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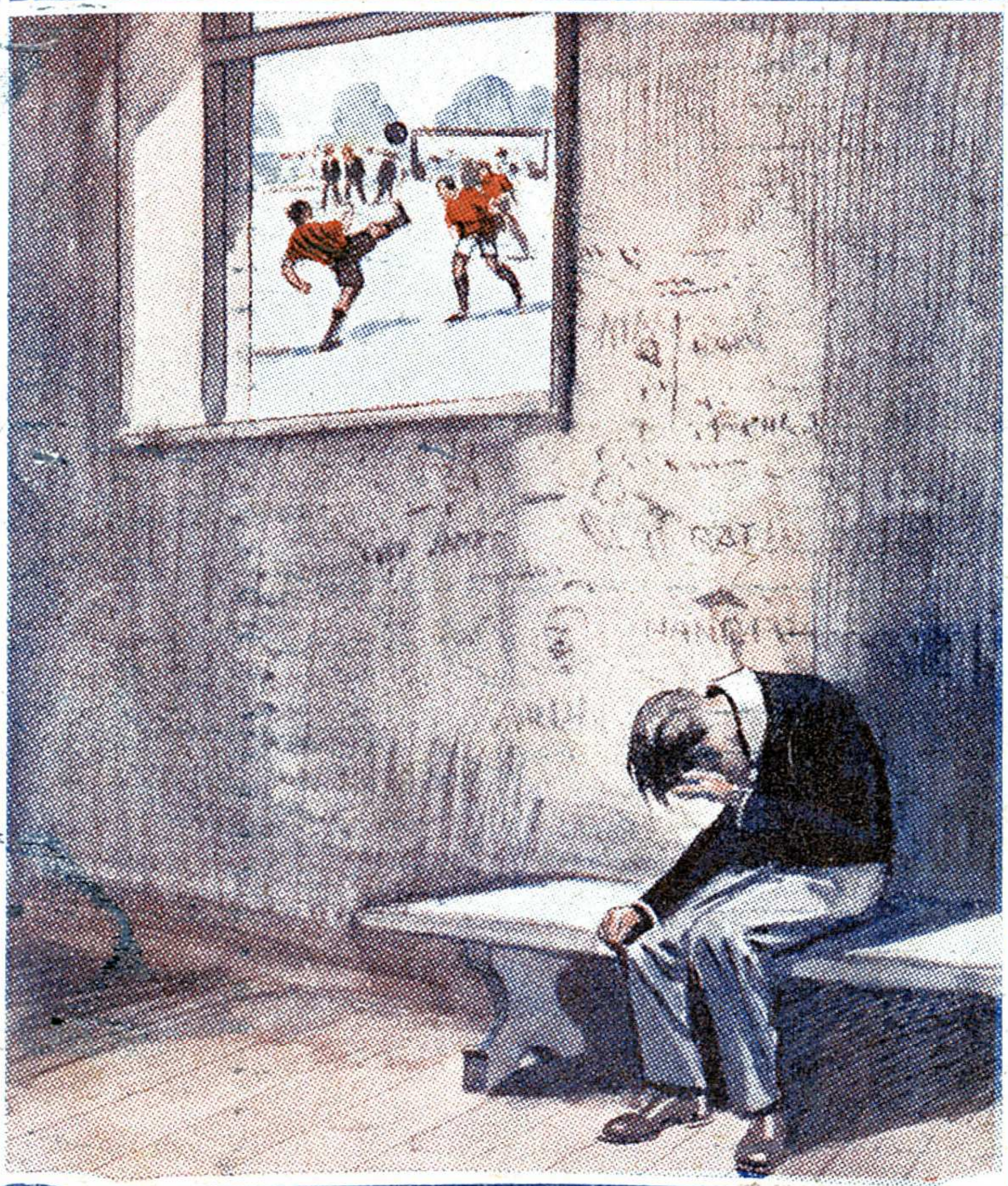


The Picture Above is taken from This Week's Rousing Story of ST. FRANK'S :—

SACKED FROM THE SCHOOL!

No. 412. EVERY WEDNESDAY. April 28, 1923.

But Willy didn't wait. He turned swiftly and dived straight into the river. He was going to pull this little animal out of reach of these inhuman brutes.

Sacked from the School!

The series of petty persecutions made against Alf Huggins by Mr. Snuggs, the new Remove master, has at last recoiled on himself. He has been found out by the Head, with the result that his prospects of getting another such appointment are rendered somewhat difficult by reason of Dr Stafford's refusal to give him any recommendation. From Mr. Snuggs' point of view, Huggins was to blame for all this and he resolved that Huggins should suffer. Mere contempt for the Hoxton boy has now become changed to bitter hatred. With the aid of Fullwood, the Cad of the Remove, Snuggs plots to get Huggins into serious trouble. In this, luck helps him to succeed beyond his wildest expectations and Huggins is expelled in disgrace from St. Frank's. How Snuggs wreaks his vengeance on his victim is vividly told in the moving narrative below.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE TORTURERS!

"LISTEN!" said Willy Handforth tensely.

"Oh, don't waste time——"

"Listen, you ass!" snapped Willy. "Another word and I'll biff you! I just heard something!"

The two leading lights of the Third Form at St. Frank's came to a halt on the towing path, and stood with attitudes of great intentness The April evening was mild and pleasant.

The fags were hurrying back to the school from Bellton, carrying with them a supply of tuck. And Chubby Heath was exceedingly anxious to complete the journey as soon as possible. But if Willy Handforth said that they had to stop and listen, the only thing was to stop. What Handforth minor said was law.

It was a rather drastic kind of law, because Willy usually enforced it with a large fist. And, at this moment, Chubby Heath observed that Willy had his fist clenched in readiness.

"Must have been mistaken, I suppose," said Willy at length.

"What did you hear?" asked Chubby.

"Sounded to me like a dog yelping."

"And do you mean to say you stopped us just for that?" demanded Chubby indignantly, "and we're in such a hurry to get back! I thought you had more sense!"

Willy glared.

"I don't want any jaw from you!" he said aggressively. "If I like to stop, I'll stop! There you are! Didn't you hear it that time?"

"No, I didn't!"

"Deaf idiot!" said Willy tartly. "Listen again!"

Once more the fags lapsed into silence. And now, even Chubby Heath heard the plaintive yelping of a dog. And then, almost immediately afterwards, came some coarse, common laughter. Willy Handforth's brow grew black. He glared at Chubby Heath.

"Sounds like somebody ill-treating a dog," he said, his eyes gleaming.

