're not going to start one here!"

"I'm not starting it," said De Valerie.

"Yes you are."

"Oh, well, you can think so if you like!" snapped the other. "I've got nothing against Dodd—not a blessed thing. I rather like him, as a matter of fact."

"Thanks!" said Jerry sarcastically.

"At the same time, there's no room for him in the study!" went on De Valerie. "I hate being crowded. If I had been asked beforehand, it might have been different—but I don't like a chap taking things for granted. Sorry, Dodd, old man, but you'll have to buzz."

De Valerie hadn't lost his temper yet, but he was certainly somewhat unpleasant, without any real cause. The feeling in the air was just of the quality which makes a quarrel very easy to develop.

Somerton himself was beginning to catch the fever.

"Look here, Val," he said quietly. "We've always got on well together, and I'm not the one to start any nastiness. But I think you're beastly selfish over this business."

"Selfish?"

"Yes!"

"Look here——"

"Beastly selfish!" repeated Somerton warmly. "Dodd's left his own study because of a row, and just because I offered to let him come here all you can do is to start another row. That's not like you at all—although I've noticed a few things lately," he added.

De Valerie looked at him in a strange kind of way.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You've noticed a few things lately?"

"Well, you've been selfish in all sorts of ways," replied Somerton. "I didn't mean to say anything about it, but you make me. What about Tuesday evening, last week?"

"Well, what about it?"

"You were sitting in here reading, and I particularly asked you to have a game of chess with me," said the duke. "You wouldn't—you absolutely refused. You told me to go and eat coke, and you went on reading."

"Was that a crime?"

"No—but it was beastly selfish!" said Somerton. "But that's nothing—only a trifle. We don't want to start squabbling over things that happened last week."

"You started it——"

"Perhaps I did, but I'm not going to keep it on!" said Somerton. "But about Dodd. I've asked him to come here, and I want him to stay. I've got just as much right to invite him as you have to object."

De Valerie jumped to his feet.

"You've accused me of being selfish, and you've brought up some fat-headed little incident that wasn't worth mentioning," he snapped. "Well, in this case, I will be selfish. Rats to you! I'm not in agreement

Rather inconsiderately, he held the saucepan under the Bo'sun's nose. A choking mass of thick smoke smothered Burton—smoke which reeked horribly of burnt sugar and treacle.

with three fellows sharing this study—and I don't want Dodd here. I'm sorry, Doddy, but——"

"Oh, don't apologise!" interrupted Jerry sourly. "I don't want to come in here—I wouldn't stop in here if you offered to pay me five quid a week! I'm not the kind of chap to remain where I'm not wanted! But I jolly well agree with Somerton that you're a particularly selfish kind of a cad!"

"What!" shouted De Valerie.

"I reckon you heard it."

De Valerie clenched his fists, and his face went pale with anger.

"If I wasn't pretty good at self-control, I'd punch you in the face for that!" he exclaimed tensely. "Things have come to a rotten pass when a chap comes into my study, and calls me a selfish cad!"

"If you like to come outside, I'll repeat it there!" retorted Jerry. "Don't hesitate to punch if you want to, but I warn you that I reckon to punch back! I'm ready to meet you any time you like, preferably without gloves!"

Somerton got between the heated pair.

"Oh, stop this, for the love of goodness!" he shouted angrily. "This row looks like developing into something worse than the other! Why on earth can't we be amiable? I hate upsets! Isn't it possible to square things even now?"

Jerry Dodd laughed.

"We're a set of asses!" he said, cooling down. "All right, De Valerie, let's drop all this piffle——"

"Thanks all the same, but I don't feel inclined to drop it!" interrupted De Valerie curtly. "If you think you can call me a selfish cad, and then worm round me, you've made a mistake!"

It was an unfortunate remark, for Jerry Dodd's temper rose again.

"By jings!" he said thickly. "You nasty rotter! I can't even attempt to be decent without you barking and yapping! I was going to apologise for calling you a selfish cad, but now I'll add to it. I think you are a beastly tempered, unmannerly hog! How does that suit you?"

"Get out of here before I kick you out!" shouted De Valerie.

"I'll get out all right, and I don't need kicking," said Jerry sourly. "I came in with the best of spirits, and I'm going away in the best of spirits. You don't think I care a red cent about you, I suppose? I never thought you were such a bad-tempered rat!"

And, with this parting shot, and boiling with rage, in spite of his words about good spirits, Jerry Dodd picked up his bundle of books and the other things, and stalked out of the study.

He slammed the door, and De Valerie sat down at the table, and savagely picked up his pen.

"Feeling pleased with yourself?" asked Somerton, in a queer voice.

"Yes, I am!" snapped De Valerie.

"I thought so!" said the duke. "A fellow with your temper would naturally feel pleased after treating another chap like that. I'm absolutely disgusted with you! You ought to be downright ashamed of yourself."

Cecil De Valerie leapt up, clenching his fists.

"What right had you to ask that bounder in here?" he roared. "Why couldn't you have asked me about it first?"

"Because I made the mistake of thinking that you were possessed of a few gentlemanly manners!" retorted Somerton cuttingly. "I had no idea that you would be a beast about it. Just because a chap wants to come in our study you get in a rotten temper over it!"

"There's only room for two——"

"Don't be so infernally selfish!" broke in Somerton. "There's room for a dozen! But you needn't worry—you'll have the study completely to yourself in future."

"What do you mean!"

"I mean that I wouldn't sit at the same table with such a selfish bounder as you!" replied Somerton hotly. "I'm going to clear out, and perhaps you'll be satisfied!"

"Good riddance!" exclaimed De Valerie, with suppressed rage.

The duke didn't utter another word, but walked to the door and strode out. In the passage, he paused, and tried to recover himself. He was bubbling with indignation and heat against Cecil de Valerie.

The fellow had undoubtedly acted caddishly, and it hurt Somerton all the more because it wasn't like De Valerie to be that way. The pair had always got on so well together.

But when boys quarrel, hot words are used—hasty, ill-considered words which only make matters ten times worse. Damage is done which sometimes can never be repaired. Friendships are turned into bitterness and enmity.

Just because of some ridiculous toffee, all this trouble had arisen! It is astonishing how trivial, insignificant things can cause such upheavals. The dust-up between Jerry Dodd and the Bo'sun was a trifling affair compared to the quarrel between the chums of Study M, but the one was undoubtedly the outcome of the other And nothing could alter the fact that practically all the blame attached itself to Cecil De Valerie.

He had revealed a strain of selfishness which was likely to lead to more serious things. For the demon within him was aroused—and when a demon of that kind takes possession of a fellow, it needs a great deal of driving out!

CHAPTER III.

THE DEMON GAINS POWER.

THE Duke of Somerton, unutterably miserable, wended his way towards the Common-room. He was wondering how the whole matter could be squared up, and it seemed to him that there was only one possible solution.

De Valerie would have to apologise—to climb down. His had been the fault from the start, and the duke couldn't possibly be friendly with him again until he expressed his regret.

At the same time, the easy-going Somerton was down-hearted. He detested a squabble more than anything else, and it pained him greatly. But he had a will of his own, and he knew that he was in the right. He wasn't going to weaken.

He entered the Common-room, and looked round.

A large number of fellows were there. In fact, fully three parts of the Remove was present. Several juniors looked at Somerton rather curiously as he came in. He noticed that Jerry Dodd was talking with Farman, over in one corner. There was no sign of the Bo'sun.

"Hallo, here's another of 'em!" remarked Reginald Pitt. "What's the matter with you, Sommy? You've got a face as long as a fortnight! Oh, of course, you've been mixed up in this dust-up, too, I suppose?"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" said Somerton uncomfortably. "I dare say we're all feeling a bit nervy this evening."

"He's trying to make excuses for that cad, De Valerie!" exclaimed Jerry Dodd. "Until to-night, I've always liked De Valerie, but he's shown me a side of his character that hasn't appeared until now. The chap's a selfish, ill-tempered bounder. And I don't care who hears me saying so."

"Well, I can't make it out!" I put in. "I expect you're all exaggerating. De Valerie's decent enough. One of the best chaps in the Remove——"

"You don't know him yet!" put in Jerry. "Look here! As soon as I went into his study he barked out at me like——"

"My dear chap, we don't want to start an argument about it here," I interrupted soothingly. "It's your quarrel—not ours. If we all get talking about it, we shall take sides, and then it'll lead to a general riot!"

"Hear, hear!" said Somerton. "Please chuck it, you chaps. It's nothing, really. Not worth talking about. What were you saying when I came in, Nipper?"

I hastened to get on with the little speech that I had been making. I knew very well what a private quarrel could lead to if it was aired in public. And for a Form row to start over absolutely nothing would have been a disaster.

"Well, the fact is, I'm after subscriptions," I said. "It's a purely charitable affair, and I'd like to touch the hearts of a few of you fellows——"

"To say nothing of touching our pockets!" remarked Pitt.

"Exactly," I agreed. "Now, these are the facts, and, mind you, they're absolutely true, with not a trace of exaggeration. I only heard them to-night, and I decided at once that it would be a good wheeze if the Remove could do something. I think the people in Bellton are a mean set of bounders."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Handforth. "If you think I'm going to subscribe to some fat-headed charity, you've made a bloomer. I don't see the fun of providing waistcoats for West Indian warriors!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's not one of those eccentric charities!" I grinned. "This subscription is for one of our own people—a man who lives in the village."

"Then it's up to the village to help him," said Merrill. "I'm not going to give anything."

"You needn't worry—I didn't expect you would. This affair only concerns fellows who are generous by nature," I retorted. "And I'm not asking for subs without going into details. It's only right that you should know the facts. I agree with Merrell that the village ought to help. But if the village won't, what have we got to do?"

"Well, it seems that it's up to us to hung forward the good helping fist, and all that sort of thing!" observed Archie Glenthorne languidly. "I mean to say, a chappie simply must dive into the cash department occasionally. What ho! What ho! Nipper, old scream, my ears are wide! Pray proceed to pour forth the sad tale of woe! I'm fairly bubbling to exude the doubloons!"

"Now, that's the kind of spirit I like," I said heartily. "You chaps ought to take an example from Archie——"

"We can't afford money like he can, you ass!" put in Hubbard.

"Possibly not," I agreed. "I don't expect any chap to contribute beyond his means. But let's get to the facts. I suppose all of you know old Griggs, who lives at Pelton's Bend, at the end of the village?"

"Griggs, the carrier?" asked Pitt.

"Yes," I said.

"Didn't he meet with an accident last week?" inquired Tommy Watson.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "A most frightful disaster, dear old lads. It seems, don't you know, that Griggs was riding along, or something, and he tripped over or something, and then, as it were, something happened! I mean to say, the poor old cove caught what might be called a dashed considerable packet!"

"Thanks all the same, Archie, but I'll do the talking," I said gently.

"Absolutely twice!" agreed Archie. "Proceed, old laddie. Pray accept a word of apology, as one gentleman to another, for butting in. In other words, carry on! The scheme, I might say, sounds somewhat priceless."

"All right—let me get on!" I said hastily. "Now, Griggs has been earning a bare living for a few years past by running a carrier's cart between Bellton and Edgemore, and a few other villages, and round about. He carries parcels and things, from Bannington at a penny or tuppence a time."

"We know it," said Handforth. "What's the good of trotting out stale stuff like this, you ass?"

"I thought perhaps some of you didn't know the facts," I replied. "Well, Griggs was going on all right—living from hand to mouth as usual—when he had a piece of really rotten luck. His horse slipped, coming down a hill the other side of Edgemore. It broke a leg, and had to be destroyed."

"Destroyed?" repeated Handforth. "Because it broke a leg?"

"Yes."

"Ass! Couldn't they let the leg mend itself?"

"A horse has got to be killed if it breaks a leg——"

"What rot!" said Handforth. "I suppose if I skid over in the Triangle, and break my thigh, I've got to be destroyed?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, there's something to be said, even for that!" remarked Pitt. "Donkeys have to be destroyed as well as horses!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You funny fathead!" roared Handforth.

"Don't start quarrelling here," I shouted.

"And don't show your ignorance so much, Handy. It's the usual custom to destroy a horse if it breaks a leg—simply because it's never any good afterwards. Anyhow, it was a disaster for poor old Griggs. The horse wasn't insured, and in that one minute he was deprived of his means of livelihood."

"Couldn't he buy another horse?" asked Handforth.

"Oh, you dummy!" I growled. "Haven't I said that Griggs only just made things meet? A horse costs money—forty or fifty pounds, for anything decent. How could Griggs lay his hand on a sum like that? During the past week the old fellow has borrowed a handcart, and he's been trudging about with this, but he hasn't been able to earn half enough to keep his family."

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "Not starving, what?"

"Well, pretty near, by what I can understand," I replied. "He's got a wife and three or four kids. I call him 'old Griggs,' but he's only about forty-five, really. It's simply a piece of horrible luck for him, because he's a steady, hard-working chap, and absolutely honest."

"Can't he get another kind of job?" asked somebody.

"That's just it—he can't," I replied. "He's a simple man, not absolutely daft, but without a scrap of talent. Fetching parcels in his cart is about the only thing he's good for. And, as I said, he's absolutely stumped now. Without a horse, he's like a train without an engine. With only a ramshackle handcart he can only do a tenth of his usual business, which means that he's getting about a tenth of his usual money."

"And what's your idea?" asked Pitt.

"Well, I thought it would be rather decent if the Remove helped him," I replied quietly. "It's not our business, of course, but it seems beastly hard lines that the poor chap should be suffering like that in this cold weather. No coal for fires—no food—and his kids crying for something to eat."

"He ought to go in the workhouse!" said Fullwood.

"I was expecting something like that from you!" I retorted. "And don't forget all you chaps, that Griggs has always done his best for us. If ever we wanted a parcel bringing from Bannington, he was always ready, and he never overcharged. Besides that, nothing was a trouble to him—the most obliging chap I ever met. So, in a way, the thing is our affair, after all. But that's neither here nor there. The man and his family are starving, and nobody's doing anything for him. Why shouldn't we get up a Fund?"

"Right you are!" said the Duke of Somerton heartily. "I'll open it with three quid, Nipper."

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

"I like to see somebody who is unselfish, and who thinks of others!" went on the Duke. There's one thing I do hate, and that's selfishness. I'd contribute more, only I'm not absolutely flush just now."

"My dear chap, three quid is too generous, if anything," I said. "I don't propose that we should give Griggs a lump sum. No. What we've got to do is to buy him a new horse, so that he can carry on with his usual business."

"That, as it were, is a deucedly brainy scheme," said Archie. "A new horse, what? In other words, a fresh gee-gee to replace the defunct one? Absolutely! Congrats, old dear! It seems to me that your bean contains a few large lumps of well-assorted brain material!"

"There's not much in the idea," I said, smiling. "The question is, shall we be able to carry it out? I'd like to get up fifty pounds, if possible. We can spend about forty on the horse, and give Griggs a little cash in his pocket, so that he can keep it by him, in case of illness."

"Dear old boy, the idea's good—it is, really!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "We're under no obligation to do this, but it's ripping to see the chaps rallying round a poor man who's down and out. Begad! I'll tell you what! I'm well off just now—I've got about fifteen quid in my pocket-book."

"Then you can equal Somerton's little sum!" I said gladly.

"Of course!" replied Sir Montie. "Here you are, dear old fellow."

He took out his pocket-book and handed me two five pound notes, and absolutely refused to contribute anything less. Montie was as soft-hearted as a girl, and it gave him absolute pleasure to contribute such a handsome amount.

"My hat! This is splendid!" I said. "Thirteen pounds already, but we sha'n't let it stop at that. Thirteen is an unlucky number, although I don't believe in that rot. I'll add a couple of quid and make it fifteen."

The contributions came in rapidly. There was no doubt that old Griggs and his family were booked for the workhouse unless something was done. But the idea of buying him a new horse appealed to the Removites.