"Well, we can't help it——"

"You—you heartless wretch!" snorted Willy. "If there's a dog being ill-treated I'm going to take a hand! The brutes had

better let me see them at their dirty work! If there's one thing I hate more than another, it is to see a dog being tortured. And some rotters seem to think it's funny! Any fellow who tortures a dog ought to be hung, drawn, and quartered!"

"I thought you didn't believe in torturing!' said Tubby sarcastically.

"That's a different kind of torture!" replied Willy. "Human beings ain't dogs! If you were tortured, for example, you could jolly well biff out, and do something to save yourself. But a dog's helpless!"

"Oh, yes!" growled Chubby. "I suppose dogs haven't got any teeth? But what's the good of arguing? Let's be getting on!"

"Not yet!" said Handforth minor. "I just want to make sure—— Why, hallo! There they are! I knew it! The rotten, torturing cads! A whole gang of 'em!"

A black frown came over Willy's usually sunny countenance. He glared ferociously down the towing path. About two hundred yards away, and coming from the direction of the village, were four or five hulking village boys, led by Lumpy Bill.

This latter youth was the son of the local blacksmith, and he was well known in the district as a bullying young reprobate, with the instincts of a hooligan. Practically every rowdy affray in the village was concerned with Lumpy Bill. He seemed to serve no useful purpose in the world.

He was the natural enemy of the St. Frank's juniors. On many occasions a solitary fag had been seized and unmercifully ragged by Lumpy Bill and his companions. The warfare between this gang of clods and the St. Frank's juniors was never at an end.

Chubby Heath looked rather startled.

"We shall have to slide!" he said in a shaky voice.

"What?" said Willy, staring.

"I mean, we can't fight that lot——"

"If you like to show the white feather you can show it!" interrupted Willy tartly. "You—you funk!"

"Who's a funk?" roared Chubby indignantly.

"You are!" retorted Handforth minor. "At least, you will be if you bunk off. Look at these rough cads! They've got a dog there, and they're torturing it like anything! I'm not going to stand that!"

Chubby became more alarmed than ever.

"Do be sensible!" he gasped. "There's only two of us, and about five of them! You don't suppose we can scrap with that crowd, do you? Why, for two pins, they'd skin us alive!"

Willy laughed pityingly.

"And do you mean to tell me that those blessed hulks could skin me alive?" he asked contemptuously. "You dotty idiot! You blithering ass! This is just where I come out strong! I'm going to fight that crowd!"

"What!" said Chubby faintly.

"The whole crowd!" said Willy in a firm voice. "Oh, you can stare! I've been waiting for a chance like this for weeks! And, what's more, I'm going to make Lumpy Bill's nose bleed like a running tap!"

Chubby Heath had nothing to say. He could find no words to answer this lunatic. He couldn't regard Handforth minor as anything else. Because the thing was mad—absolutely insane! After all, he and Willy were only fags, and there were at least five of these hulking village youths. It would be just like walking to the slaughter.

But Willy regarded the thing from a totally different point of view.

In many ways he was the exact counterpart of his brother, the famous Edward Oswald. In many other ways he was precisely the opposite. And when it came to fighting, Willy was in the front rank.

It didn't matter a toss to him whether there was one enemy to fight or a score. All he wanted to see was the enemy. Then he sailed in. If they whacked him, all well and good—that was simply the fortune of war. But before they did whack him he would take jolly good care that he gave them something to be going on with

That was Master Willy's simple point of view.

He possessed a kind of blind courage—just that courage that had won the V.C. or the D.S.O. in many a skirmish on the battlefields. Both Willy and Edward Oswald were full of that spirit of do or die.

"It's—it's all very well to be plucky, but there's a limit!" growled Chubby. "I don't want to be smashed up, even if you do! Look here, the best thing I can do is to shoot off to the school and get hold of some of the chaps. You can stick here and watch from behind the bushes!"

Willy sniffed.

"Watch!" he repeated. "Oh, yes! I'll do a fat lot of watching! I'm going to make these brutes sit up! You can go, if you like. I don't care! You'd only be in the way, anyhow!"

Chubby was too excited to resent the insult.

And then he stood staring down the towing path. Lumpy Bill and his companions had come to a halt quite a short distance away. They had not noticed the presence of the two fags—partly on account of a bush that half concealed them, but chiefly because they were so intent upon their blackguardedly work.

Lumpy Bill was carrying a small, ugly-looking mongrel. It was a pitiful looking little dog—grubby, half starved, and of the fox terrier type. And it was quite helpless in the arms of its captor.

Willy watched, his eyes glittering.

"If they touch that pup I'll—I'll——" He paused, breathing hard.

Lumpy Bill and the other village louts were standing just against the river bank.

Lumpy Bill laid the dog in the grass, and Handforth minor and Chubby Heath wondered it made no attempt to get away. Then they understood. For they noticed that

the dog was bound up. String was tied cruelly round its front legs and its rear legs. It commenced to whine, and Lumpy Bill stared down at it.

"Shut that row, blame yer!" he said coarsely.

He gave the dog a kick, and it yelped with agony.

"Did you see that?" gasped Willy, red with anger. "Oh, my hat! I'm jolly well going to do something!"

"Better go easy——"

"Oh, look—look!" yelled Willy.

He was now burning with indignation and rage.

For the village roughs had picked up the dog, and Lumpy tossed it far out into the river. Helpless though it was, the mongrel made valiant attempts to reach the shore—swimming, even, with its legs tied. Its natural instinct told it to make for land.

But it did not have sufficient sense to swim away from its tormentors.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Lumpy Bill. "Let 'im 'ave it!"

Qhizz! Whiz!

Stones were thrown into the water—at the puppy It was a cruel, dastardly outrage, and Willy Handforth simply could not stand it. This little dog was being brutally tortured.

He rushed forward and ran up to the village youths with blazing eyes.

"You cads—you rotten cads!" he shouted tensely.

Lumpy Bill stared at him.

"Who told you to interfere?" he roared. "'Ere, mates! Grab this kid and chuck 'im in arter the dorg!"

But Willy didn't wait.

He turned swiftly and dived straight into the river. He was going to pull this little animal out of reach of these inhuman brutes.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE HANDS OF THE ROUGHS!

LUMPY BILL stared out upon the river with rising fury.

"Come out o' that, you little demon!" he shouted. "If you touch that there pup I'll skin you alive."

"Chuck these 'ere stones at 'im!"

"That's it!"

One or two attempts were made, but only half-heartedly. Bad as the roughs were, they drew the line at stoning the St. Frank's juniors. Only Willy's head was visible above water as he swam to the rescue of the unfortunate dog. It would have been too risky to hurl the stones.