All the other well-to-do fellows in the Remove—such as Singleton and Archie Glenthorne—dubbed up handsomely. Archie, in fact, wanted to go too far. He looked very uncomfortable as he gazed into his notecase.

"This, as it were, is somewhat poisonous," he observed in dismay. "I mean to say, the cash department is dashed weak! It so happens, laddie, that I possess no more than twelve quid in cash! The fact is, I'm bally well broke!"

Reginald Pitt fainted gently upon Jack Grey's bosom.

"Broke!" he breathed. "Broke, with twelve quid in his pocket!"

"Twelve bob is a gold mine to me!" said Hubbard enviously.

"Well, I mean to say, in a way of speaking, as it were," went on Archie. "Of course, I can yank out the tenner at once, old dear, but I'm afraid that wouldn't be ad.!"

"It wouldn't be what?"

"Adequate, dear one!" said Archie. "So, under the circs., I will proceed to stagger forth to the old study and write out a cheque. What shall we say, old scout? Twenty of the best?"

"We'll say nothing," I replied. "If you contribute ten pounds, Archie, it's as much as anybody can expect, and you've done jolly well. There's no need for you to contribute more than that. It wouldn't be fair."

Archie seemed very disappointed, but I was firm. Of course, I have only mentioned the big sums so far. There were only a handful of fellows who could help so generously.

The majority contributed a shilling or half-a-crown, and some could afford no more than a few pence. But all the fellows rose manfully to the occasion, and subscribed as much as their funds would allow them to.

I had appeased Archie by telling him that if we were short of a few pounds, after all efforts were exhausted, we should come to him. But I was trying to get the sum together without any further aid from Glenthorne. But it takes a good many shillings and half-crowns to mount up into pounds.

"Now, let me see!" I said, as I checked the various sums. "We've already formed a committee of three, and I'm the treasurer. What about the chaps who aren't here? By jingo! There's De Valerie!"

"You won't get much out of him!" said Somerton.

"Why not?"

"He's too selfish!"

"Oh, don't be so bitter!" I smiled. "Just because you've had a bit of a squabble with him, you needn't say things like that, Sommy. I happen to know that De Valerie received a fiver this morning from his pater. He can whack out two quid, anyhow, and still have plenty of cash left for himself."

"Where is this moneyed man?" enquired Pitt.

"I suppose he's still in the study," said Somerton.

"Good! We'll go and beard him in his den!' I said promptly. "Come on!"

And off we went—Pitt, Sir Montie, Watson, Handforth, and one or two others. We arrived at Study M, kicked the door open without ceremony, and marched in.

"We've arrived!" I announced cheerfully. "We're not going to exactly hold a gun at your head, Val, old son, but we're after cash!"

De Valerie was lounging in the chair in front of the fire. He looked round with a scowl and got to his feet. Anybody with half an eye could have told that he was not in the sweetest of tempers. But I pretended to be blind.

"No fuss," I said. "We've come for a contribution towards a well-deserving fund——"

"I haven't got any money to give away," interrupted De Valerie curtly.

"What about the fiver you got this morning?" demanded Handforth.

"It's a pity if a chap can't deal with his own financial affairs!" snapped De Valerie. "What I've got is nothing to do with anybody else! You can clear out—the whole lot of you! I won't give a cent!"

"Didums lose oo's ickle temper?" said Pitt soothingly.

"Clear out!" roared De Valerie with great violence.

I staggered slightly.

"Dash it all, don't bark like that!" I protested. "There's no need to jump down our throats, De Valerie! And I think you might at least hear what this fund is before you refuse to contribute."

De Valerie controlled himself with an effort.

"Well, what is it?" he growled thickly.

I told him. He listened with very obvious impatience, and an unpleasant expression came over his face as I finished.

"You want me to give some money to this dirty old village carrier?" he asked sourly. "What's Griggs got to do with me? I'm not anything to him! Of course, I won't contribute; why should I?"

I stared at him wonderingly.

"It's not like you, old man, to talk in that way," I said quietly. "There's no positive reason why you should contribute. But you've got money, and the Remove has taken this thing up. I thought you'd like to be in it."

"Well, I wouldn't."

"Do you mean that you won't give anything at all?"

"Yes, I do!" retorted De Valerie, glaring. "I wouldn't give a cent! The man's no good—a miserable, ragged pauper! Let him go to the workhouse! I can't use my money in helping bounders of that sort!"

"All right, keep it!" I said quietly.

The Duke of Somerton burst through the crowd of juniors in the doorway.

"You selfish cad!" he shouted furiously. "I told you what to expect, but they wouldn't believe me. I've noticed this coming on for weeks! You've been growing more and more selfish every day. I don't believe you'd take a penny out of your pocket to help a dying man! You ought to be kicked out of the school—you're a heartless beast!"

De Valerie turned on him like a whirlwind. That demon within him was gaining complete mastery over all his finer feelings. He knew it, but he was no longer commander of his own self.

"By gad!" he shouted savagely. "Let me get at him——"

"No, you won't get at him!" I interrupted. "We're not going to have any fighting here, De Valerie. And I must say

that I partly agree with Somerton. It seems to me that all you think of is your own comfort and your own pleasure. You don't care what happens to these poor people, who are practically on the verge of starvation."

"Why should I care?" snapped De Valerie.

"Because you ought to have a heart," I replied. "You have got a heart, too; only, for some unknown reason, you're not yourself. And let me tell you this: I won't complete this fund until you've contributed your whack, even if it's only a shilling! The fund remains open until you change your mind."

"You can keep it open for ten years, and I sha'n't change my mind!" shouted De Valerie. "You won't get a farthing out of me, so you'd better understand that, once and for all."

It was only with great difficulty that we held Handforth back. For he wanted to go straight in and slaughter De Valerie on the spot. All the fellows were thoroughly sick with disgust at De Valerie's behaviour, and they cleared out of the study, uttering loud and pointed remarks concerning the shape of his face.

De Valerie slammed the door and locked it.

CHAPTER IV.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

TAP—tap.

The knuckles which beat against the door of Study M were hard, and De Valerie started round with a scowl. He had only been alone for five minutes, and he was still boiling wth unreasonable rage.

Everything seemed to be going wrong—everything was against him. It never occurred to him that all the fault lie within himself. He blamed the others. Bitterly, he pointed out to himself, how they had wronged him.

Yet, as a matter of fact, he, and he alone, was the sole cause of all the trouble. But Cecil De Valerie was blind to this fact.

"Go away!" he shouted roughly. "If you think I'm going to unlock that door——"

"It's me, Master De Valerie!" came a cheerful voice.

"Oh, Tubbs!" muttered De Valerie. "What the dickens do you want?" he added in a shout. "I don't intend to be disturbed now, confound you! Go away, Tubbs, or I'll come out and kick you down the passage!"

"Lumme!" came the voice of the page-boy from outside. "You ain't half riled, Master De Valerie! I won't disturb you, but there's a gent and a young lady askin' for you."

De Valerie jumped up, filled with alarm. He went to the door and unlocked it. Tubbs had taken the precaution to back over to the other side of the passage. He wanted to be on the safe side.

"What's that you said?" demanded De Valerie. "A lady and gentleman to see me? What rot! At this hour of the night——"

"Why, bless your 'eart, sir, it's only half-past six!" said Tubbs in surprise. "A rare nice gent, sir, an' a young lady what looks a perfect picture! They says they wants to see Master De Valerie——"

Before Tubbs could speak any further, two figures appeared from the lobby, and De Valerie gasped. At the first glance he recognised them—his Uncle Dan and his Cousin Mary!

The junior was conscious, in that swift moment, of looking at his very worst. His hair was ruffled; he looked untidy, and his face was still flushed with inward temper.

But that imp of perversity inside was still at work. Why should he care? Who was his uncle, anyhow?

Without a word, he turned and went back into Study M.

He felt furious with his uncle for coming at all. Hadn't the man any more consideration than to drop on him like this without giving him a minute's warning? It was outrageous, and De Valerie, in his present mood, rebelled. It seemed to him that he hated Mr. Daniel Cunningham as much as he hated Somerton and all the other fellows. Of course, his uncle had come here to growl about something. Uncle Dan always growled.

And, while he was thinking in this way, the two visitors entered his study. Uncle Dan did not look the kind of man who would growl at anything. He was big, bluff, with a round, clean-shaven face, which expressed jollity and good humour. He seemed to fill the whole atmosphere about him with hearty cheer.

And his fair companion was a really pretty girl of about fifteen. She was small, and attired in a very trim musquash fur coat, with a little fur hat, which suited her to perfection. She had brown eyes, and she was smiling all over her face as she entered.

"Hallo, Cecil!" she exclaimed gaily, as she ran forward.

"Ho, ho, my boy! Caught you by surprise, eh?" laughed Uncle Dan. "We thought we'd just drop in and have a look at you."

De Valerie looked at them sullenly.

"You might have given me a bit of warning!" he exclaimed in a growling voice.

"Eh? What's this—what's this?" asked his uncle. "You don't seem to be in the best of tempers, Cecil. Has anybody been upsetting you?"

"Yes. I'm not feeling up to the mark."

"That's no reason why you should be so boorish, my lad," said Uncle Dan.

"Oh, Cecil, I think you're horrid!" exclaimed Cousin Mary. "Why, you haven't even shaken hands."

De Valerie sat down.

"What's the idea of coming here?" he asked abruptly.

"I can see that we shall have to put a bit of life into you, sonny!" said Mr. Cunningham. "As a matter of fact, I brought

Mary down here because we heard that there's some excellent skating on the Stowe. We're staying with some friends just near Bannington. Mary can't skate much, and I thought you'd be gallant enough to teach her a few of your special little tricks. You're a good skater, Cecil."

"Won't it be lovely?" asked the girl gaily. "The ice is just glorious, and I'm ever so keen on learning. Dad has got permission from the Head to take you back with us. So you'll be able to stay the night, and then we can go out skating to-morrow. Won't it just be too ripping for words?"

Under any ordinary conditions De Valerie would have leapt at the chance. But he was still feeling bitter, angry, and perverse. And the spirit of selfishness was strong upon him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't want to come."

"Oh, Cecil!" said the girl in dismay. "But——"

"I can't help it. I've got something better to do than to teach people skating!" growled De Valerie. "Can't you pay somebody to teach you? I don't see why I should be dragged about when I don't want to go!"

Uncle Dan's smile turned to a frown.

"It is bad enough for you to show temper towards me, Cecil, but I am pained and hurt that you should speak to your cousin in such a way," he said quietly. "What is the matter with you?"

"Oh, nothing!" said De Valerie. "Why the thunder can't I be left alone? Can't you see that I don't want to come?"

"It is impossible to mistake your attitude," said Uncle Dan curtly.

"It's not my fault. The fellows have been rowing with me over nothing!" went on De Valerie, breathing hard. "It's no good you looking at me like that, Uncle Dan! Can't a chap have a mind of his own. I don't want to come. And what's more, I'm not coming!"

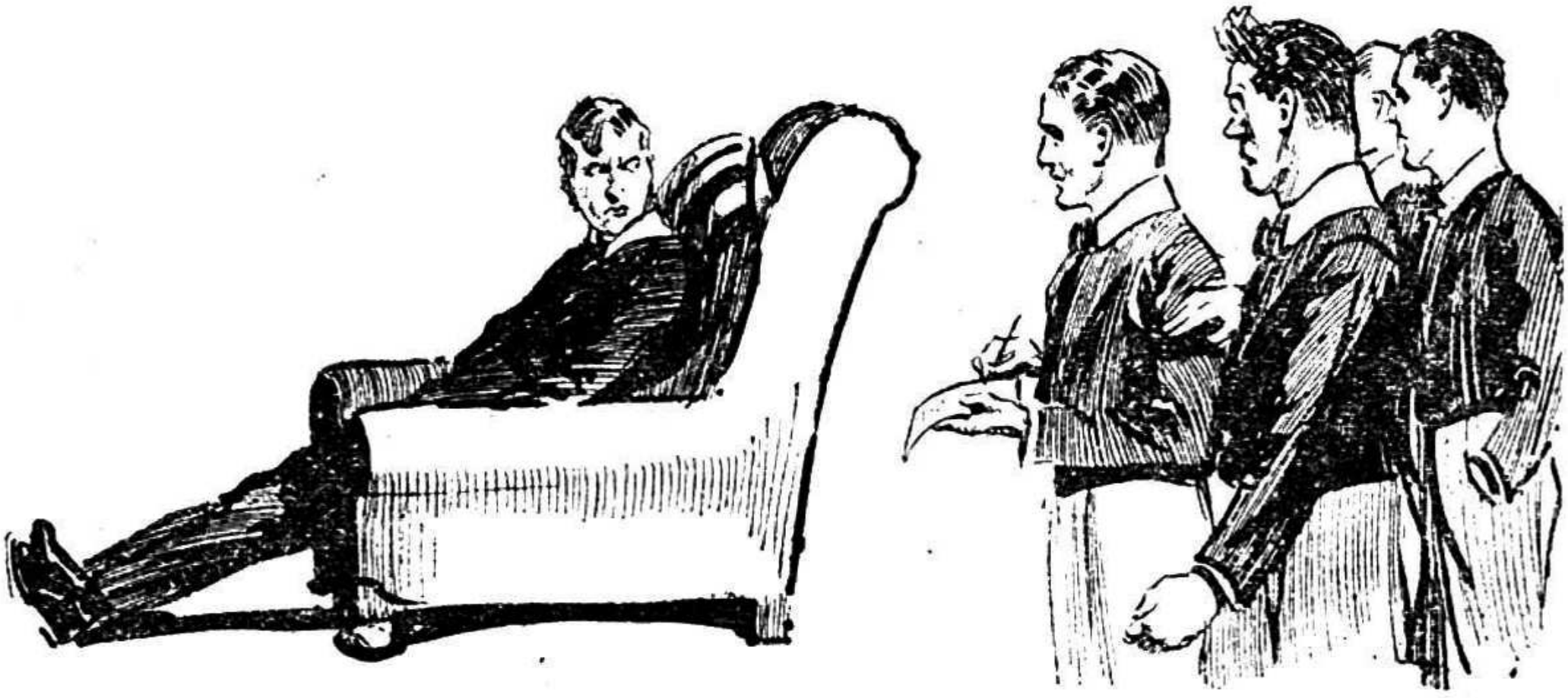
"Oh, I didn't know you could be so horrid!" said Cousin Mary angrily.

"Didn't you?" sneered De Valerie. "Then it's about time you found out! I'm not an angel, and it's no good thinking I am! It's too confoundedly thick when people come here without warning, and then expect me to do favours!"

"Favours!" repeated his uncle sharply.

"You want me to teach Mary how to skate, don't you?"

"Is that what you call a favour?" demanded Uncle Dan warmly. "Good gracious! You infernal young boor! You ought



"We've arrived!" I announced cheerfully. "We're not going to hold a gun at your head, Val, old son, but we're after cash!"

to think yourself extremely lucky to have the opportunity. Favours, indeed! We shall certainly ask no favours of you, Cecil! And until you apologise—both to Mary and to me—I have not another word to say to you."

"Good!" grunted De Valerie nastily. "That's a relief, anyway."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Cunningham, clenching his fists. "Come, Mary! We won't stay another moment in this wretched young puppy's presence! I can see that all my former opinions of Cecil were sadly at fault!"

The girl hesitated a moment.

"Oh, Cecil, you can't mean what you say!" she exclaimed earnestly. "Why don't you behave yourself? Father wants you to come over with us——"

"I want nothing of the kind!" interrupted Uncle Dan.

"But, dad, it'll be all right if Cecil apologises——"

"You can save your breath—I shan't apologise!" broke in De Valerie gruffly. "Why should I? I've done nothing wrong!

If you want to learn skating, there are plenty of other fellows who'll be glad enough to teach you!"

The girl stood there, flushing deeply.

"Oh, you—you cad!" she exclaimed, with hot emphasis.

And she swished round, and walked out of the study, holding her head high. Uncle Dan followed, without even giving another glance in De Valerie's direction. The junior stood there, scowling with passion.

And it made him ten times angrier to realise that he had acted in a manner which was totally foreign to his own nature. Something had goaded him on to say things that he never meant to say.

And even as he had been uttering the words, he had been amazed and shocked at himself—only to say harsher things the next moment. He couldn't understand why he had done it, and he felt that he could kick anything that came within reach of his foot.

But he put all the blame on to others—it was their fault for irritating him, and for upsetting him. Not a trace of remorse came to him. He stuck to the position that he had done nothing to be ashamed of.

And Cousin Mary's last words had hit him like the lash of a whip. The expression she had put into that word "cad" made De Valerie squirm as he remembered it. He kicked savagely at the coalbox, and only succeeded in hurting his toe.

"The miserable little minx!" he snapped. "I'll make her suffer for that! Coming into my study, and calling me a cad! By jingo! I'll—I'll——"

He broke off, hardly knowing what his own thoughts were. And for some few moments he paced up and down impatiently, and with the feeling within him that he was the most unjustly treated person on earth. For some unknown reason, everybody was against him—everybody hated him.

His mood was such that he would not admit that any fault lay within himself. The quarrel with Somerton was entirely the duke's fault. The row about the Fund had been brought on simply because a lot of fools interfered with other people's business. It was a pity if he had to give his money for some worthless, good-for-nothing ruffian in the village!

And it was too confoundedly thick of his Uncle Dan to come bursting in upon him without letting him know a word beforehand. All the trouble had been caused by these others, and he wasn't to blame at all. To call him selfish was ridiculous. He wasn't selfish—never had been!

It was in this strain that De Valerie argued with himself. He was worked up to such a pitch that he didn't want to see anybody for hours and hours. And if he was disturbed again, he'd say a few more things!

He strode over to the door, and savagely turned the key in the lock. Then he went back to the fireplace, kicked the glowing coals into a blaze, and pulled up the easy-chair.

He sat down, lay back, and glowered fiercely and maliciously into the twisting, flickering flames. He could see all sorts of faces forming themselves among the red embers—faces that seemed to leer at him, and it appeared that a human figure stood there, in the middle of the burning coals—a figure that pointed an accusing finger in his direction. De Valerie breathed hard.

Tap—tap!

He sat forward, utterly and absolutely exasperated.

"Go away!" he shouted thickly. "I don't want to be disturbed!"

"It's me—Uncle Dan!" came the voice of Mr. Cunningham. "Open this door a moment, Cecil—I command you. Let's have no more of this silly nonsense!"

De Valerie got to his feet, and hesitated.

"It's no good, uncle—it won't make any difference!" he called out. "Can't you leave a fellow alone?"

"Open the door!"

With a muttered exclamation, De Valerie crossed over, and turned the key. He flung the door open, and Uncle Dan stood there looking at him with a stern, angry face. It seemed to the junior that Mr. Cunningham had become more determined and masterful.

"I thought I would come back before leaving the school," said Uncle Dan quietly. "I believe, Cecil, that we dropped in upon you just at the moment of an unfortunate quarrel. I am quite prepared to overlook many of your thoughtless utterances. If you will only apologise to your cousin ——"

"Why should I?" demanded De Valerie.

"That is a question which needs no answer," replied Uncle Dan. "You ought to know well enough why you should apologise. You treated Mary with a discourtesy which amounted to a positive insult. If you cannot distinguish between right and wrong, my present mission is futile."

De Valerie sneered.

"It is!" he said sourly. "I don't care a hang for Cousin Mary."

What made him say it? What mischievous demon caused him to use those words when, in his heart, he knew well enough that he cared far more for Cousin Mary's opinion than anybody else's?

But Uncle Dan closed his mouth like a trap.

"Very well!" he said curtly. "That is quite sufficient. I shall never ask a favour of you again, Cecil. You are utterly selfish, inconsiderate, and objectionable!"

He turned, and walked away, and De Valerie felt quite triumphant. In that moment he felt that the victory was his. He would show people that he wasn't going to be sat on!

Somewhere within him he had a lingering hope that this outburst of temper would

subside, and that he would be a little sorry for his actions and his ill-considered words.

But now, after his uncle's second visit, he paced up and down the study, and told himself that he didn't care a hang for anybody. If everybody in the school turned against him, he wouldn't care! Let them!"

Never would he admit himself in the wrong—because he wasn't in the wrong! To express a moment's sorrow now would simply mean that he was caving in—tamely knuckling under.

And he wouldn't knuckle under—never! He would remain strong and firm, and prove, in the end, that his attitude was justified.

He didn't want to sit in front of the fire any more—he wanted to be doing something. He rather liked the sound which came from outside. The wind had increased, and snowflakes were pattering noisily against the window-pane. It was quite pleasant to listen to

He passed out of the study, and went down the passage. And he had only gone a few paces before he ran into Reginald Pitt. The latter looked at him rather curiously.

"Still in the same old tantrums?" he asked calmly.

"Go to the dickens!" snarled De Valerie.

"Thanks—but I'd rather not," replied Pitt. "You can take it from me, my son, that things will be pretty warm for you in the Remove if you don't change a bit. The fellows are rather fed up with your attitude over the Fund."

"Do you think I care?"

"I think you will care!" replied Pitt curtly. "And you'll jolly well learn that it doesn't pay to be as mean as a miser! You're simply rolling in money, and yet you can't whack out a quid or two!"

"I'll do what I like with my own money!"

"I hope it burns you!" said Pitt. "You're a rotten cad, and you know it. You're the last chap in the world I should have expected to act in this way. It may interest you to know that Nipper is still holding up that Fund until you subscribe."

"He'll have to hold it up a good time, then!" retorted De Valerie savagely. "He'll get my whack when the moon turns green!"

"Do you mean to tell me that you won't give anything?" inquired Pitt. "Nipper has positively declared that he'll keep the Fund waiting a couple of days, if necessary."

"Then Griggs and his family will starve in the meantime," sneered De Valerie.

"If they do, it'll be your fault," replied Pitt. "They're pretty well on the edge now, so if any disaster happens, the blame will rest on your shoulders. Don't forget that."

"You're a fool!" growled the other. "I've already told Nipper that I'm not going to pay a farthing, and if he cares to keep the Fund open, it'll be his own idiotic fault."

He passed on, still scowling.

In the lobby he came across Archie Glenthorne, who was standing there, talking with Phipps, his valet. Phipps had his overcoat and hat on, and was apparently setting forth for the village on some errand.

"I think that's about all, Phipps," said Archie. "Don't forget to biff into the grocer's and obtain a somewhat large supply of fish-paste. The supplies are short, and it seems to me that fish-paste is just the absolute stuff to brace a chappie up."

"What variety would you care for, Sir?" asked Phipps.

"That, good lad, I leave to you," said Archie, with a wave. "I mean to say, I'm not partic. Lobster, anchovy, crab, roach, pike, or any old thing. I was reading in some priceless volume that fish is somewhat stimulating to the brain. I think that's dashed good, what?"

"I shall obain a large amount of fish-paste, sir," said Phipps gravely.

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I don't think there's anything else. Of course, you've got the throat tablets firmly engraved on the old plates of memory? You mustn't forget the throat tablets, Phipps. I mean to say, the vocal department is getting dashed hoarse. In fact, the young master is somewhat run down. The good old tissues are at a low ebb!"

"Quite so, sir," said Phipps.

De Valerie brushed past roughly, and Archie staggered slightly. He gazed after De Valerie with a frown.

"That, Phipps, is what a chap might correctly term a blister!" he observed.

"Pardon, sir?"

"A blister, Phipps!" said Archie, with a nod towards De Valerie. "In other words, a blot upon the old landscape. De Valerie has been playing the jolly old deuce, and I should say that the outlook for him is black and scaly!"

De Valerie turned, scowling.

"Can't you mind your own confounded business?" he snapped.

"Gadzooks!" exclaimed Archie. "You observe, Phipps? Here we are—absolutely on the spot. I mean to say, just you and I, standing here, chatting as one chappie to another. We converse—we hold a little homely conclave. And this lump of garbage butts in—absolutely butts in, don't you know!"

"Take no notice of him, sir," said Phipps diplomatically.

"Rather not," exclaimed Archie. "Or, in other words, rather! That is to say, absolutely no notice whatever! At one period, Phipps, I regarded De Valerie as one of the lads of the village—one of the select circle, so to speak. But now he's outside the jolly old ring. In future I shall cut him so bally coldly that he'll sprout icicles!"

De Valerie felt that if he really started, he would slaughter Archie on the spot. And to take any action of that sort with Phipps present, was quite impossible. For Phipps would not hesitate to take a hand in the game.

So De Valerie, clenching his fists, strode out into the Triangle. He didn't care about the weather. In fact, he was rather glad that he had not troubled to don his overcoat. The wind was howling mournfully, and snowflakes were hissing down with ever-increasing violence.

They were tiny snowflakes, for the temperature was well below freezing point. And De Valerie paced up and down the Triangle, chilled to the marrow. What did he care, anyhow? If he caught pneumonia, and died, it might be all the better! Then, perhaps, the chaps would be a bit sorry!

However, this foolish mood didn't last long. He suddenly made up his mind that he would go indoors. But he wouldn't say a word to anybody. If the chaps addressed him, he would cut them dead. He wouldn't give anybody a chance to cut him first.

De Valerie had not repented in the least. That demon still held command of his victim.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN IN THE SNOW.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" said Jack Grey excitedly.

"It's true, you ass—absolutely true!"

"You're trying to spoof me——"

"Go and look in the lobby if you're not satisfied!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "It's there as large as life—pinned on the board. A notice, signed by the Head himself."

Cecil De Valerie gazed at the juniors from beneath lowering brows. It was morning now, and he was lounging against one of the posts at the bottom of the Ancient House steps. The sun was shining, the wind had died down, and everywhere lay a coating of fine whiteness.

The snow had not been so much after all, and the frost had held. Skating would be absolutely perfect to-day. But De Valerie didn't want to skate—although only the previous morning he had been looking forward to the prospect with a great amount of eagerness.

He had been ignored by all and sundry—and this hurt him more than anything. Even Somerton had not come anywhere near him. Pitt, Levi, Singleton, and all the others had taken studied care in avoiding him.

De Valerie had not missed all this.

And so he held aloof—bitterly telling himself that he didn't care. Why, indeed, should he care? They weren't worth worrying about. He'd done nothing wrong, and he wasn't going to be the first to break the ice.

And so he hung about there, at the foot of the Ancient House steps, openly defiant and inwardly rebellious. He made out that he was utterly indifferent to the attitude of the Remove.

He found himself listening in a disinterested kind of way to the conversation of Pitt and Grey. And then Handforth and Co. came out of the lobby, all of them looking flushed and excited.

"Good old Head!" exclaimed Church, with enthusiasm. "My hat! I never thought he was such a sport!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "Dr. Stafford's all right!"

"One of the best!" said McClure.

"And only yesterday everybody was railing at him like one o'clock!" grinned Pitt. "He was run down by all and sundry. Oh, to be a Headmaster! It must be a glorious life—I don't think!"

"Well, how the dickens were we to know that he'd turn up trumps like this?" demanded Handforth. "Yesterday, he said that no skating would be allowed. And this morning he's not only given permission that we can all go on the ice, but he's stamped the thing with a kind of hall-mark by giving the giddy school a whole holiday!"

De Valerie started.

The information was news to him. A whole holiday! And he was moping about on his own—perverse, miserable, and in a don't care mood. What would he have given for such an opportunity as this a day or two earlier?

And there was no doubt about the matter at all.

The whole school was cheering, and the excitement ran high. Instead of the Head's popularity being at a low ebb, it was at flood tide. He was looked upon as a kind of magician, and respected and loved by all.

A whole holiday—on a day when there wasn't even an ordinary half-holiday! And the Head had done this just because the frost had come, and the skating was good. It was really an unprecedented favour to the school, and just one of those little human touches which Dr. Stafford was famous for. The loss of time at lessons would be practically nothing compared to the benefit the boys would receive from the healthy sport.

And the English climate is not so reliable that a day's skating can be put off. That was probably why the Head had granted this whole holiday. By the morrow, perhaps, a thaw would come, and that would end all hopes—for, after all, the real winter had hardly commenced.

Everybody thought themselves extremely lucky to have any skating at all, so early in December. The winter looked like being one of the good old-fashioned sort. But one could never tell, and so it was far better

to grab the chance of skating while it was here.

It was not yet breakfast-time, and dozens of fellows were bustling about, diving into trunks and boxes, frantically searching cupboards, and begging for pieces of emery cloth from the housemaid.

Skates were being searched up--and, as most of them were rusty, they were being cleaned and polished. A great many fellows didn't have any skates at all, and numbers rushed down to the village, careless of missing breakfast, because it had been reported that Mr. Sharpe, the ironmonger had been enterprising enough to lay in a large stock of skates.

"We're going to have a glorious day, too," declared Pitt, as he looked up at the sky. "Not a sign of any more snow, and the barometer's as steady as a rock. I've heard that we can skate up the Stowe as far as Pilling, and that's ten miles away."

"Ripping!" said Church.

He saw that Handforth was looking at De Valerie, who had been listening in a kind of sullen temper to this talk. And Handforth seemed to be rather less aggressive than usual.

The great Edward Oswald, for all his bluster, had an absurdly soft heart. He hated to see anybody down in the dumps. At one hour he would punch a fellow's nose, and declare that he would never speak to him again. And in the next hour he would slap him on the back, lend him five bob, and peace would be restored.

He was quite disgusted with De Valerie for the way in which the latter had acted. But it touched Handy's heart to see the junior standing there, aloof and alone. He didn't mean to speak, but couldn't help himself.

"Got your skates ready, old man?" he asked casually.

"No!" replied De Valerie.

He bit his lip, for he hadn't meant to say anything at all. At the same time, he was aware of a feeling of pleasure that Handforth had addressed him. When he was his usual self, De Valerie was a cheery soul, and hated being left out in the cold.

"Better buck up, then," said Handforth. "If you haven't got any skates, you'll have to look alive, or they'll all be sold——"

"You needn't worry. I'm not skating, thanks!" interrupted De Valerie, with a sudden return of viciousness which he could not account for. "The river will be a bit too crowded, and I'm rather particular who I mix with!"

The bitter words were uttered in a stinging, contemptuous tone. And Handforth instinctively clenched his fists.

"You—you insulting rotter!" he roared. "I was a silly idiot to say anything to you! I might have expected what I should get! It's the last time I'll try to be soft again!"

He turned away, breathing hard. And De Valerie walked off, heaping fierce condemnations upon his own head. What a fool! Why couldn't he have seized this chance to make matters a bit better? The opening had been there, and all he could do was to add to the friction.

He went into breakfast merely as a matter of course. Not because he wanted any. And as he sat there, studiously ignored by all the other juniors, the bitterness entered his soul more than ever.

The meal was rather a snatchy one, for there was a gay spirit in the air, and even the masters were influenced by it. There was not the usual decorum at table, and all sorts of light-hearted jokes were passed to and fro. In addition to that, everybody was hurrying, so that they could get out and enjoy themselves.

It seemed to De Valerie that the whole community had plotted and planned to conspire against him. While he was so miserable, everybody was happy. And yet some little whisper within him indicated that it might be changed, if he allowed it. But the spirit of obstinacy held the upper hand.

He wouldn't weaken, he was in the right, and he would hold out.

And so, as soon as breakfast was over, he mooched off by himself. He would make all the juniors feel how rottenly they were treating him. But as he watched the fellows getting ready for the day's sport, he did not see many indications of sympathy for him.

In fact, he was ignored--nobody had a thought for him.