Chubby Heath stood looking on from behind the bush—very nervous. He was not a coward in the ordinary sense, but these blundering village youths were greatly feared by the fags. Willy was about the only Third Former who was prepared to rush into the attack.

And the manner in which he had gone to the rescue of this dog completely upset the calculations of Bill and his companions. They were being deprived of their sport.

"The young 'ound!" exclaimed Bill. "Just wait until 'e comes hout! 'E needn't think as we'll let 'im off!"

"Not likely!"

"An' we'll 'ave that pup back, too!"

The village boys were determined.

And they stood watching from the bank, ready to pounce the very instant that Willy returned. They had not the slightest fear that they would be able to deal with him in a very effective way.

But Willy again upset their calculations.

He struggled hard to get to the little dog's side—for he was fully clothed; having had no time to even throw off his jacket. And the current was fairly strong just here.

Willy was a good swimmer, but he had essayed a very grim task.

He reached the little dog's side and grabbed at it.

"All right, old man—I've got you!" muttered Willy. Don't struggle like that! I'll get you ashore!"

Somehow or other the puppy seemed to realise that Handforth minor had come to his rescue.

He ceased his struggles and lay quite limp in Willy's arm. And the junior trod water as he looked round. The river was rather cold, and he was feeling chilled.

And the next thing was to get ashore.

"Come on—we're waitin' for yer!" shouted Lumpy Bill jeerily.

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"You'd best come out quick, or you'll get drowned!"

The roughs stood looking on, awaiting their moment. And Willy came to a desperate decision.

If he swam to the towing path the village gang would grab him—and he knew that he would be helpless after his exhausting swim. The puppy would be seized, and the torture would go on.

So Handforth minor set his teeth and made for the opposite bank.

It was a plucky decision, and Willy did it entirely for the sake of the helpless little animal. Over there it would be out of reach of these torturers. It was better to cross the river.

But it was deadly dangerous.

The distance was much further, and Willy was already feeling chilled to the marrow, and his limbs were numbed. Although he didn't know it at the time, he was taking a terrible risk.

Indeed, a human life was being almost sacrificed for the sake of a mongrel.

Willy struck out, and it was only his great determination that carried him along. He got nearer and nearer to the other bank—fighting against the current every inch of the way.

And even Lumpy Bill and the other roughs began to realise that there was a big element of danger. They feared that their brutality might lead to a very real tragedy.

But they did not make any attempt to help.

They stood watching—their fear growing. But Willy was fighting his way valiantly. And although he felt his strength ebbing away he kept on—fighting—fighting to get to that bank which seemed no nearer.

And Chubby Heath was nearly scared out of his wits, too.

He was afraid to move—he was too frightened to run off for help. All he could do was to stand there, gazing out at Willy's head as it crept nearer and nearer to the opposite bank.

The fag was fascinated, and his heart was jumping madly. If anything happened to Willy, these ruffians would be to blame! Chubby almost began to sob as a dreadful fear gripped him.

Would Handforth minor do it?

It was touch and go—nobody knew this better than Willy himself. He never said so afterwards, but for a certain time he really believed that it was all up. He practically gave himself up for lost.

But the plucky fag swam on—mechanically, determinedly, and with wonderful perseverance. The river bank on the other side grew nearer and nearer. And yet it seemed miles away.

Willy's feet seemed to be a ton weight—his boots held him back. His clothing clung to him, and made all his movements sluggish and clumsy. He began to wonder how he had kept up for so long.

And then, with his breath coming and going in short gasps, he felt that the end was at hand. He couldn't do it. It was no good—it was useless to keep on trying.

And at that moment he felt something under his foot.

And to his intense joy, he discovered that his feet were touching the river bed. He could feel the stones underfoot, and the soft, oozing mud. He staggered forward.

Safe!

He pulled himself out in a dazed, bewildered fashion, and lay there in the grass. The puppy was struggling to get free from its bonds beside him. The little dog was nearly spent, however.

The spell was broken. Chubby Heath gave one great gasp of relief, and ran off like mad. It was his intention to fetch help as soon as possible. As for Lumpy Bill and the other roughs, their anger returned with double force.

"Come on, mates—we ain't goin' to stand this 'ere!" growled Bill. "That kid ain't goin' to best us!"

"Not likely!"

"We'll soon make 'im smart for this 'ere!"

And, with one accord, the gang set off up the towing-path as hard as they could run. Willy, on the opposite bank, did not even know that the louts were after him. He was still striving to regain his breath.

The village crowd knew that there was only one way to get at their victims now—and that was by crossing the rustic bridge which spanned the stream higher up the river.

They ran for it in a kind of mob. They were not going to be defeated by this insignificant fag from St. Frank's. They would show him!

They got across the bridge, and then tore round. Willy caught sight of them just as they came into view from behind an intervening clump of willows. And Handforth minor staggered to his feet, clenching his fists.

"Oh, the beasts—the caddish beasts!" he muttered.

There was despair in his heart. He felt that he could do nothing now. He would fight to the best of his ability—but how could he possibly hope to get the better of this gang?

His own strength had been spent, and there was no power left in his punch.

But as Lumpy Bill and the others came up, Handforth minor stood back, with the little puppy at his feet. There was a grim, defiant look in his eyes. He faced the torturers with flaming cheeks.

"You—you miserable brutes!" he shouted huskily. "Aren't you satisfied? If you dare to touch this dog——"

"Git out of it, kid!" said Bill gruffly.

"If you touch this dog, I'll tell the police about it!" shouted Willy. "And then you'll be arrested, and shoved in prison——"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

The louts closed round Willy in a throng. This was just the kind of thing they liked. They only had one insignificant junior to deal with—and he was practically used out.

Willy's blows were futile. His punch was lacking in its usual fire, and he was grasped by two of the roughs, and dragged over the grass. In a moment he was held there, struggling feebly. The plucky Third Former could do no more. He had risked his very life for the sake of a mere puppy—and all for nothing! For the young blackguards had picked up the puppy again, and Lumpy Bill was preparing to throw it back into the stream.

Handforth minor nearly went insane with rage and helplessness.

"You—you awful savages!" he panted thickly. "Oh, why doesn't somebody come? You cads—you inhuman rotters!"

He took one deep breath, and gathered himself together. And then he let out a wild yell—a cry that practically used up all his remaining stock of energy. But what was the good?

"In with the little cuss," said one of the villagers.

"You bet!" grinned Lumpy Bill.

He absolutely delighted in this torture. And he swung his arms back in readiness to

fling the whimpering puppy back into the river.

And then Alf Huggins burst upon the scene.

CHAPTER III.

ALF TO THE RESCUE!

AS a matter of fact, Alf arrived quite by accident.