"Oh, all right—hang the lot of them!" muttered De Valerie savagely. "I wouldn't go with them, even if they asked me."

He suddenly determined that he would go for a ramble—a long walk along the frosty country road. After all, this would do him more good than skating.

Just as if he was going to teach his Cousin Mary how to skate. The nerve of it! Coming over to St. Frank's and demanding that he should go back! He wasn't a skating instructor!

His thoughts were as bitter as ever as he strode along the country lanes. He didn't pay much heed where he went—in fact, he didn't actually know which direction he took. He was only aware that he was walking along the smallest lanes he could find, with snow-covered hedges on either side.

He was alone—absolutely. Ever since he had started out he hadn't passed a soul. And for this he felt very grateful. He didn't want to meet anybody. His only thought was to be alone.

He told himself that he had been altogether too considerate for the others in the past. That was why they had attempted to impose on him. In future he would be different.

People could call it selfishness if they liked, but he wouldn't care. He would go his own way—and look after himself solely. It was the only way to be happy—although

if this was happiness, De Valerie didn't seem to be enjoying it.

His thoughts strayed towards the Fund which was being raised for old Griggs. In a perverted kind of way, De Valerie considered this to be humorous. The Fund was still open—waiting for his contribution.

Well, it could wait! All the money he had was his own property, and he wasn't going to be told how to spend it! Not likely! It was a pretty fine thing when a crowd of chaps came and told him how to spend his own money!

What did he care if Griggs did starve? The man was nothing to him, and he thought even less of the other members of the Griggs family. Why, he hadn't even seen them.

De Valerie, in short, was going from bad to worse.

Being alone was responsible for this probably. For he was allowed to brood, and there was no other influence to assist him. He felt that every hand was against him, and he would fight the lot.

In a subconscious kind of way, he knew that he was in the somewhat broader lane which ran from the hamlet of Edgemore to Bellton. And he could feel some snowflakes falling.

This caused him to look up at the sky.

When he had last eyed the weather conditions, the sun was shining. But now, in some strange way, the whole sky had become overcast, and snow was beginning to fall in big, heavy flakes. And with this sudden snowstorm came a wind—a chill, cutting wind, which seemed to have a bite in it.

But De Valerie didn't care.

He still trudged on, and within five minutes the snow was whirling down in real earnest, and the wind had increased to a miniature gale. It was a rather severe snow squall which would probably soon be over.

And now, as he walked, he had a most peculiar experience. Straining his eyes, it seemed to him that a shadowy kind of figure was about twenty or thirty yards in advance.

He couldn't see distinctly, but he was certain that some shape kept there, at about the same distance. The effect was rather uncanny, for amid those whirling snowflakes the figure seemed ghostly and unreal.

What could it be?

De Valerie, forgetting all his troubles and worries, moved faster. He wanted to make his mind easy on this matter. And so he hurried along in order to overtake the mysterious figure.

He didn't know how long it was before he actually overtook the other, but it seemed to be hours. He had an eerie kind of sensation that he couldn't overtake the illusive figure, like one experiences in a dream.

Then there came a momentary lull in the storm—just a clear space for a second or two. And De Valerie grunted with disgust. For the figure, after all, was merely that of a man pushing a hand-cart!

Owing to the snow on the road, De Valerie had not been able to hear the wheels. And the whirling flakes had prevented him from seeing properly. And he could see that the man was hurrying, pushing the barrow with all his energy.

There was something strange about his gait.

It was uncertain—wavering and unsteady. As he walked, he swayed and lurched from side to side. But he continued to push the barrow in safety. And now De Valerie was rapidly overtaking him.

A curious thought came to him—a thought which rapidly became a certainty. This man in front of him was Griggs—Griggs the carrier! And here he was, as drunk as a lord, pushing his confounded handcart.

"By gad!" exclaimed De Valerie. "And this is the rotter they expected me to help! Rolling along the road, as full as a barrel!"

It was certainly humorous, this situation.

He would be able to grin at all the other fellows later on, when they found out the truth about Griggs. If the man wasn't drunk, why was he staggering along like that?

The snow was now descending as hard as ever, and so rapidly had it been falling that the lane was covered by a carpet three or four inches thick. De Valerie himself was smothered. And now he understood more clearly why the old carrier had been going so rapidly.

For they were descending a hill. It was the hand-cart itself which had pulled Griggs along—although, possibly, the lazy blackguard would have preferred to go at a dawdle.

And this, indeed, was the case, for in a few minutes Griggs slackened his gait so much that he was only going at a crawl, pushing the barrow with obvious difficulty. It was as much as he could do.

They were ascending the little hill out of the valley, and Griggs was finding it hard to push his barrow. The man did not even know that De Valerie was so near, for he was giving all his attention to the work.

Then, suddenly, he slipped.

He fell sprawling, the hand-cart slewed round, and tipped up into one of the snow-covered banks. A miscellaneous assortment of odds and ends slithered out, and lay there in a jumbled up heap.

Griggs attempted to rise, and he succeeded in getting to his feet. But he swayed, his knees sagged, and he fell again, uttering a low groan. De Valerie, who had paused, looked on with contemptuous interest.

The fellow was so drunk, that once having fallen, he couldn't get up again! De Valerie walked forward, considering that here was an opportunity to say a few words of well-merited reproach.

He advanced, arrived opposite the prostrate man, and looked down at him. Griggs

was just trying to struggle up again. Then he caught sight of De Valerie, and held out a hand appealingly.

"Thank heaven you've come, young sir!" he said weakly. "I hopes you don't mind giving me a hand up, sir? My legs don't seem to be what they used to be. I'm feelin' mortal queer, sir!"

De Valerie looked at him with a slight catch in his throat.

Instead of a bloated, beer-soaked face, there was something quite different. The rugged countenance of Griggs was as pale and ashen as that of a corpse. His cheeks were stricken, his eyes hollow. And it seemed to De Valerie that the eyes burned with a feverish, unnatural light.

In a flash he forgot all his own affairs.

He bent down beside the man, and then went on his knees.

"I say, pull yourself together, Griggs!" he exclaimed quickly. "It's all right—you only just slipped over."

Griggs sighed with a kind of contentment as he felt himself raised in De Valerie's arm. There was a peaceful expression on his face now, but no flush in the ashen cheeks.

De Valerie knew well enough that this man had not been drinking. There was no sign of it. His lips were blue with cold, and there was scarcely any wonder for this. For Griggs' ragged overcoat was almost threadbare, and De Valerie caught a glimpse of the suit he wore underneath. It was thin—somebody's cast-off summer wear, by the look of it. And the man's boots were gaping with holes. To be walking abroad in a snowstorm thus attired was ghastly.

Obviously, the stories about Griggs were true. He really was at the last extremity. And, certainly, a man in his condition ought never to have been working on such a day. De Valerie felt angry.

"Why on earth did you come out?" he demanded gruffly. "Good Heavens; that's a horrible cough you've got! You'll catch pneumonia if you're not careful!"

"It's all right; it don't much matter now, anyway, sir!" said Griggs weakly. "I don't reckon I'll last long enough to catch no illness. I didn't ought to have come out today. But a man can't allus do what he wants."

"You must have been ill before you started," said De Valerie. "I thought you were drunk at first, the way you were lurching along."

"Drunk!" Griggs uttered a weak, hollow laugh. "Bless your heart, sir, I ain't touched a drop of anything except water for the last ten days! We haven't had no wood for a fire, and no money to buy tea. I dessay I was a fool to come out this mornin', but there was a chance of earnin' a honest shillin'."

"A shilling!" muttered De Valerie dazedly.

"'Tain't much, sir, but I could ha' bought bread, an' a bit o' cheese for the kiddies," muttered Griggs. "But it's over now, sir; 'tain't any good grumblin'. They did say as some o' the kind folks was goin' to help me along a bit with one of them subscriptions. I was a fool to hope for it, sir. In these 'ere days people ain't got money to spare to 'elp a poor man what's had hard luck!"

De Valerie could see that the man was hurrying and pushing the barrow with all his energy.

"It's all right, Griggs, our chaps are getting up a fund," said De Valerie eagerly. "They were thinking of bringing some money down to you last night. But it's certain to be handed over to-day."

Griggs clutched at him with a fever of joy in his eyes.

"Gawd bless ye, sir!" he said faintly. "Gawd bless ye! I can go better now—more peaceful like! It won't seem so 'ard! 'Cos I shall know that the wife and kids'll be looked arter. She told me not to go out this mornin'. Mebbe, if I had stayed home, I'd ha' pulled through."

De Valerie was aghast.

"You'll pull through as it is," he said almost gruffly. "There's no sense in talking like that, Griggs. Look here, I'll give you a hand. If I can manage to hoist you on to that hand-cart, I'll buzz you home in no time——"

"It ain't no good, sir," said Griggs, his voice dropping to a mere whisper. "I couldn't do it—I ain't no more good in this world. But I'm a-goin' out of it more 'appy becos I met you. It's reglar 'ard when a man 'as to pass out without sayin' a word durin' his last minutes——"

"Good heavens!" muttered De Valerie hoarsely.

"Good-bye, sir. I ain't got long now!" breathed Griggs, as he feebly clutched at De

Valerie's sleeve. "Tell—tell the wife I was thinkin' of 'er! An' the kids, sir! I—I ain't forgot 'em. I—I——"

His voice trailed away, and then it seemed to De Valerie that all the rigidity went out of the man's body. He flopped back, and his eyes closed. He lay there, in De Valerie's arms, still and silent, and there was a peaceful expression upon his poor, rugged face.

De Valerie was nearly mad with emotion and fear. In spite of himself, great floods of tears welled into his eyes. The man had fainted—fainted from sheer lack of sustenance.

He had been starving for days. By the look of him, he hadn't tasted a morsel of food for a week. And all this was because he had come out this morning. He ought to have been in bed—with hot broth and blankets and a blazing fire. And all these things could have been provided if that money had been sent last night!

De Valerie's mind was in a whirl. He had never seen anybody in a faint like this before. It was terrible—ghastly. And the junior felt all the more horrified because the thought came to him, stunning and smashingly hard, that he was mainly to blame.

And then, as he still crouched there with the unfortunate Griggs in his arms, he heard a kind of purring noise in his rear. He glanced round, and saw that a small motor car was coming along through the thick snow.

De Valerie gave a gasp of relief. He had never been more thankful to see a stranger. He gently allowed Griggs' head to fall in the snow, and he rose to his feet.

"Stop—stop!" he shouted.

But the motorist needed no bidding. He had already stopped, and was just climbing out of the driving-seat as De Valerie ran up. Then the junior was further gladdened by the fact that this newcomer was Dr. Brett, the village practitioner.

"Oh, thank goodness it's you, Dr. Brett!" panted De Valerie.

"Why, my boy, what on earth's the matter?" asked the doctor curiously. "Good gracious! Who's that?"

"It's old Griggs, sir! The village carrier!" broke in De Valerie. "He was pushing his barrow up this hill when he fell down, and I went to help him. But he's fainted! The poor old fellow's collapsed in my arms. Let's get him home, sir, for goodness sake!"

Dr. Brett looked grave.

"Griggs!" he exclaimed. "I saw the man yesterday, in the High Street, and he looked more like a corpse than anything else! He ought never to have come out in this storm—on such a cold day, too!"

"Oh, please look at him, Dr. Brett!" pleaded De Valerie.

The man needed no second bidding. He hurried across the snow-covered road to the spot where Griggs lay still. Dr. Brett knelt down in the snow, raised the old carrier's head, and then he gave a sharp exclamation.

"Well, sir?" said De Valerie huskily.

Dr. Brett made no reply. He felt for Griggs' heart, and placed a hand there for a few moments. Then, looking at De Valerie with grave, pained eyes, he slowly removed the hat from his head.

De Valerie felt a great lump rise into his throat.

"You—you don't mean——" He paused, afraid to utter the words.

"My boy, I am too late!" said Dr. Brett quietly. "This man is dead!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOLE IN THE ICE!

CECIL DE VALERIE felt that the world had crashed to atoms.

It seemed that blinding flashes appeared before his vision, and there was something thudding in his brain. But it was only for a moment. Then, in a flash, those dreadful words of Dr. Brett's came to him clearly.

He found himself looking down at the still figure in a fascinated way.

"Dead!" he stammered. "But—but—— Oh, you've made a mistake, sir!" he burst out. "He can't be dead! It's impossible——"

"Steady—steady!" exclaimed Dr. Brett, as he gently laid a handkerchief over the white face. "I'm a doctor, De Valerie, and I don't make mistakes of that kind. I'm more grieved than I can say, because Griggs was such a simple, honest fellow. He died through starvation and exposure!"

De Valerie clenched his fists, and his own face was as pale as a sheet. All his limbs trembled, and his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Dead!" he said, nearly choking. "And—and would he have lived, sir, if he had got into a proper bed last night, with blankets and food——"

"I have not the slightest doubt that Griggs would have recovered his full health and strength," interrupted Dr. Brett. "But it is idle to talk in that way, my boy. If I had known Griggs was so ill I would have done something for him. It is a pity—a terrible pity!"

De Valerie stood there as motionless as a statue.

"Oh, I—I——"

He broke off, and sobbed in great, heartbreaking gulps. He couldn't help himself. The thing was more than he could stand, and it was only with great difficulty that Dr. Brett managed to soothe and calm him.

And while De Valerie was attempting to gain a further hold on himself, Dr. Brett lifted up the pitiful remains and placed them reverently in his car.

"You had better come with me, too, De Valerie," he said quietly. "This shock has

been a great one for a boy, and I can well understand your emotions. Come home with me, and I'll soon make you feel better——"

"No—no!" said De Valerie fiercely. "I don't want to come, sir—I want to be alone—alone! Don't bother about me! I shall be all right; a walk in the cold air will do me better than medicine!"

Dr Brett considered for a moment and then nodded.

The lad was distraught, and matters would not be improved by taking him along in the car with the dead body. It would be better, perhaps, to let him go for his walk. He was well wrapped up, and would come to no harm. Besides, the doctor couldn't delay.

"Very well, my boy," he said. "Go for your walk."

De Valerie didn't seem to hear. He hardly knew that the car had started off. In fact, De Valerie didn't know anything—until, suddenly, he found himself quite alone.

He awoke from a kind of trance, and a wild, despairing hope came to him that his imagination had been running riot. But there was no chance of this. There was poor old Griggs' hand-cart—upturned, with its pitiful assortment of odds and ends in the snow.

"He's dead—he's dead!" breathed De Valerie remorsefully. "And—and I could have saved him! Oh, how did I know? How could I guess that things were so bad as that!"

He walked along, blindly—not caring where he went.

"It isn't fair!" he burst out. "The fellows didn't tell me it was as serious as all that——" He paused. "But they did tell me!" he went on fiercely. "It's my fault—absolutely my fault entirely!"

The fact came to him that if he had contributed to the fund the previous evening all would have been well. Dr. Brett himself had said that Griggs would have lived. This man's death was on his hands! It was too awful for words. It couldn't be true—it was too horrible to be true.

But De Valerie always got back to the same starting point. It was true! There was no shadow of doubt about it. And, with overwhelming force, the realisation of his own selfishness and meanness struck him like a blow.

But what a price to pay for enlightenment! What a terrible lesson this was—and how cruel that old Griggs should be the main sufferer! Why was life so bitter and remorseless?

De Valerie had never felt so absolutely miserable in all his life. He walked on unconsciously, and did not even know that he was getting nearer and nearer to the River Stowe.

The snow had ceased to fall now, and the sky was clearing once again. But De Valerie didn't know anything of this—he had no thoughts for the conditions of the weather.

Neither had he any realisation of the passage of time. Five minutes might have passed—ten—perhaps a whole hour. He did not know. He wasn't even aware that he had left the road, and wandered off through a kind of skeleton wood to a spot where a steep hill-side ran down to the banks of the river.

It lay stretched before him now—a winding sheet of ice, peaceful and alluring. In the far distance figures could be seen—fellows keenly enjoying themselves, skating, and flushed with warmth and health.

They knew nothing of this tragedy which had just occurred.

"Oh, what a fool Nipper was not to have sent that subscription last night!" muttered De Valerie huskily. "He's to blame as much as I am! If only he had sent that money——"

But he paused, wringing his hands. It was no good trying to get away from the truth—It was no good trying to put the blame on somebody else's shoulders. He was the cause of everything!

Then his heart jumped strangely.

From afar, as though unreal and ghostly, came a shrill cry. De Valerie was on the alert in a second. And the scream came again—a wild, despairing cry for help. This time it was louder.

De Valerie turned, every nerve on the stretch. He stared down towards the river, and he could hardly believe his eyes. Some little distance away there was a change in that stretch of ice. There, in one spot, near the very centre of the stream, a sinister black hole had appeared—a black hole, with jagged edges.

And as De Valerie looked, the head and shoulders of a girl rose up—a girl, attired in a musquash coat, with a neat fur toque. The distance was considerable, but the air was clear, and somehow, De Valerie's vision seemed to be extraordinarily acute.

The girl was Cousin Mary!

And then she vanished—she slipped back into that black patch of deadly, icy water, and she did not appear again. And this blow, coming so suddenly after the other dreadful affair, was nearly enough to send De Valerie crazy. It was too horrible for contemplation.

His cousin, struggling in the icy waters of the Stowe! Not another soul was in the vicinity, although De Valerie could see dim, indistinct figures speeding up the river from the lower reaches.

There was only one person in the world who could save the girl—and that was himself. He was galvanised into fierce activity.

His cousin—that sweetly pretty girl—had been skating unescorted. She was a novice, she knew practically nothing about the sport. But she was high-spirited and confident, and she had obviously set out on her skates without troubling anybody to accompany her.

And it was De Valerie's fault!

He, like a blackguard, had refused to go out with her, and this tragedy was the re-

suit. It was another outcome of his mean, contemptible selfishness. But he would save his cousin!

No other thought entered into his head.

He had to save her—he had to!

One tragedy had already happened to-day because of his horrible caddishness. It would be frightful beyond measure if a second took place. And it was Mary this time—Mary, his own little cousin. De Valerie knew well enough that the girl was one of the sweetest little things on earth.

And, even as he ran, he was horrified at the realisation of his own ungentlemanly conduct of the evening before. It hadn't struck him so at the time. Even this morning he had tried to convince himself that he was in the right. But he wasn't. Nobody on earth had ever been so much in the wrong!

He found that he couldn't go direct down to the river bank. For just here the hillside was so steep that it became a precipice. He had to make a detour, and in a few minutes he found himself tearing through a wood. The further he ran the deeper he seemed to get.

Panting, gasping for breath, he ran on. It seemed hours before, at length, he broke out into the open once more. And all the time Mary was in that icy water, sinking into the depths.

His thoughts came to an abrupt halt, for he could see across a short meadow now—he could see the spot where Mary had vanished. And a number of juniors had come up. Shouts were in the air, and there was a great commotion.

De Valerie felt that he was going mad, and he ran over the meadow like one possessed. At almost every other stride he broke through thin patches of ice. But he struggled on. At last he tore on to the ice of the river.

There were five or six juniors there—Handforth, Church, McClure, Reginald Pitt, and Jack Grey, and Solomon Levi.

All except Pitt and Handforth were standing near that gaping hole in the ice. Pitt and Handforth were in the water. They were hoisting something out—something limp and still. A choking cry of relief came into De Valerie's voice. He was too late—but they had got her. They had pulled her out! But it was a terrible task to bring the girl to safety.

Again and again the ice broke. But with the help of the others Handforth and Pitt struggled on. And at last Cousin Mary lay there on the ice. Church and McClure had ripped off their coats, and these were wrapped round the girl in next to no time.

Jack Grey and Levi had taken their overcoats off, too, and they were put round the shoulders of Mary's resscuers.

A spell seemed to be broken, and De Valerie rushed forward.

"Is—is she all right?" he croaked.

The juniors turned, and looked at him with pale, drawn faces.

"I—I don't know!" said Handforth, between chattering teeth. "Goodness knows, we did our best!"

"Mary — Mary!" shouted De Valerie.

He flung himself down on his knees, and lifted the girl in his arms. Her pretty face was as white as a sheet, even to the lips. Her toque had fallen off, and her hair lay wet and tangled about her head. There was no sign of life—not a twitch or a flicker.

"Oh!" wailed De Valerie. "She's dead!"

"No, she can't be—it's impossible!" gasped McClure. "I've seen somebody like this before—she'll come round if we try artificial respiration. Quick! There's not a second to waste, or she'll die of exposure."

De Valerie seemed incapable of doing anything.

In a kind of trance, he watched the others at work. They massaged the girl's hands and arms—they pumped her arms up and down in a way that seemed utterly cruel. But they were fighting—fighting for her life, as boys had never fought before.

De Valerie was utterly stunned. The tragedy of old Griggs had been ghastly enough. But this, immediately after it, was like thrusting a knife into an open wound. He literally shuddered with the agony of it.

Hadn't the first lesson been enough?

Why was Fate so cruel as to cause this other calamity—just to show him his own brutality and selfishness? It wasn't necessary that Mary should have suffered so fearfully. It was cruel—cruel!

A voice came to him like a whisper.

"It's no good, you chaps—it's no good!" it said.

"You think she is gone?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, good heavens!"

De Valerie gave a wild, awful cry.

The other juniors, turning to him, saw that he had wilted like a flower in an icy blast. And he was sobbing convulsively.

"It's all my fault—it's all my fault!" he said chokingly. "Can't you understand, you chaps? I'm to blame for everything!"

"The fellow's overwrought!" muttered Jack Grey uneasily.

"I'm not—I'm not!" shouted De Valerie. "Look at me, and then you can picture my misery! I wish I had fallen into the river instead of Mary! It wouldn't matter if I was drowned—it would be all the better!"

"Steady, old man!" said Church quickly.

"You think I'm mad, but I'm not!" went on De Valerie. "Oh, I was a mean cad last night! This is my cousin—my own cousin! She asked me to teach her how to skate, and I refused! I was a brute—a cur! She came out alone, and this is what happened! She broke through the ice, and—and——"

"But it wasn't your fault, De Valerie!" put in Grey. "I dare say you were a rotter last night, but——"

"It was my fault!" insisted De Valerie. "I never realised what a hound I was until

now! Selfishness—it's the biggest curse of anything! Selfishness has led to all this tragedy!"

"I don't think she's dead!" muttered Handforth. "We pulled her out as soon as we could!"

"There's Griggs, too—Griggs, the carrier!" said De Valerie dully. "He's dead—and that's my fault——"

"Griggs dead!"

"He's mad!"

"Griggs is dead!" said De Valerie simply. "The poor old chap died in my arms! Oh!"

"You can't be serious——"

"Can't be serious!" echoed De Valerie bitterly. "Do you think I'd say things like that if they weren't true? Yes, I think I am going mad, after all! My brain seems to be on fire! I can't stand it—I can't stand it! It's too much all at once!"

"Don't go on like that, old man!" muttered Church.

"Why couldn't I have seen before?" shouted the wretched junior. "Oh, why couldn't I have stopped all this by acting decently, instead of being such a brute and a beast? It was bad enough for Griggs to die, but Mary's dead, too!"

"We can't tell—we don't know!" put in Pitt. "But it's madness to stay here—you chaps have got to carry the girl to the school as quick as possible. Handy and I are nearly frozen through!"

"It's no good—it's no good!" exclaimed De Valerie brokenly. "You can't fool me—Mary's gone! She can't recover from this—she can't! Oh, why was I born? Why should I bring such trouble and suffering?"

He swayed, staggered as he stood, and involuntarily took two or three steps backwardwards.

"Look out!" yelled McClure, in alarm.

But it was too late.

Cecil De Valerie, before he could stop himself, felt the ice cracking and splintering beneath his feet. He had unwittingly approached the edge—the danger zone.

And then, before he could recover his balance, the ice cracked into a thousand fragments. He felt himself going down. The cold, black waters enveloped him.

He slipped down and down, and the icy waters closed over his head. He was choking, and fight as he might, he found it impossible to rise. His limbs were numbed, his mind was tottering.

The River Stowe had claimed him!

CHAPTER VII.

HAMMERED IN!

CRASH!

Cecil De Valerie, struggling fiercely for life, fought desperately and madly against the icy water which swirled cruelly round him. He struck out his hands, and something went over with a splintering sound.

Then, shivering in every limb, he found that he was sitting on something hard. Dazedly, he found that he could open his eyes. He did so, and was dazzled. The bright gleam from an electric light fell upon him.

The icy chill had gone, and there, in front of him, was the fire of Study M, now dying down somewhat. And against the window of the little apartment a few snowflakes pattered.

De Valerie gasped—a great, gulping gasp. Just in front of him, on the floor, lay the shattered remains of a jug, which somebody had apparently knocked off the corner of the table. And the easy-chair was there. Only a minute before De Valerie had fallen out of it.

He picked himself up, steadying himself by clutching the table.

His mind was still in a state of chaos. How did he get into his study? For one brilliant, hopeful second, he had a wild idea that he had been dreaming. But that was impossible—no dream could be so vivid and horrible as this!

No, the truth was obvious. Somehow or other, they had got him out of the river—they had brought him to the school, and had left him in front of the fire. And now he had recovered consciousness.

He looked round, breathing very hard.

His mind began to get a little clearer as the chaos subsided.

But was it possible? If they had dragged him out of the river, wouldn't they have put him straight to bed? Besides, there was nobody with him. It was out of the question that they should have left him alone. His eye caught sight of the door.

The key was in the lock.

De Valerie gave one gulp as he staggered over to it. He gripped the door handle, and pulled.

The door was locked on the inside!

This proved—beyond question—that nobody had been in there. How could the door be locked on the inside if they had brought him in from the river? He glanced at his watch.

Half-past seven!

De Valerie gave one shout of hysterical laughter. He sank down into a hard chair, and leaned over the table. And there was a light of wonderful, glorious relief in his eyes.

"A dream!" he exclaimed faintly. "Only a dream!"

But even now it seemed so mad that he half expected to wake up in a state of delirium, and to find that he was in bed, after all.

Gradually, however, De Valerie convinced himself that it must be a dream. But what about his uncle—and Cousin Mary? Had they really come to the school, or was that part of the dream, too?

He wrestled with himself.

And then, slowly, he remembered. Yes, they had come, but it was only three-

quarters of an hour ago! There had been no next day—no whole holiday and the dying of Griggs—no tragedy on the River Stowe.

But when had he fallen asleep? He tried to bring these things to mind—and succeeded. He remembered locking the door after his uncle and Mary had gone. He had sat in front of the fire—he had sprawled in the armchair.

Yes. That was it!

He recalled staring into the glowing embers, and seeing faces and figures. That was the time! He had closed his eyes, and it seemed to him that his uncle had come back.

But, of course, his uncle hadn't come back.

That was part of the dream! And it was all so vivid that it seemed as though it had really happened. Even now, although he had convinced himself that it had no actuality, he wanted somebody else to clinch it.

He unlocked the study door, and hurried out.

Handforth was just coming along. De Valerie ran up to him, and clutched him by the arm.

"What the dickens——"

"Has—has anything happened, Handforth?" panted De Valerie.

"Yes," said Handforth. "You've been sent to Coventry!'

"I—I mean, my Cousin Mary!" gasped De Valerie. "Did she break through the ice of the river, and—and—— Is she all right?"

Handforth stared.

"Your Cousin Mary?" he repeated. "Oh, that girl who was here with the fat man? I think they're having a talk with Mr. Lee in his study——"

"Oh, thank Heaven!" said De Valerie fervently.

"What the dickens is the matter with you?" demanded Handforth. "Have you been having a nightmare? Did your Cousin Mary break through the ice? What rot!"

"And—and Griggs?" asked De Valerie.

"Griggs!" repeated Handforth, frowning. "The Fund's completed, you mean rotter! Nipper says that Griggs' family need some coal and grub to-night, and so two or three of the chaps are going to buzz down in about ten minutes——"

"Hurrah!" shouted De Valerie joyously.

Without another word, he turned on his heel, and dashed back into Study M, and closed the door. He wanted to be alone again—but only until he had calmed himself down a bit.

A dream!

Yes, there was no doubt about it.

All that ghastly business about Griggs, and the breaking of the ice on the River Stowe—it was nothing but a piece of imagination while he slept. It was too awful to be real—he knew that now.

And a warm thrill surged through him. Everything was all right. There was no need to worry at all. But, suddenly, De Valerie became grave. He was thinking over all the happenings in that vivid nightmare.

And he saw himself as he had been in that picture.

He saw the results that could have occurred because of his selfishness. His vindictive, nasty mood had gone. There was nothing but gladness and generosity in his heart.

His relief was so enormous that he felt that he could do anything. And he shuddered as he saw himself as a cad and a brute.

It was awful—unbelievable!

The way he had treated Somerton, just because the latter had brought Jerry Dodd into the study. The way he had spoken to his uncle and his cousin! He was appalled now that he was able to look at the matter with a true sense of proportion.

Selfish? Of course he had been selfish—unutterably selfish. He deserved to be kicked. He was absolutely ashamed of himself, and as he stood there in Study M, he flushed with the very shame of it.

But there was time to make things right; that was the glorious part of the whole business. In the dream he had been too late every time. He had seen the result of his brutal behaviour, but had been unable to avert the tragedies. But now he had returned to the land of reality.

And Cecil De Valerie had enough sense to allow the lesson to be hammered home. He could not help feeling that this dream had come to him on purpose to show him what kind of a beast he had been.

There was no doubt as to what he should do.

He turned, rushed out of the study, and ran down the passage to the Common-room. He burst in and found that the room was fairly well filled. Pitt and I had our overcoats on.

We looked round at once, and were rather astonished to see the extraordinary difference in De Valerie. There was no more of that sullen, unpleasant expression. He was his old self—the fellow we knew so well.

Pitt and I were just off to the village with five pounds, and we intended giving it to old Griggs at once, so that he would be able to get some firewood and coal and plenty of food. Unless we went immediately, we should be too late for the evening. The shops closed fairly early in Bellton.

"Just the chap I want to see!" exclaimed De Valerie, as he grabbed hold of me. "Oh, Nipper, I'm jolly glad I grabbed you before you went out!"

"Mean rotter!"

"Clear out of here, De Valerie!"

"You've been sent to Coventry by the Form!"

"Don't you speak to him, Nipper!"

"Wait a minute, you fellows," I said quietly. "I've got an idea that De Valerie has been doing a bit of quiet thinking."

"I've had a look at myself as I was an

hour ago, and I'm pretty well disgusted with the picture!" said De Valerie steadily. "I was a cad, a brute, an absolute blackguard!"

"Dash it all!" observed Archie. "Dashed terse what? I mean to say, hard things to say about yourself, laddie! I admit that I regarded your conduct as somewhat on the putrid side; in other words, dashed near the edge. But I wouldn't say that you were a blackguard, or anything of that sort or shape!"

"I was!" declared De Valerie. "And I want the whole Remove to accept my apology. I give it freely, and know that I don't deserve to be forgiven."

The juniors were staring at him in amazement, for such a frank avowal of wrong was very seldom heard. The Duke of Somerton was looking at his study chum with real delight.

"Dear old Val!" he said affectionately. "I knew you'd come round."

De Valerie took something crisp and crinkly from his pocket.

"I want to contribute this to the fund for Griggs," he said quietly.

"I took the money—a five pound note—and then looked up sharply.

"But this is all you've got!" I exclaimed.

"It's my contribution!"