He had been wandering in one of the meadows which adjoined the river—trying to see if he could find some mushrooms. Alf Huggins was rather hazy regarding at what time of the year mushrooms could be discovered, but he thought there was no harm in having a look for some.

And then he heard that yell from Willy.

He wondered what it could be, and went to the thick hedge which shut off the river, and gazed through.

"Crikey!" he gasped.

That one glance was enough for him. He burst through the hedge as hard as he could go, and came dashing across towards the villagers. Long before he got to the spot he took in the whole situation.

The new boy at St. Frank's—the bricklayer's son who was shunned by the Remove—was pretty sharp witted. He saw Willy Handforth being held down. He saw the dripping puppy in the hands of Lumpy Bill. And Bill's very attitude was sufficiently eloquent.

Alf arrived, breathless.

"'Ere!" he exclaimed. "Wot's the game?"

"Clear off, afore we start on you, too!" snarled Lumpy Bill. "Why, look at 'im, mates! This 'ere's the chap we've 'eard tell on! The chap from Lunnon 'oo ain't no more eddicated than wot we are!"

"We ain't talkin' about eddication!" snapped Alf curtly. "Wot are you doin' with that puppy? Give it to me, quick, or I'll——"

"Well, wot will yer do?" sneered Lumpy.

"I'll swipe you across the jaw!" replied Alf.

Lumpy Bill gave a coarse laugh, and prepared to throw the puppy into the river. Alf dashed forward, and with one swift movement he took the little dog away, and flung it right back in the long grass, behind him. Then he stood back, and clenched his fists.

"Now!" Fetch that pup if you can!" he shouted. "I ain't goin' to stand 'ere and see you act in that way!"

"Oh, good man!" murmured Willy. "Go it, Huggins!"

The village roughs stared at Alf in amazement. Did he imagine for one moment that he could stop them? Was this Remove junior fool enough to believe that he could defy a whole gang?

"Come on!" snarled Lumpy. "We'll soon settle this 'ere chap!"

They rushed upon Alf in a body.

Crash! Biff! Crash!

Alf Huggins stood like a rock.

He was heavily built, and when it came to fighting, he was not lacking in pluck or skill. And just at the moment he was fired by the same kind of fury that had gripped Handforth minor.

It enraged him to see these hulking louts torturing a helpless puppy. And his blows were given an extra power.

Alf's fist crashed its way into Lumpy Bill's face, and the latter went over with a roaring howl. Two of the others went over in just the same way. But they were up again in a moment, and rushing at Alf.

And then the fight went on in the most terrific way.

It was rather a grim business. Alf was dogged. He hardly moved a yard out of his original position, and he battled with a desperation that caused Willy to yell with admiration. There were five village youths altogether—and Alf was dealing with three of them.

"We'll smash him!" snarled Bill, in a tearing rage.

He rushed upon the junior at the very moment that the other two were attacking him. For a moment Alf was off his guard.

Crash!

Alf staggered drunkenly as Bill's mighty fist thudded into his left eye. At the same moment he received a blow on the jaw which gashed his lip. He went down, and a heavy boot kicked him on the ear.

Willy struggled madly with his two captors.

"Lemme go!" he gasped. "Oh, you beasts! Lemme go!"

He was rapidly regaining his strength. But it was impossible for him to escape from the clutches of these two roughs. They were glad of the excuse to hold him—they didn't like the look of Alf.

Many juniors would have given up the battle.

But Alf Huggins, battered and bruised, and rather dazed, was more determined than ever. He scrambled to his feet, swaying slightly.

"Come on!" he muttered. "I'm ready!"

But he didn't wait. It was his idea that attack is the best form of defence. And while the three brutes were hesitating, Alf flung himself at them.

And the battle raged, even more fiercely than before.

It became a roaring melee. Alf's clothing became torn, ruffled and dirty. But he knew nothing of this. He was fighting magnificently. And when Lumpy Bill went down for the third time he had had enough.

He crawled away, cursing loudly.

"I'll pay ye for this!" he snarled. "By ginger! Just you wait!"

The villagers were not very plucky. When they came upon somebody like Alf, they found that their bullying courage was insufficient. And with Alf fighting harder than ever, they hesitated.

Lumpy Bill was out of it—and one of his companions went over with a terrific crash

a minute later. He had had enough, too. Howling with pain, he ran off across the meadow. It was a signal for the rest to do the same. This one junior had beaten them all!

And Willy's captors fled as soon as Alf turned upon them. Willy leapt to his feet, and glared after them.

"Cowards!" he yelled. "Dirty, bullying cowards!"

The village roughs turned when they reached the hedge, and tried to obtain some kind of compensation by hurtling stones.

But the St. Frank's juniors took no notice of them. This sort of thing only made them utterly contemptuous.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Willy, panting. "I say, Huggins! That was great! My hat! You can fight!"

"Them brutes ought to be shoved in jail!" muttered Alf unsteadily.

Willy stood back, and looked at him.

"Jolly good!" he said approvingly. "They've marked you a bit, but nothing to speak of."

If the Headmaster had seen Huggins at that moment, he would not have shared Willy's opinion. For Alf Huggins was in a dreadful condition. His left eye was rapidly becoming black, blood was streaming from the corner of his mouth, and one of his ears looked about twice its normal size.

His hands were bruised and battered, he was covered with mud, and his collar was hanging by only one stud-hole. His tie had vanished altogether. Taken as a whole, Alf looked frightful.

But Willy didn't seem to think so.

"Yes, you've escaped pretty lightly!" he said. "You're a wonder, Huggins! Why, even Ted himself couldn't have done so well—and he's a bit of a terror once he fairly starts."

"It's all right—I 'ad to go for 'em," said Alf breathlessly. "The brutes! Fair made my blood boil to see 'em!"

He bent down, and picked up the little puppy—which was now shivering with cold and fright. With shaking fingers, Alf untied the strings, and then tucked the little mongrel into his jacket.

"We'd best get back—quick!" he said. "You won't come to no good, being wet through like that there! Good job you called out, young 'un. Seems like I came just in time."

"You bet you did!" said Willy. "They were just going to throw the pup back into the water. Come on!"

They set off for the school as hard as they could run, caring nothing further for Lumpy Bill and Co. Those callous youths had had more than enough, and they were limping their own way homewards.

When Alf and Willy arrived at the school gates, they found old Josh Cuttle, the school porter, pottering about near by. Alf went straight to him, and produced the little dog.

He only briefly explained, and asked Mr. Cuttle to look after the pup. Mr. Cuttle promised to do so. He was fond of animals, and both Willy and Alf were satisfied.