"My dear chap, two quid will be ample——"

"I don't want the money; I'd rather be without it!" interrupted De Valerie. "Poor old Griggs can do with it fifty times more than I can. I've never realised before how selfishness can make a cad out of a chap. Please take it, Nipper; I sha'n't be comfortable if you don't."

I could see that some strange enlightenment had come to him.

"Right you are!" I said heartily. "I'm not going to refuse if you put it like that. I'm jolly glad, Valerie. I knew you were decent at heart; you weren't yourself earlier in the evening."

"Thank Heaven I wasn't!" said De Valerie fervently.

Handforth came over and grabbed the junior's fist.

"Of course, I knew you'd come round like this!" he said. "I told all the chaps that you were one of the best!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean, you said that De Valerie was——"

"Never mind what I said!" roared Handforth. "I withdraw it. He's turned up trumps, and that's good enough for me. After the way he apologised, we should be cads not to accept it."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old De Valerie!"

Somerton came over, and took his chum's arm.

"Thank goodness, Val!" he murmured. "I say, I didn't mean all those rotten things I said——"

"If you did, I should be better pleased!" interrupted De Valerie. "I deserved everything. If you can chum up again with me, Sonmy, it'll be more than I deserve. I've been a beast."

Before De Valerie could recover his balance, the ice cracked, and he felt himself going down into the cold, black water.

"We're all beasts when we get in tempers!" said the duke. "You don't know how glad I am this wretched business is over. By the way, about Jerry Dodd and the Bo'sun——"

"By jove, yes!" said De Valerie. "Where's Jerry now?"

"Over there by the fire."

De Valerie hurried off to the other side of the Common-room. Jerry Dodd and Tom Burton were sitting there, near the fire, chatting amiably. They didn't look very cross with one another.

"I say, Jerry, please don't take any notice of what I said to you!" exclaimed De Valerie. "I didn't mean it—not a word."

"I reckon you didn't!" grinned Jerry. "That's all right, chum, I've forgotten all about it."

"You're a brick!" said De Valerie. "Let's be pals again, eh? I'd like you to come into our study——"

"Jolly good of you, but I reckon there's nothing doing in that line now," interrupted the Australian junior. "You see, the Bo'sun and I aren't such mugs as to keep up a quarrel about a little bit of messy toffee. We are as thick as thieves again."

"Bust my main deck!" said the Bo'sun. "It wasn't a quarrel at all. This lubber was talking about hoisting his anchor and sailing for another port. But I came along and made him bring his cargo back. We're berthed in dock for good now."

"Which shows that you've got a lot more sense than I had!" said De Valerie. "You don't know how relieved I am—and how happy!"

But it was an absolute mystery to nearly all the other fellows. For a junior to change so completely in every way—and with such dramatic suddenness—was unheard of.

Somebody came into the Common-room and looked round. It was Fenton, of the Sixth. He could see that the fellows were unusually animated over something, but he had no idea as to the actual truth.

"Anybody seen De Valerie?" asked the prefect.

"Here I am!" said that junior.

"I thought I'd better let you know, but your uncle and cousin are just leaving!" said Fenton. "I heard you had a bit of a squabble over something, and it wouldn't be very nice to let them go without putting it right."

De Valerie ran forward.

"Thanks, awfully, Fenton!" he said. "You're a brick!"

He rushed out, tore into the lobby, and was just in time to catch Uncle Dan and Cousin Mary as they were emerging into the Triangle. De Valerie was thankful that the lobby was otherwise empty. Mr. Cunningham already had his hand on the heavy door.

"Uncle!" shouted De Valerie.

Uncle Dan looked round, frowning. The girl, prettier than ever, regarded De Valerie with cold indifference. There was a flash in her eyes which hurt De Valerie like a lash.

"I—I say, uncle!" he pleaded. "Can you forgive me? I don't know what I was thinking of when I spoke to you as I did! And you, Mary! I was a rotter—a beast! I'm so sorry, that I don't know what to say."

The girl's eyes softened.

"I was rather severe, too," she said. "But, oh, Cecil, you did make me angry!"

"You called me a cad, and I was worse than that!" said De Valerie. "I've never known anything cut me so much, Mary. But you were right, and I was a fool not to realise it at the time."

"Oh, Cecil, I'm so glad!" said Mary simply.

"My boy, you needn't say any more; I quite understand," said Uncle Dan, laying a kindly hand on De Valerie's shoulder. "We all have our fits of temper, and we all overstep the mark occasionally. But, bless your life, I'm not the kind of man to preach. You've said everything that's necessary. I'm glad, Cecil, infernally glad! Good lad!"

De Valerie clasped his uncle's hand, and then hugged his cousin.

"Only about an hour ago I was as miserable as sin!" he said happily. "But now I'm just the opposite, although I don't deserve to be forgiven like this. But I'll never be such a cad again, uncle. I've had a lesson that I shall never forget as long as I live!"

Uncle Dan's eyes twinkled.

(Continued on next page.)

"What about that little favour?" he asked.

De Valerie swallowed hard.

"Favour!" he echoed. "Why, I'm the luckiest chap in the world to be allowed to teach Mary how to skate! She's doing me a favour by allowing it! Rather! I'd just love to go back with you, uncle!"

"Then you'd better hurry off and get your things together!" said Mr. Cunningham. "We won't disturb Mr. Lee again, because we said good-bye. But we'll wait for you in your study."

De Valerie flew off, and tore upstairs like lightning. The Duke of Somerton was waiting, and he followed.

In the dormitory he looked at De Valerie in a strange way.

"What caused it, Val?" he asked quietly.

"I'll tell you!" said De Valerie. "I had a dream!"

"A dream!"

"Yes. I fell asleep in the armchair, after I'd been such a beast to Uncle Dan," said De Valerie. "I dreamt it was to-morrow, and the Head granted the school a whole holiday so that we could all go skating——"

"Well, I hope that part comes true, anyway!" said the duke.

"It won't; things like that only happen in dreams!" said De Valerie. "But after that there were all sorts of awful things. It's so vivid, that it seems almost real. Old Griggs died, and I could see myself in a true light. Then my Cousin Mary fell through the ice into the River Stowe. She was drowned."

"That wasn't a dream—it was a nightmare!"

"Of course it was, but it served to show me how beastly I've been. I went through absolute agony in that dream. As a finish, I fell into the river myself, and found that I'd dropped out of the chair."

"I'll bet you were jolly relieved!"

"I was dazed!" said De Valerie. "I didn't know where I was for the minute. The dream was so real that I had to ask Handforth some questions before I satisfied myself that none of those ghastly things really happened. But I can tell you, Sommy, it drove home a few facts all right!"

"It was all on your mind!" said Somerton. "That's why you dreamed so vividly. But what's the hurry? You're not going to bed, are you?"

"Going to bed!" echoed his chum. "Rather not! I'm just getting a few things together. I'm buzzing off with Uncle Dan and Cousin Mary this evening. They're staying with some friends near by, and I've been asked to go."

"Lucky bounder!" said Somerton.

De Valerie took a deep breath.

"Lucky?" he repeated softly. "By Jove! I should think I am!"

There was only one other fellow in the school who ever knew about Cecil De Valerie's dream—and that fellow was myself. That's why I've been able to set down all the details so clearly.

But the other fellows never knew anything. And if they ever think of the matter, they still puzzle themselves as to what caused De Valerie to change so quickly. But they never guessed the right reason.

De Valerie had had a lesson—and it was hammered right home!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

Forthcoming Photo Plates.

My Dear Reader,

I have seen the advance proofs of our forthcoming Locomotive Photo Plates, and they are really wonderful, every detail in these leviathians of our railways appearing remarkably clear and a sheer delight to look upon. The first of the series comes out Next Week with a fine example of the latest type of Great Western Railway Loco. called "The Prince of Wales." Do not miss this opportunity of getting such a unique series of Photo Plates as we are now offering to our readers.

Would You Like a Model Loco?

I wonder how many of you would like to possess a working model of one of these engines specially made to scale? Surely, this would be a prize worth trying for. In our next issue I hope to announce particulars of a novel competition in which I am offering a splendid model locomotive engine as a prize.

Next Week's New Feature.

In addition to the above attractions, there will be another grand, long, complete story of St. Frank's, entitled "THE HOUSE WITH A THOUSAND EYES!" Also, a special DETECTIVE MAGAZINE STORY SECTION, in which I am publishing the cream of detective stories—two complete ones every week. The first of these, called "THE RED-HAIRED PICKPOCKET," commences a tip-top series of stories dealing with some of the methods employed by our leading detectivs at Scotland Yard in running the criminal to earth. Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

Nipper's Magazine

No. 54. EDITED BY NIPPER, December 2, 1922.

BANNINGTON

THE MARKET SQUARE.

A market town o 5,000 inhabitants Bannington is about three miles from St Frank's College and is frequently visited by the college boys on account of its being a good shopping centre and po: ses ing a large picture palace.

COMING NEXT WEEK!

No. 1. of a Fine New Series of Real Photo Plates of

MODERN BRITISH LOCOMOTIVES!

A Magnificent Made-to-Scale Working Model of one of these Photos will be offered as a Prize in a New, Fascinating Competition, which will be duly announced in the next issue of **THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY**.

The Red-Headed League

PART II.

CHAPTER ONE.—THE DEATH CELL.

ALONG a short passage off the council chamber was the death cell—a stone vault six feet square. Herein were thrust Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge. From the glimmer of an oil lamp left on the floor, the condemned men could see the hopelessness of their position. There were no windows, the only opening in those cold, dank walls being through the iron door, now double locked. A hideous face leered in at them from behind a three-inch grille in the door.

"This we call the Chamber of 'Orrors!" it said. "Becoz them as sleeps the night in 'ere dies o' fright by t' mornin'. 'Tain't never bin known to fail, ye hopeful deteetives! Pleasant dreams! Ha! ha! ha!" And then the hateful face vanished, his fiendish laughter grating like a knife on a grindstone.

CHAPTER TWO.—APPROACHING DOOM.

"I wonder which of us will die first!" remarked Mr. Midge, sitting huddled up in a corner trying to resign himself to his fate.

A sibilant sound of hissing like the simmering of a kettle fell on their ears.

"A snake, probably a cobra!" whispered Mr. Podge.

Gradually the light of the lamp began to pale as if some strange shadow were passing over it. Neither detective dared speak.

CHAPTER THREE.—HORRIBLE VISIONS.

By some mysterious agency Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge were transported from their cell to the bottom of the ocean, great phosphorescent fish providing an ever-shifting light. Awful shapes with snake-like tentacles and loathsome features floated before them. They felt as helpless as bits of straw in a whirlpool, being driven on and on towards these expressionless, gaping monsters of the deep. One vile creature extended its slimy feelers towards its victims. Slowly and deliberately, the deadly coils closed round the unfortunate detectives, and then——

CHAPTER FOUR.—WAS IT A DREAM?

And then they woke up to find themselves in their consulting room at Quaker Street.

"I have had a most horrible nightmare, Mr. Podge," said Mr. Midge.

"That's most remarkable, Mr. Midge. Precisely the same thing happened to me," said Mr. Podge.

Each related his experiences with the Red-Headed League and marvelled at the coincidence of their dream.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge were seized with uncontrollable laughter.

"A huge joke, Mr. Midge," said Mr. Podge hilariously.

"It's good to be alive after all," chuckled Mr. Midge.

Then for the first time in their detective careers, Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge indulged in some undignified horse-play, but the cell was scarcely big enough for this sort of thing, and after Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge had bumped their heads somewhat unmercifully against the stone walls, they awoke to the reality of things.

CHAPTER FIVE.—THE ESCAPE.

"Poison gas!" were the first words of Mr. Podge as he came to his senses.

The sounds of approaching footsteps spurred both men to action, or, to be exact, inaction.

"We must feign to be dead," said Mr. Podge, "and then attack the scoundrels unawares."

Presently the heavy iron door was unlocked and a man entered. While he was bending over the still form of Mr. Midge, Mr. Podge crept up behind and felled the man with a heavy blow.

The pair then stole quietly out of the cell, relocking the door as they left. By a stroke of luck they found a man-hole leading to the street. Dawn had already made its appearance as they hurried along to Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER SIX.—FORESTALLED.

Here they found Inspector Forbes waiting to receive them, and they repeated to him their discoveries concerning the Red-Headed League.

"I know all about them," said the inspector with a smile. "They were raided early this morning and put under arrest. Their leader MacTavish, was detained yesterday afternoon and *I* took his place at the meeting last night!"

Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge stared in dumb astonishment.

"Sorry you had to have a dose of poison gas," continued the inspector. "I had to play my part, you know. But I soon substituted the deadly stuff by laughing gas as an antidote. And now, what have you done with Sergeant Williams who was sent to release you?"

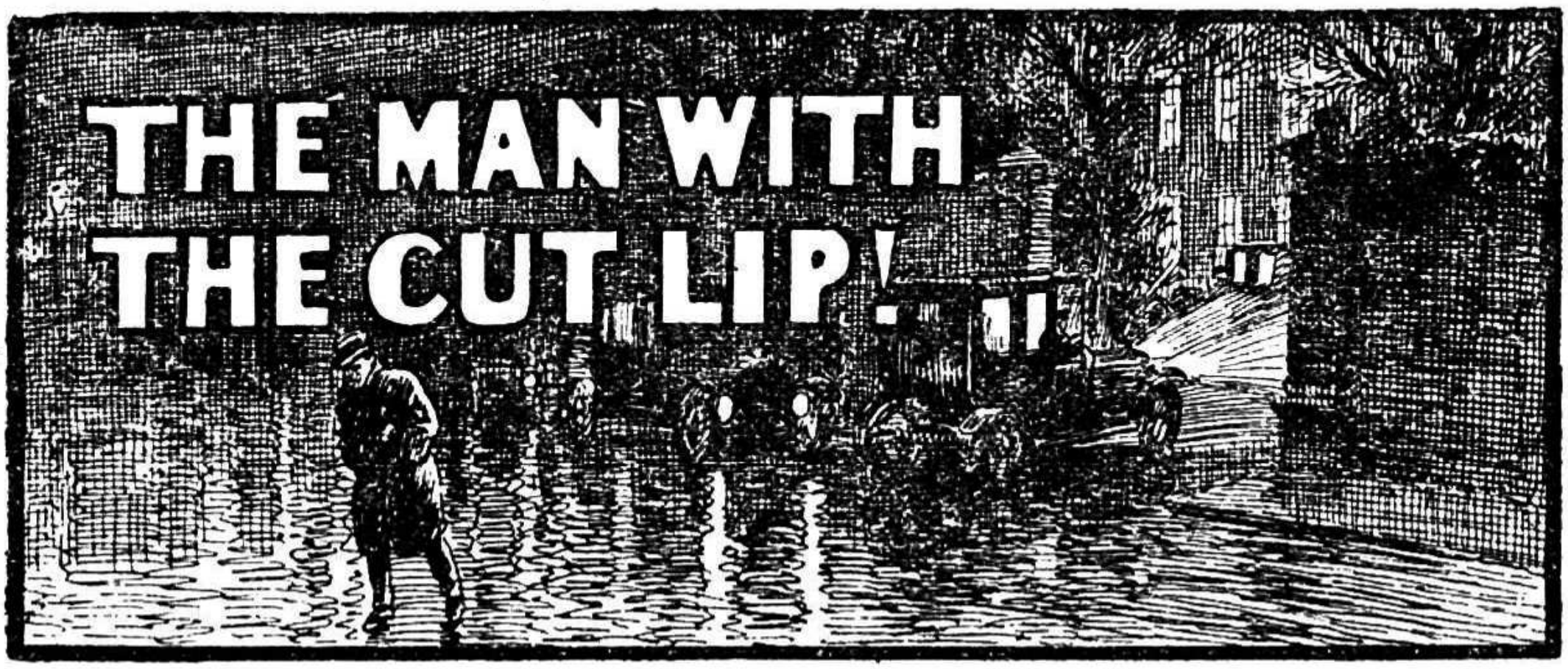
Mr. Podge looked at Mr. Midge for an answer.