And then they hurried towards the Ancient House.

Fortunately, the Triangle was deserted, and nobody saw the pair as they went across. It was getting dark, too, for the dusk was deeply gathering. Lights gleamed out from many windows.

"If we're lucky, we'll slip in without being spotted!" said Willy. "My hat! You look a bit of a sight now, Huggins!"

"Can't be helped!" said Alf. "All in the day's work!"

They mounted the steps, and entered the lobby.

And they were just in time to come face to face with Mr. Snuggs!

CHAPTER IV.

THE REWARD OF VALOUR.

MR. SNUGGS gave a horrified exclamation.

"Good gracious me!" he gasped. "What is this I see? What is this I see? I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

Mr. Snuggs adopted an air of exaggerated consternation. He was the new master of the Remove—a thin, weedy individual with a permanent kind of sneer, and thin lips and watery eyes. Mr. Snuggs was several kinds of a worm, and all the decent fellows in the Remove loathed him.

"I am astounded—I am staggered, indeed!" exclaimed the Form-master. "Huggins! What possible explanation can you give for your disgraceful condition?"

Alf looked at Mr. Snuggs steadily.

"I don't s'pose it'll be no good if I do give an explanation, sir," he replied. "Wot's the use? I'm always in the wrong!"

The junior spoke bitterly, and Willy Handforth gave him a sharp look.

"Well, you're not in the wrong this time, old son," he said cheerfully. "It's all right, sir—Huggins is a hero!"

Mr. Snuggs compressed his lips.

"I shall be very pleased, Handforth minor, if you will refrain from chiming in!" he exclaimed tartly. "You may go upstairs and change your clothing. Upon my soul! You are soaked to the skin!"

"Oh, it's all right, sir—I'm not cold," said Willy. "Sha'n't come to any harm in this mild weather."

Mr. Snuggs turned back to Alf.

"You are in a perfectly scandalous state, Huggins!" he said, his voice shrill with indignation. "I am more shocked than I can say. I can quite easily see that you have been fighting!"

"Yes, sir."

"I shall punish you severely!" declared Mr. Snuggs. "I will not have this ruffianly conduct! You are a disgrace to

the whole school, Huggins! I am ashamed of you!"

"So you said afore, sir," remarked Alf resignedly.

"How—how dare you!" shouted Mr. Snuggs. "You are not only intolerably impertinent, but you are deliberately insulting! I have half a mind to take you straight before the Housemaster!"

Alf brightened up.

"I wish you would, sir!" he said eagerly.

Mr. Snuggs leered.

"Oh, indeed! You possibly imagine that Mr. Lee will be lenient—that he will overlook your blackguardly behaviour! Let me tell you, Huggins, that I shall deal with this matter personally!"

Willy stood listening, rather astounded. He had heard that Mr. Snuggs was bigoted, and extremely little-minded, but he had hardly believed that the Remove-master was such an absolute beast as this.

"I say, sir!" said Willy. "Just a moment!"

"I have already told you, Handforth minor——"

"Yes, I know, sir!" said Willy. "But wouldn't it be just as well to hear the facts? You say that you're going to deal with this matter—and yet you don't even ask what's happened!"

"Are you daring to dictate to me?" demanded Mr. Snuggs.

"Yes, sir——"

"What?"

"I mean, not exactly dictate!" said Willy hastily. "But it's always struck me that no fellow ought to be punished until he's had some offence proved against him. Any other kind of justice isn't justice at all!"

"If you say one more word, Handforth minor, I shall be compelled to speak to your Form-master!" exclaimed Mr. Snuggs excitedly. "I will not have it! I will not allow you to address me in such a manner!"

"Keep your hair on!" said Willy. "I—I mean, no need to get flurried, sir. You don't seem to understand. We found a lot of those village roughs trying to torture a dog, and we stopped the game."

Mr. Snuggs started.

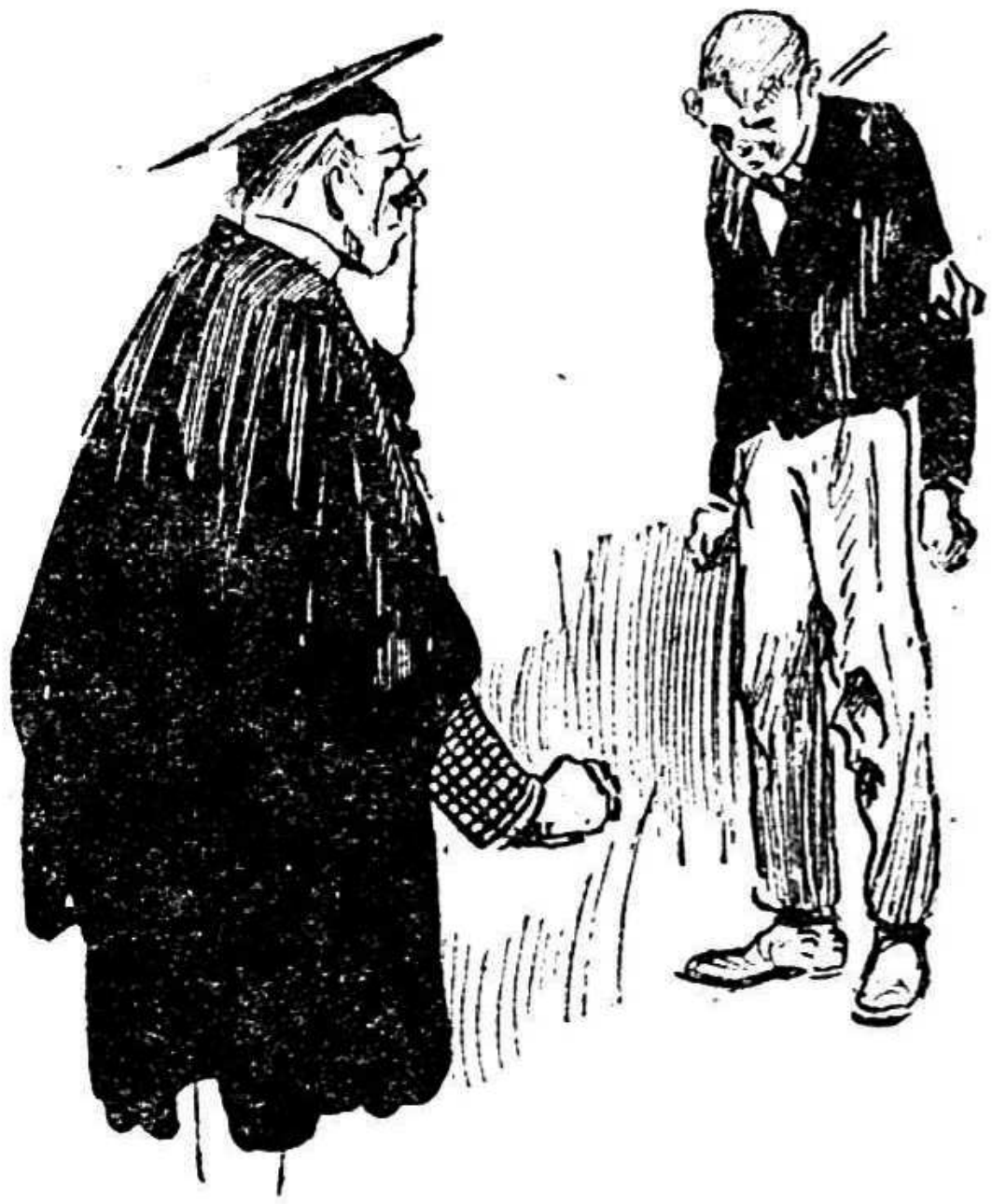
"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed sharply. "So that is it! We are getting at the truth! Yes, to be sure! It seems that we are getting at the truth!"