"We didn't know, you know——" he began.

"I expect you knocked him down and locked him in," hazarded Inspector Forbes. "In future, I advise the pair of you to quit detective work or you will be getting into hot water with the police authorities. Now hop it before Sergeant Williams returns or there may be trouble!"

Mr. Podge and Mr. Midge were not sorry to get back to Quaker Street to think things over.

THE END



A GRIPPING STORY OF NELSON LEE AND NIPPER.

I.

A HORRIBLE DISCOVERY.

IT was the middle of October, and for several days London had been enjoying a spell of Indian summer, mild, and bright weather with a faint haze in the air that veiled the glow of the sun. There was a dance at Red Beeches, a large dwelling on Clapham Common that stood in spacious grounds, and was the residence of Mr. James Wardlaw, a wealthy stockbroker.

It was between nine and ten o'clock, and most of the invited guests were in the ballroom, waltzing to the strains of a string orchestra. Others were arriving in cabs and cars, and passing into the house through the open doorway.

James Wardlaw had gone into the library to fetch a box of cigars from a cabinet, and as he came out to the hall, at the moment when the orchestra had ceased playing, he distinctly heard a low, husky cry from somewhere above him.

"That's queer!" he muttered. "What can it mean?"

He at once hastened up the stairs to the first floor, and, guided by a streak of a light that shone beyond him, he darted along a passage, and by a door that was partly opened he entered his study, a small and comfortably furnished apartment where he was in the habit of sitting after dinner, writing letters and reading. He was struck dumb for an instant, overcome with horror, by the scene that met his gaze.

"By heavens!" he gasped.

A roll top desk at one side of the room had been forced open, and the contents of it were in a state of confusion. Stretched on the carpet, with a revolver lying near him, and crimson drops oozing from a wound in his breast, was a dark and clean-shaven man of about thirty. Another young man of the same age, with a fair moustache, had just risen to his feet, and was clutching the edge of the table for support.

"Wardlaw!" he exclaimed.

"Hilton!" cried James Wardlaw. "You here! You and Basil Norman! You in my study, and the desk forced open! You have been fighting with Norman, and you have shot him!"

"No, no, I haven't!" Ralph Hilton declared, turning white to the lips.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes, quite dead, Wardlaw! He has been shot through the heart!"

"And by your hand, you scoundrel!"

"I—I didn't do it!" Ralph Hilton panted, pressing a trembling hand to his forehead. "Don't accuse me of such an awful thing! The murderer has escaped!"

"Who was he?" James Wardlaw asked in a sceptical tone.

"I don't know! He was a stranger to me! I never saw him before!"

"If there was another man here, a burglar, how could he have got away? Both of the windows are closed."

"He escaped by the door, of course! I am innocent, I tell you! Let me explain! I haven't said there was a burglar here! It must have been one of your guests, one whom I don't know! I heard the report of the revolver, and when I had hurried upstairs and into the——"

"Don't lie to me, Hilton! It is utterly useless, for I can see exactly what happened. You squandered the little fortune you inherited from your uncle, and for some months you have been hard up. You admitted as much to me last week, when you wanted me to lend you a couple of hundred pounds, and I refused.

"You waited for an opportunity to-night, and came up to my study under the impression that there might be a considerable sum of money in my desk. Basil Norman saw you ascend the stairs, and his suspicions were roused. He quietly slipped after you,

and caught you at the desk, which you had broken into.

"There was a struggle. You fought with Norman, drew a revolver, and shot him. No alarm was raised because the orchestra was playing at the time. The music had ceased when I heard a faint cry above as I was leaving the library. It was your voice. You were terrified at what you had done."

"You are wrong," Ralph Hilton said hearsely. "This isn't my revolver. I didn't have one. It wasn't I who shot poor Norman."

"I wish I could believe you, but I can't," said James Wardlaw. "The case is too black against you. The evidence could not be stronger than it is."

"It is circumstantial evidence, remember."

"That doesn't matter. I am satisfied that you are guilty."

"But you haven't heard my story yet, Wardlaw."

"Never mind about that now. This is a terrible business. Murder has been done, and I want to be fair to you. I won't act too hastily, though I have my own opinions, and I am sure I am right. For your sake, because we have been friends, I will——"

James Wardlaw broke off abruptly, and stepped to a telephone that was in the room. For a moment he hesitated.

"I will ring up Mr. Nelson Lee, the detective, with whom I am acquainted," he said, "and have him come on here as quickly as he can if he is at home. I had better send for the police as well, but I won't do so immediately. I will let you tell your story to Mr. Lee before you are arrested. Sit down, Hilton, and wait for the detective," he added, "Don't make any attempt to escape. You are my prisoner."

II.

THE ARREST OF RALPH HILTON.

IT was shortly before ten o'clock that night when Nelson Lee was called to the telephone at his chambers in the Gray's Inn Road. He held a short conversation with Mr. James Wardlaw, and, having repeated to his young assistant, Nipper, what he had learned, the two left the house without delay, and hailed a cab.

They went by way of Waterloo Bridge, and in less than half an hour, so fast were they driven, they arrived at Red Beeches on Clapham Common.

Meanwhile, in spite of the precautions which Mr. Wardlaw had taken, the news of the tragedy had leaked out, and had put an end to the festivities. A number of the guests had gone home, and others were gathered in the hall, talking in low tones.

James Wardlaw met Nelson Lee and the lad at the door, and at once led them upstairs to the first floor, where he detained them on the landing while he briefly related what had occurred.

"It is a queer case, Mr. Lee, to my mind," he continued. "I think you will agree with me. It was stupid of young Hilton to try to fasten the crime on somebody else, and on one of my guests at that. It would have been more plausible if he had stated that a burglar did the shooting. He was in need of money, and he was tempted to steal.

"And now come and see the prisoner. I have him locked in. He hasn't told the whole story as yet. He has merely denied his guilt, and accused another man. I have just sent one of my servants to the police-station, by the way, and I dare say an inspector will be here shortly."

Moving forward as he spoke, Mr. Wardlaw unlocked and opened the door of the study, and entered it with his companions. The door was closed, and Nelson Lee's gaze swept the room, resting on the disordered desk, on the lifeless body that was stretched on the floor, and finally on the pale and agitated young man who was sitting on a chair by the fireplace.

"Here are Mr. Lee and his young assistant, Hilton," James Wardlaw said coldly. "You can give your version of the affair to the detective, now, before the police arrive. I wanted you to hear it first, Mr. Lee," he went on. "With your experience, and your knowledge of human nature, you should be able to tell whether or not the man is lying. That is why I sent for you."

Ralph Hilton, who had shown some confusion under the detective's scrutiny, rose to his feet. By an effort he pulled himself together, and at Nelson Lee's bidding he told his story. He spoke very slowly, weighing every word, as if he realised that his life depended on his statements.

"It happened only a few minutes before Mr. Wardlaw came in," he began. "I had come out of the smoking-lounge below, and the orchestra was playing in the ballroom, when I heard what sounded to me like a pistol-shot somewhere above.

"I wasn't sure it was that. Having listened and heard nothing more, I crept rapidly up the staircase, and along the passage, and into the study.

"The door was partly open, and the desk was as it is now. Basil Norman was lying on the floor, apparently dead, with the revolver by his side. And standing by him was a tall man who was in full evening-dress, and wore a crush-hat.

"He was an utter stranger to me. I am certain I have never seen him before. He was about my own age, with clean-shaven features and a sandy complexion, and there was a small cut on his lower lip.

"So much I observed at a glance as I sprang at the fellow. He dodged a blow that I aimed at him, and let fly with his fist, knocking me down. I fell heavily, striking the back of my head, and my senses swam.

"I was in a dazed state, almost entirely unconscious, for I have no recollection of the man taking flight. I gradually recovered, and I had just got to my feet when James Wardlaw hurried into the room, and found me here.

"Every word I have spoken is true. I can take my solemn oath that I am innocent of the murder."

Ralph Hilton paused.

"I swear that I am innocent," he resumed, with an appealing glance at the detective. "Basil Norman must have heard some suspicious noise before I heard the pistol-shot. He hurried up to the study and struggled with the man, and he was dead when I came on the scene.

"And while I was lying here in a stupor the murderer made his escape, either by the main staircase or by the one at the rear of the house."

"You asserted that he was one of my guests," said James Wardlaw.

"I thought so because he was in evening-dress, which a burglar would not have worn," Ralph Hilton answered.

"Yet you didn't recognise him?"

"I did not. I have said that I never saw him before."

"Well, Hilton, I can tell you this much. There is not one of my guests who bears any resemblance to the description you have given, nor is there a single one of them with whom you are not acquainted, or whom you do not know by sight."

"I don't doubt that. I admit that you are right. I can only repeat what I have stated. If the man who shot Basil Norman was not a guest, he could have slipped into the house unobserved, and slipped out as easily."

"So you suggest that he was a burglar disguised in evening-dress?"

"Yes, Wardlaw, I do. That is the only plausible explanation."

Nelson Lee and Nipper had been listening attentively. The lad was puzzled, yet on the whole, in view of the fact that the accused man was in financial straits, and that he had recently been refused a loan by Mr. Wardlaw, he was inclined to disbelieve the statement. Lee's face was inscrutable.

"You mentioned a cut on the stranger's lip, Mr. Hilton," he said.

"Yes, it was a small slanting one," Ralph Hilton replied. "Partly on the lip and partly below it."

"Was it a comparatively fresh one?"

"It was quite fresh, I should say, for I noticed that it was bleeding slightly."

"Could it have been caused during a struggle?"

"I should think not, Mr. Lee. It looked like a cut from a razor."

Nelson Lee did not ask any further questions. He moved about the room, his keen eyes roving here and there. He picked up the revolver, and examined it closely, and put it down.

There were no finger-prints on it, nor were there any on the lid of the desk. Something suddenly occurred to James Wardlaw, and, stepping to the desk, he thrust his hand deep into a pigeon-hole, and withdrew it empty.

"I had almost forgotten that I had a roll of five-pound notes in there!" he exclaimed. "There were five or six of them! I'm not sure which! But they are not there now! They are missing! I must trouble you to empty your pockets, Hilton!"

Ralph Hilton's cheeks flushed. "I have six five-pound notes of my own, as it happens," he doggedly declared, taking them from a pocket of his waistcoat.

"They are mine, not yours!" James Wardlaw hotly answered.

"They are not, Wardlaw! Have you a list of the numbers?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, I can assure you that these are my bank notes. Your money was stolen by the man who shot poor Norman. And I am not that man."

"Of course you are, Hilton! What is the use of denying it? Basil Norman caught you in the act of robbing my desk!"

Nipper nodded, and threw a significant glance at his master. Ralph Hilton was at a loss for words. He dropped into his chair again, his features haggard and twitching, and stared at the floor. James Wardlaw shrugged his shoulders scornfully and turned to the detective.

"Good heavens! That there should have been such a terrible tragedy in my house!" he said. "It is a perfectly clear case, isn't it? Don't you think so, Mr. Lee?"

"I would rather not express any opinion at present," Nelson Lee evasively replied. "Circumstantial evidence is not always to be relied upon."

"Am I to understand that you doubt Hilton's guilt?"

"It is a very curious affair, Mr. Wardlaw."

Nelson Lee was not satisfied one way or the other. Leaving the room, he went downstairs and questioned the guests who were in the hall. He also interrogated the servants, and when he returned to the study he was no wiser than he had been before.

"I haven't learned anything, Wardlaw," he said. "Nobody has seen a man in evening-dress, such as Mr. Hilton has described to us."

"Certainly not," James Wardlaw replied. "There has been no such person in my house to-night. As for the evidence, it is more than circumstantial, since my stolen bank notes have been discovered in Hilton's possession. They don't belong to him. It is obvious that he took them from——"

He stopped short as footsteps were heard in the passage. There was a rap at the door, and Inspector Brace, of the Clapham Police-station, entered the room with two con-

stables. He was acquainted with Nelson Lee, who briefly explained the situation to him. The inspector listened to James Wardlaw's statements, and to a repetition of Ralph Hilton's story. Then he stepped forward and tapped the accused young man on the arm.

"I shall have to take you into custody, satisfied with the evidence, and I would like you to accompany me while I make some investigations in the vicinity. We may possibly discover something which will tend to throw a different light on the murder."

"There is not a chance of it," declared James Wardlaw. "Not a chance, Mr. Lee."

Moving to one side of the drive, Nelson Lee stooped and picked up a bottle that was half filled with a brown liquid.

Mr. Hilton, on a charge of murder," he said. "You must come with me."

Ralph Hilton rose, a gleam of despair in his eyes, and looked in wistful appeal to the detective.

"I am innocent!" he vowed. "I swear again that I am! Won't you help me, sir?"

Nelson Lee hesitated. "If I can do anything for you I will," he quietly answered.

With that he turned to the inspector. "Let your men take the prisoner to the police-station," he said. "I am not not

III.

THE COLOURED HANDKERCHIEF.

THE prisoner was on his way to the police-station with the two constables, and the last of Mr. Wardlaw's guests had departed, when Nelson Lee, and Inspector Brace, and Nipper, left the dwelling.

It was dark now, for heavy clouds had overcast the sky and hidden the moon; but Lee had his electric torch with him, and he drew it from his pocket. Inspector Brace,

like most police officials, was utterly lacking in imagination. He was a strong believer in circumstantial evidence. Being convinced of the guilt of Ralph Hilton, in spite of the straightforward statement the latter had made, he was sure that he and Lee were going to have their trouble for nothing.

There had been no rain for days; the ground was hard and dry, and the grass was parched and worn. Those guests who had trampled over it had not left any footprints, and it would have been impossible to distinguish the prints of any one person in any part of the garden. Nelson Lee was aware of that, but the fact did not discourage him.

Starting his investigations at the front of the house, he walked slowly and carefully around it, playing the light of his torch on terraces and shrubbery and gravel paths.

And then, having returned to the rear of the premises, he struck across the lawn to a tall hedge that skirted the bottom of the garden. Bearing to the left, he perceived a narrow gap in the hedge, and squeezed through it, followed by his companions.

"Have you discovered anything?" asked the inspector.

"No, not yet," Nelson Lee replied.

"What has brought you here, then? Do you know where we are?"

"Yes. I am familiar with the neighbourhood. I am aware that we are in the grounds of The Gables, a dwelling belonging to Mr. Peter Hammond."

"That's quite right. Perhaps you are thinking of calling on the gentleman. If so, I may tell you that he has been down at his country place in Kent with his family for the last month."

"Indeed?" Nelson Lee murmured. "That doesn't interest me."

"You are trespassing on Mr. Hammond's property," said Inspector Brace.

"In the course of my investigation; that is all. By the way, do you know Mr. Peter Hammond's country address?"

"Yes. He left it at the police-station, in case there should be a burglary at his house.

"You are a queer chap, Lee. What are we doing here? What is your object? As for the murder, you surely don't believe that a strange man in evening-dress got into Mr. Wardlaw's dwelling to-night and shot Basil Norman."

Nipper was as puzzled as was the inspector. "You have something in your mind, guv'nor," he said.

Nelson Lee shook his head. He had a vague object in entering the grounds of the Gables, but he was so absorbed in thought that he did not care to speak of it at present.

He was investigating in this direction simply because he had been impressed by the way in which Ralph Hilton had told his story, and he thought that there might be at least a shadow of doubt as to his guilt. also, because of certain deductions which would be plausible, he judged, in the event of the young man being innocent.

"Come along, Brace," he bade, in an absent tone.

Red Beeches overlooked Clapham Common, and the Gables, which is also a large, detached residence, fronted on a road that was to the east of the common. There was a spacious garden, with flower beds, dense clumps of trees and shrubbery, and stretches of open lawn.