And Mr. Snuggs looked round, and made sure that everybody was attending—for by this time a crowd of juniors had collected. Mr. Snuggs always delighted in an audience.

"We are getting at the truth!" he repeated.

Willy sighed.

"My only hat!" he said. "Of course we're getting at the truth! Haven't I been telling you, sir? You ought to have seen the way Huggins sloshed into those



"I am astounded—I am staggered, indeed!" exclaimed the Form-master. "Huggins, what possible explanation can you give for your disgraceful condition?"

louts! He absolutely biffed them sideways!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Snuggs. "He did what?"

"Knocked them into smithereens, sir!"

"Disgraceful!" said Mr. Snuggs sourly. "Utterly scandalous!"

"What!" shouted Willy, staring. "It was grand!"

"I shall be severe with you——"

"I can't help that, sir!" retorted Willy indignantly. "Great guns! These rotten village roughs were torturing a dog! Can't you understand? For goodness' sake, wake up, sir!"

Mr. Snuggs looked rather startled—he didn't know Willy very well.

"What did you say, Handforth minor?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm blowed if you haven't gone deaf now, sir!" growled Willy. "We got into this mess because we had a fight with the village cads—a regular, roaring battle! You never saw such a thing! Blood all over the place, teeth lying in the grass, and I shouldn't be surprised if there are one or two ears knocking about! It was absolutely gorgeous!"

"You—you bloodthirsty young rascal!" shouted Mr. Snuggs indignantly. "What you have told me only confirms my first suspicion. Go upstairs at once, Handforth

minor! I shall report this affair to Mr. Suncliffe!"

"But look here, you—you——"

"Go upstairs at once!" thundered Mr. Snuggs. "You are wet through—you will catch your death of cold! Go!"

Willy gave one sniff and turned.

"Oh, what's the use?" he asked. "Now I know! I've been told a few things—but now I can understand! No wonder the Remove looks so rocky! Poor chaps! I'm sorry for 'em!"

And Willy stalked away, and rushed upstairs to change into dry things.

And Mr. Snuggs, gloating with joy, turned back to the unfortunate Alf. He certainly looked a sorry spectacle, with his bruised and battered face, his muddy clothing, and his torn, crumpled collar.

"From the first moment of your arrival at St. Frank's, I have regarded you as a perfectly disgraceful young blackguard!" said Mr. Snuggs. "I am quite certain that you are a disgrace to the school!"

"You'll learn that by 'eart soon, sir," said Alf sullenly. "Ain't you goin' to cane me, or somethink? I want to git cleaned up a bit!"

"You are far worse in every way!" snapped Mr. Snuggs. "I am disgusted! I am utterly disgusted! You will write me five hundred lines for taking part in a disgraceful fight with the village boys—who, I have not the slightest doubt, were blameless!"

Alf nodded.

"Right, sir!" he said. "Can I go now?"

"It was not my intention to let you go in—but perhaps I had better change my mind!" said Mr. Snuggs sneeringly. "You are such an atrocious sight that I do not wonder these other boys shrink from you! Yes, go indoors, by all means—your appearance is revolting!"

Alf passed inside without another word. It was not that his spirit had gone—that he had no go in him. But Mr. Snuggs was always like this, and it was quite useless to argue.

It didn't matter what happened—it didn't matter who was to blame—Alf was always in the wrong.

And so it was now.

As soon as he got fully into the lobby, he found himself surrounded by a crowd of jeering Removites. Merrell and Marriott were the leaders, and Armstrong and Griffith and Hubbard were also prominent.

"Measly gutter brat!" said Hubbard. "Just like him! Taking part in a low-down brawl!"

"He's getting worse every day!"

"Well, what else can we expect?" asked Armstrong. "When he came here he was on his best behaviour. But now he's showing us his true colours. He's nothing more nor less than a street urchin!"

"Hear, hear!"

Alf looked round grimly.

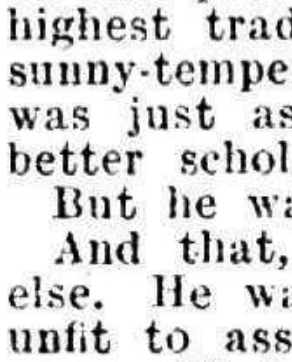
"Are you fellows goin' to let me pass, or shall I show you a bit more 'ooliganism?" he asked. "I can tell you straight—I ain't standing no nonsense! Stand back—an' look lively! I ain't in a mood to 'ear any more o' your sneers! I'm fed up with the 'ole lot o' you!"

He advanced, clenching his fists.

And the valiant Removites fell back, contenting themselves with further jeers and jibes.

CHAPTER V.

ALF'S BEST FRIEND.



ALF HUGGINS walked upstairs, secretly amused at the manner in which the snobs had fallen back. These Removites were utter cads, and Alf looked upon them all with supreme contempt.

Yet these were the fellows who had been making his life so unbearable in the Ancient House. They regarded themselves as superior beings—they looked upon Huggins as a lower order of life.

Yet, as a matter of fact, if the snobs could only have seen themselves as they actually were, they might have realised that Alf was the only one who had been acting in a gentlemanly manner.

And Mr. Snuggs encouraged these fellows. He was hand in glove with the snobs, and did everything possible to urge them on in their warfare against the boy from Hoxton.

Alf had been having a pretty rough time of it.

Not because he was a cad—not because he was a coward. He was neither. Indeed, he had proved himself to be worthy of the highest traditions of St. Frank's. He was sunny-tempered, quite good-looking, and he was just as advanced in his work as the better scholars in the Remove.