Peering about him as he went, the electric torch in his hand, Lee led his companions by one side of the unoccupied house, and round to the front of it, where he held to a gravelled drive that led to the gates.

He had nearly reached them when he paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ralph Hilton may be innocent," he said. "There is a likelihood of it. I was favourably impressed by his statements. They seem to bear the stamp of truth.

It struck me that if Basil Norman had been shot by some other person, the murderer might have fled in this direction, through the grounds of the Gables, and I was greatly hopeful of stumbling on some clue. But that hope has failed, and the evidence against the young man is so strong that I am afraid I will have to——"

A dull glitter caught Nelson Lee's eye as he spoke, and, moving to one side of the drive, he stooped at the edge of the shrubbery, and picked up a black bottle that was half-filled with a brown liquid. He pulled the cork out, and sniffed at the contents.

"It is whisky," he remarked.

"Whisky?" repeated the inspector. "I wonder how it got here?"

Lee did not answer. Having flashed his torch into the bushes, he drew from beneath them something that had been lying on the grass. It was a large, gaudily-coloured handkerchief, and the four corners of it were tied loosely together.

The detective tore them apart, and disclosed to view a couple of slices of bread, a bit of cheese, and a number of charred ends of cigarettes.

"My word, what a queer discovery!" exclaimed Nipper.

"It is," Inspector Brace assented.

Nelson Lee nodded. He stood motionless for a few seconds, his brows knit in conjecture. Suddenly, a sparkle crept into his eyes and was gone. He searched further, amongst the shrubbery and on the drive, and abandoned his effort.

"What does this coloured handkerchief suggest to you, Brace?" he asked.

"It is such an one as vagrants are in the habit of carrying their belongings in," the inspector replied.

"And what would you deduce from it, and from the other thing?" Lee continued.

"The beggar was in here during the day, and——"

"No, not a beggar; a tramp."

"Well, then, a tramp. I daresay he was that. He found there was nobody at home, and, as he was leaving, he tripped and fell at this spot. His parcel flew into the bushes, and the bottle of whisky dropped from it on to the drive."

"Exactly. Your deductions are logical, as far as they go, and I agree with them. But why did the fellow go off without his bundle? Why didn't he stop to pick up the handkerchief and its contents?"

"I don't know, Lee. I can't answer that question."

"I will tell you why. The man was badly frightened. He was afraid to delay for even a moment or two. Furthermore, it was not in the course of the day that he went by here, and out at the gate. It was to-night, and not long ago."

"To-night? How can you judge?"

"By clear evidence, Brace. There is dew on the grass, but the handkerchief is not even damp, except where it touched the ground."

Inspector Brace looked puzzled. "They are trifling details," he said.

"No, no, they are not," Nelson Lee declared. "On the contrary, they are of great importance."

"How can you attach any importance to them?"

"From the fact that the tramp was in Mr. Hammond's garden some time to-night, and that he was in a hurry to get away."

"Assuming that he was, Lee, you can't connect him with the murder. That would be absurd. If the story told by Ralph Hilton is true—and you seem to believe it—Basil Norman was shot by a man who was in evening-dress and wore a crush-hat. What sort of an idea have you got in your head?"

Nelson Lee did not reply. He was deep in thought, absorbed in one of those theories, as thin as air, which his shrewd brain sometimes evolved from the merest thread of a theory.

Nipper, gazing closely at his master, was satisfied that he had hit on some explanation of the mystery.

"I have not finished with my investigations yet," Lee said at length.

"What are you going to do?" the inspector inquired.

"I intend to look for something, Brace."

"Well, I hope you may find it. I can't imagine what it can be."

Accompanied by Inspector Brace and the lad, Nelson Lee went all over the garden, scouring every part of it that was not open. He beat the trees and shrubbery, thrusting his stick into every copse of bushes, and riddling them with the flare from his electric-torch.

But he did not find what he was looking for. He was disappointed. Keenly disappointed. He had almost lost faith in his theory now. He turned his attention to the dwelling next. He strolled entirely around it, examining every door and window and at the rear of the premises discovered a small window that was not fastened. He raised the sash a few inches, and lowered it.

"It is significant," he said, half to himself.

"It was very careless of Mr. Peter Hammond to leave the window like this," the inspector replied, in a sarcastic tone.

"Very careless," Lee murmured. "A burglar might have got in."

"Perhaps one did. What of the fellow with the coloured handkerchief?"

"I have been thinking of him, Brace. I should not be surprised if he had——"

"Yes, he has probably burgled the place. That would account for his hurried departure. Shall we enter by the window, and have a look round?"

Nelson Lee hesitated, and shook his head.

"No, we would not be legally justified in entering the dwelling because we have found a window that is not secured," he replied.

"We will search the house to-morrow, though, and with consent of the owner. We had better wait, a few hours won't make much difference.

"We will be off, now, Brace," he added. "Come along. I will walk as far as the police-station with you. And by the way, you can give me Mr. Peter Hammond's address in the country. I must send him a telegram as soon as possible, and get him up to town."

"Do you expect to find a clue to the murder in his dwelling?" Inspector Brace asked.

Lee smiled.

"Wait and see," he answered.

IV.

THE STRANGER IN THE DRESS SUIT.

BETWEEN eleven and twelve o'clock the next morning Mr. Peter Hammond, a tall and lean gentleman of about forty, with clean-shaven features, got out of the cab in the Gray's Inn Road, and mounted the stairs to Nelson Lee's chambers. Nipper opened the door to him, and when he had walked into the consulting-room, he took from his pocket the telegram he had received in the country. He stared blankly at the detective, with whom he was not acquainted.

"What does this mean, Mr. Lee?" he asked. "Why have you brought me up to town? You did not give me any explanation."

"It is a very simple matter," Nelson Lee replied, as he shook hands with the visitor. "A tramp was in the garden of your residence last night, and he may have committed a robbery, as a small window at the rear of the house was not fastened."

"So that accounts for your message!" said Mr. Hammond. "I thought it might possibly have something to do with the murder at Red Beeches. It is a terrible affair that.

"I know young Hilton, and I am sorry to believe that he is guilty. The evidence is black against him.

"But we were talking of the tramp. There are some valuable things at my place, and I hope nothing has been stolen."

"I can't tell you, sir," Nelson Lee answered. "We shall see very shortly."

Stepping to the telephone as he spoke, he rang up his garage, and gave orders that his car should be sent round at once. It arrived in less than ten minutes, and without delay, Lee, and Mr. Hammond and the lad set off on their errand.

They drove first to the police-station at Clapham, and from there, accompanied by Inspector Brace they went on to the Gables. Peter Hammond opened the front door with his latchkey, and the little party stepped into the hall.

"We will go to your bedchamber first, I think," said Nelson Lee.

"To my bedchamber?" Peter Hammond repeated in surprise. "Why?"

"For a couple of reasons, sir. For one thing, I imagine that you forgot to take your shaving utensils with you to the country."

"So I did, Mr. Lee. How did you know? You must have been in the house."

"No, I have not been. I made a guess."

They mounted the staircase, and went along a passage to the bedchamber. The door was partly open, and Nelson Lee had no more than entered the room when he knew that his theories had been right.

"By heavens, that scoundrel of a tramp has been here!" Mr. Hammond cried in consternation.

Inspector Brace glanced about him, and nodded to the detective. Lying open on the bed was an empty suit-case. On the dressing-table were, a pair of scissors, soap, and a shaving-brush, and on the edge of the mug, were faint stains of blood.

The blinds of the two windows were lowered. Nelson Lee raised one of them and stepped to the fireplace, where he observed several shaving papers that had been used, and a number of short locks of thick, reddish hair. His eyes sparkled.

"It is just as I supposed, Brace," he remarked. "You can hardly fail to grasp the significance of what you see here."

Peter Hammond had hurried away and when he returned, after a brief absence, there was an expression of relief on his face.

"I have not been robbed of anything of value," he said. "I have been to the library and the dining-room. I found the doors locked, and the windows secured. My dress-clothes are all that have been stolen."

"Was everything that you required for evening wear in this suit-case?" Nelson Lee asked.

"Yes, everything—the clothes, a shirt, a collar and tie, socks, an opera hat, and a pair of patent-leather shoes. The tramp has stolen them, and yet he could have had much more valuable things if he had broken into the library, or the dining-room."

"He took what he wanted, Mr. Hammond, and nothing else. Having shaved himself, and trimmed his hair with the scissors, he put on your dress-clothes, and went off in them."

"He put them on?" said Peter Hammond. "Then where are the clothes he discarded?"

"He took them with him," Nelson Lee replied, "and he is no doubt wearing them now."

"The fellow must have been mad."

"There was method in his madness, I can assure you. By the way, sir, was the suit-case on the bed?"

"Yes, I left it there, Mr. Lee. I had meant to take it to the country with me, but I changed my mind."

Peter Hammond was utterly bewildered, but the inspector had grasped the solution of the mystery, and so had Nipper. They all descended the stairs, and passed out of the house by the door at the rear of it; and when Nelson Lee had stood looking around him for a few seconds, in one direction and another, he went straight to the thickest patch of cover that was in the garden.

For a little time he moved about amongst the trees and shrubbery, peering into the foliage above him, and then, thrusting the crooked handle of his stick into a crotch of one of the trees, he pulled down a parcel that was wrapped in an evening-dress jacket.

He opened it, and showed to his companions all of the things that had been stolen from the suit-case.

And now a light suddenly dawned on Peter Hammond, who had read of the murder at Red Beeches in the morning paper.

"By heavens, it was the tramp who shot Basil Norman!" he cried.

"Of course it was," Inspector Brace declared. "I knew it."

Nelson Lee nodded. Drawing a notebook from his pocket, he wrote on a leaf of it from his pencil, and tore it out. He gave it to the inspector.

"Here is a description of the wanted man," he said. "Tall and slim of build, with clean-shaven features, a sandy complexion, reddish hair, and on his lower lip slight cut made by a razor."

"The man is shabbily attired, and is probably a tramp," he continued. "We cannot be sure of that, however. You might have him sought for in London, Brace, and I will notify the rural police outside of the metropolitan area."

Lee paused for a moment.

"Don't waste any time in setting Ralph Hilton free," he added. "You must be satisfied that the poor fellow is innocent."

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V.

THE WANTED MAN.

IT was on a Wednesday that the discoveries were made at the Gables, and during the following day no trace of wanted man was found in London.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had taken measures of his own. He had sent telegrams to a number of places outside of the metropolis, and on the afternoon of Friday, having just received some information by a wire, he rang up Inspector Brace at the police-station at Clapham.

The day was drawing to a close when Nelson Lee and Inspector Brace, accompanied by Nipper, arrived at the village of Hazel Hatch.

They stopped in front of a little cottage, which was commonly called the police-station, though it was simply the residence of the local constable.

The man who had been detained had not been locked up. He had been there for three or four hours, under the watchful eye of the constable, and he was sitting on a bench, ragged and dirty and unshaven, when the little party entered the room.

"I know the fellow well," said the constable. "His name is Joe Meikle, and he has been tramping this part of the country for a year or so. What do you want with him?"

"I'll tell you presently," Nelson Lee replied.

Inspector Brace and the constable held the prisoner tightly, to prevent him struggling, while Lee felt his clothing. Then, producing a knife, he cut a slit in the tramp's ragged jacket, and drew from beneath the lining of it seven crisp bank notes for five pounds each.

"I'll charge you now, Meikle," he said sternly. "We are going to take you into custody for the murder of Mr. Basil Norman, at the residence of Mr. Wardlaw, of Clapham Common."

"I did it!" admitted Meikle. "But it wasn't murder! It was an accident! I never meant to fire the shot! I swear I didn't! I'll tell you all about it!"

He insisted on making a confession, perhaps, in the hope that he might save his neck. On the night of the murder, while on tramp, he had passed The Gables; and, observing that the place was in darkness, he had slipped through the gate.

Having prowled about in the garden, and noticed that there was a dance at the large dwelling in the rear of the Gables, he had got into Mr. Hammond's residence by the small window that was not fastened.

"The doors on the lower floor were locked," Joe Meikle continued, "and I didn't try to break them open. I went upstairs to a bedchamber and turned on the light. There were shaving things and a pair of scissors on the dressing-table, and on the bed was a suit-case.

"I opened that, and when I saw what was in it an idea flashed to my mind. I shaved myself, cutting my lip, and trimmed the edges of my hair with the scissors. Then I put on the gentleman's evening-clothes, and his opera-hat, and left the house as I had entered, by the window.

"I had my own clothes with me, and when I had hidden them in the bushes I squeezed through the hedge into the garden of the other house, and walked boldly in by a side-door that was open.

"Nobody paid any attention to me, as I was dressed like the guests. I crept upstairs and entered a bedchamber, where the light was burning.

"There was a desk there. I forced it open, and I had no more than taken some bank notes from a pigeon-hole, and slipped them into my pocket, when a gentleman rushed in and grabbed me by the throat.

"I whipped out a revolver I had in my pocket, and it went off by accident, and the gentleman was shot in the breast as I was struggling with him. A moment later, another gentleman hurried into the room, and I struck him a hard blow that felled him to the floor.

"No alarm had been raised, as there was an orchestra playing below. I got downstairs and out of the house as quickly as I could, and returned to the garden of the other dwelling, where I put my own clothes on, and hid the dress-clothes, and the hat, and the other things in a crotch of a tree.

"As I was hurrying towards the gate I tripped and fell, and dropped a parcel I was carrying. I was afraid to stop to pick it up, for I could hear what sounded like the footsteps of a constable. There was one coming along the road, but he didn't see me.

"I stole away in the darkness, and I've been on tramp in the country ever since. It is the whole truth I have told you, sir. I didn't do murder. I never meant to——"

The man's voice faltered, and he moistened his dry lips.

"It—it wasn't murder," he repeated.

The confession had, in every respect, confirmed Nelson Lee's theories, and the inspector ungrudgingly gave him the credit he was entitled to.

"It was an uncommonly clever piece of work," he said. "I don't see how you fitted the links together so accurately."

"You might have formed the same deductions yourself if you had used your wits," Nelson Lee replied. "It was fairly obvious to me that a man who carried food and a bottle of whisky, wrapped in a coloured handkerchief, was a wandering tramp.

Lee paused. "It has been a curious and interesting affair, Brace," he added. "And I am glad that we have brought it to a satisfactory conclusion. And now we will run back to town with our prisoner."

THE END.

RESULTS OF FIRST PROBLEM STORY COMPETITION.

LIST OF PRIZE-WINNERS.

The Editor has been pleased to award the following readers with prizes for their solutions of the problem story, "The Strange Affair at Heather Hall."

FIRST PRIZE—£1.

C. E. Davy, Feremina, St. Martins, Guernsey, C.I.

THE STRANGE AFFAIR AT HEATHER HALL

The man who came to Heather Hall as Harry Beverley was not really him but an impostor, who was exactly like the real Harry Beverley, except for being a little browner in his face, which everybody put down to his being in Africa. Meanwhile, the real Harry Beverley had been kidnapped and hidden away. The night that Sir Roger Beverley woke up and heard his nephew go out, was when the impostor heard his confederates in the car up the lane. He had a row with them, and was killed, and left lying in the road, while the men got away. Then the poacher, Ben Lockett, came along and saw the body, and being afraid that he would be accused of having murdered the man while poaching, he drops his pheasants and handkerchief in his haste, and runs home to get money, and a few things, before he escapes to London. The tramp noticing the body as he was walking along, thought there would be some money on him, and stole all the things in the murdered man's pockets.

Meanwhile, the real Harry Beverley has escaped from his captors, and goes to the Hall, and is seen by Sir Roger Beverley.

SECOND PRIZE—10s.

J. P. Osborn, 99, Ashburnham Road, Northampton.

Consolation Prizes of 2s. 6d. to the following:

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