But he was the son of a bricklayer.

And that, of course, nullified everything else. He was the son of a bricklayer—and unfit to associate with the sons of gentlemen. That was why Alf was cut—why he was persecuted from morning till night. He was growing accustomed to it by now—and he was secretly amused, too. For Alf knew something which nobody else knew.

He had a secret.

To be absolutely truthful, Alf was not Alf Huggins at all—but the son of Sir John Brent. And Sir John Brent was the Chairman of the Governors of St. Frank's! That was why Alf smiled to himself.

He had come to St. Frank's as an experiment. For at his previous school he had been told that the juniors here were not snobs. Alf had wagered that if he went as the son of a bricklayer he would be cut and ostracised.

And Alf was proving his own contention to be true.

That was the rich part of the whole

affair. He was the son of a most important man on the Governing Board. Yet he had been cut dead by a majority of the juniors.

Now, Alf was curious to see what fresh developments would take place. He had an idea that something big might be brewing. But never, in his wildest dreams, did he have the faintest suspicion of the actual truth.

He knew that Fullwood hated him—and Mr. Snuggs hated him in just the same way. It was from these two that he expected some move. And Alf's shrewdness was not at fault.

Having had a thorough wash and a clean down, Huggins—as it is better to call him—went downstairs, and made his way straight to Archie Glenthorne's study. He went inside and grinned.

Archie was sound asleep on the lounge.

It was a luxurious apartment, and it was shared by these two. Archie had expressly invited Alf to be his study-mate—much to the amazement and consternation of the Remove.

The friendship seemed incongruous.

For Archie was of noble blood—and Alf was the son of a labouring man. It seemed absolutely ridiculous that these two should be such fast chums. Yet, during the past week or so, they had been drawn together more than ever. And now they were the firmest of firm friends.

Alf sat down, and rubbed his injured ear tenderly.

"What-ho!" mumbled Archie, sitting up. "Why, great goodness! I should say, good greatness! How, as it were, did you flow in, dear old lad? I mean to say, not a sound! Silence in chunks, and what not!"

"You've been dozing, Archie," smiled Alf.

"Forty of the best, what?" said Archie, yawning. "Good! In fact, bally good! I must remark that I'm feeling frightfully braced. The good old tissues are absolutely restored."

"That's good!" grinned Alf. "Lummy! My heye ain't 'arf sore!"

"Sore?" repeated Archie. "Dash it, it's better to be half sore than fully sore! But, good gadzooks—in other words, great Scott!—what have you been doing, old scream?"

"Fighting!" said Alf.

"Well, I mean, any bally cove can see that," said Archie. "But it seems to me to be something rather worse. Gazing at you squarely, old darling, I should be inclined to hazard the opinion that you've been run over by about fifteen steam-rollers."

Archie gazed at Alf in a very critical way.

"The remains are in a shocking condish," he went on. "I really cannot regard you as a human being, dear laddie. What I mean to say is, you look absolutely a poisonous wreck."

"It was them village blokes," said Huggins.

"Ah!" said Archie. "The village blokes—what? I must remark, in passing, that the village blokes are a frightful set of—of—— Well, there you are! They're absolutely a frightful set."

Alf related the adventure.

"But there's no need to talk about wot I did," he ended up. "It won't please me if you start chinning about it. If there was anythink praiseworthy done, Handforth's young brother was the feller who showed hisself to be a real good 'un."

"Diving in the old wetness—what?" asked Archie. "Swimming out to the rescue sort of stuff. Oh, rather! Oh, several rathers! I mean to say, this Handforth youngster appears to be a somewhat dashed plucky sort of cove!"

"He's a young mivvy," said Alf, with conviction.

"I don't exactly follow, but quite so," said Archie. "I trust that is no expression of contempt——"

"A mivvy—a marvel!"

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie firmly. "Well, when it comes to that, as far as I can see, the whole bally Handforth family are marvels. You know what I mean—birds of a feather. In fact, a deucedly remarkable throng."

"Yes, they're a bit different to most families," agreed Alf. "But I like 'em. They're two of the best chaps in the school—the Handforths are. A bit noisy, p'r'aps, but as true as steel."

"I agree, old fruit—I agree!"

"And you ought to have seen the way Willy walked up the apples-and-pears!" went on Alf. "That was after 'e had been telling Snuggs off. 'E was as sprightly as you like."

Archie looked puzzled.

"I gather the trend, old dear, but I think I must have failed to grasp a few words," he said apologetically. "I mean to say, I don't very well see how any cove could walk up some apples-and-pears——"

"Stairs, you ass!" grinned Alf. "Apples-and-pears—stairs!"

Archie gazed at him in wonder.

"Well, of course, now you come to mention it, absolutely," he said. "But all these frightfully slang terms catch me somewhere in the middle, don't you know. I mean to say, I'm doubled up. Pray let us change the old sub, laddie."

"Just as you like," said Alf. "Of course, what I really went out for was to find some mushrooms."

"Oh, ah!" said Archie. "Rather priceless things."

"I heard you say as you liked 'em, so I thought I'd go an' gather a few," said Huggins. "But afore I could get really started on the job, those village blokes come on the scene."

"And I gather that you must write five hundred lines for the Snuggs bird?"

"Yes."

"Fearfully hard lines, old man," said

Archie sympathetically. "Of course, that man is a kind of centipede! I mean, a bally thing that crawls. You can't call him a human being—not absolutely. Every time I see him, sundry spasms and shudders whizz up and down the old spine like one o'clock!"

"Yes, he do give you that feelin'" said Alf, nodding. "But I'm getting used to 'im by now. As for the lines—blow 'em!"

"You mean that you won't do the job?"

"Not yet, anyway," replied Huggins. "He didn't say when I was to get 'em in, an' that gives me time. The old misery! Let's forget all about 'im, an' talk about football."

with a clean collar. The leader of the Third Form nodded.

"Hallo, old bones!" he said. "I've come here to have a few words."

"Then you'd better get outside and have a few words with somebody else," retorted Handforth. "I'm right in the middle of work. I'm not going to be bothered now. Clear!"

"Well, there's a nice brotherly way to be greeted!" said Willy, in an aggrieved voice. "I'm surprised at you, Ted. You ought to be pleased to see me. It's only by luck that I'm here at all."

"Buzz off!" snorted Handy.

"A rather priceless scheme!" said Archie, nodding.

CHAPTER VI.

WILLY STATES HIS MIND.

EDWARD OSWALD Handforth looked up from his prep. and glared at the door of Study D.

"Come in!" he said aggressively.

The door opened, and Willy appeared, smiling cheerfully. Willy was practically himself again—attired in dry clothing, and

"I might have been killed an hour ago," said Willy.

"Killed?"

"Even Church and McClure looked up at that. Willy's tone was a little different, Edward Oswald looked at his younger brother in a curious way.

"What are you getting at?" he went on. "What's all this rot? You might have been killed?"

"Well, I wasn't far from drowning, anyway," replied Willy. "And Lumpy Bill was to blame. That bullying ruffian ought to be shoved under arrest, and sent to chokey."

Handforth slowly rose to his feet.

"Has Lumpy Bill been going for you?" he asked grimly.

"Well, not exactly—but I'll explain," said Willy. "It's rather a pity you weren't there, because there was some first-class scrapping. I didn't do much at the time—although I had a row with Chubby Heath just now."

"What's Chubby Heath got to do with it?"

"Oh, he funked it!" said Willy contemptuously. "He whizzed off, and didn't come back. But, about the other affair."

Willy went into details, and Handforth listened with very careful attention. He was so interested that he instinctively clenched his fists, and automatically punched at the air.

He was probably picturing himself in the midst of the fight. It wouldn't have mattered if he had continued punching the air. As Willy was describing the little mongrel's sufferings, Handforth suddenly made a terrific swipe, and knocked Church over in one fearful drive.

"Didn't you go for the rotter?" roared Handforth.

"Yow!" howled Church. "You—you dangerous lunatic! What—what's the idea of that?"

"Oh, don't bother!" snapped Handforth. "You shouldn't get in the way. Listen to what Willy's saying. I'm jolly well going out, and I'm going to find Lumpy Bill, and I'll put his head under the village pump. Then I'll drown him."

Willy sighed.

"There's no sense in getting excited about it," he said. "Wait a bit. You'll have plenty of chances to have a go at Lumpy Bill. I really came here to talk about Huggins."

"Huggins?" repeated Handy.

"Of course, you've never heard of him, have you?"

"Don't be cheeky!" said Handforth severely. "About Lumpy Bill——"

"I tell you I want to talk about Huggins!"

"I don't care what you want!" roared Handforth violently. "If I say I'm going to talk about Lumpy Bill, I'm going to talk about Lumpy Bill! Lumpy Bill's a cad! I'm going out, and I'm going to find Lumpy Bill, and then I'm going to——"

"Find Lumpy Bill?" asked Willy sarcastically. "My hat! There seems to be a lot of Lumpy Bill about it! You've jolly well got him on the brain. Now, about Huggins——"

"Look here——"

"Look here——"

The two brothers came to a stop, at a deadlock. They stared at one another, doing their utmost to wither one another on the spot. And Church and McClure sat looking on, interested spectators. It was something novel to hear Handforth roaring at somebody else in Study D. He generally gave these little attentions to his own chums.

"Well?" asked Willy, at last. "I'm still here!"

"I can see that, can't I?" snorted Handy.

"Oh, I had an idea you might be thinking that you'd melted me away," said Willy. "That glare of yours would do ripping on the films. When you grow up, Ted, you'll be worth quids and quids as a villain."

"A villain!" roared Handforth. "Why, you—you——"

"Oh, help!" groaned Willy. "This always happens when I come here. We can't keep to the subject—and in about two minutes it'll end up in a fight. I didn't want to hurt you chaps."

Handforth suddenly calmed down. This was one of his little habits. It was really impossible to tell what he would do. There was no relying on him. Sometimes he would flare up into a white-hot rage, and sometimes—just when his chums were expecting him to burst—he would become as cool as ice. But he was more dangerous in that condition.

"Oh!" he said bitterly. "Oh!"

"Something pricking you?" asked Willy.

"No. Something's hurting my eyes," retorted Handforth. "Some horrible object that I'm ashamed to own as a brother. In fact, I don't own him. I wouldn't be seen walking with him. Go away! You offend me."

Willy grinned.

"Putting all jokes aside, Ted——" he began.

"Jokes!" shouted Handforth.

His temper blazed out again with unexpected violence.

"Joking aside," went on Willy calmly. "What about Huggins? I've been watching you chaps in the Remove—not you fellows particularly, but the whole crowd. I haven't been impressed."

"Oh!" said Handforth. "You haven't been impressed?"

"Upon the whole, I regard the Remove as a rather mouldy crowd," said Willy. "Not only mouldy, but absolutely decayed. The way the Remove has been treating Huggins is shameful."

"Go on!" said Edward Oswald thickly. "Go on!"

"That's what I am doing," said Willy. "Huggins came here at the beginning of term—he's a real good chap. One of the best. A bit common, perhaps, but what does that matter? The heart's where you want it—not in the speech. And Huggins is true blue. A brick!"

"Tell us something we don't know!" sneered Handforth.

"Why, you've always been down on him——"

"I haven't been down on him!" snapped Edward Oswald. "I thought it was a bit thick. I've got nothing against him personally, though. Simply as a matter of principle. I reckon it was a dud idea to

send him to St. Frank's. He's not the kind of fellow for this school. He's—he's ——"

"Well?"

"Well, he's common," said Handy bluntly.

Willy gazed at him with withering scorn.

"And aren't you common?" he asked. "Aren't I common? Aren't we all common? As far as I can see, there's no difference between us and the chaps of the other schools. We're flesh and blood, and they're flesh and blood. It doesn't matter where you go, you'll find decent chaps, and you'll find rotters."

"Well, of course——"

"I haven't finished yet!" interrupted Willy. "The chaps who have to be educated at the cheaper schools aren't so lucky as we are—because our paters have got money to send us to a place like this. Is that any reason we should be down on the chaps who are poor? Hasn't Huggins always proved himself to be decent?"

"Well, yes."

"Then why shouldn't he be here?"

"I didn't say——"

"Yes, you did," said Willy. "So don't try to get out of it. I'm not going to be spoofed like that."

"I'm just about fed up!" snorted Handforth. "I've stood as much of this as I'll stand from anybody. As a matter of fact, Huggins is one of the best. I've always said so. I've backed him up many a time."

"Well, you ought to back him up more than ever," declared Willy. "After the way he fought those village cads, I'd swear by him. It was the loveliest scrap you ever saw in your life. Worth quids."

And Willy went into a long account of the affair. He praised Alf up to the skies. He explained every blow, and went into a wealth of detail that made his listeners feel rather queer. He took particular delight in describing how Huggins had nearly driven two of Lumpy Bill's teeth down the back of his throat.

By the time he had done, Handforth was glowing.

"And Huggins did that?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright, of course!" said Willy. "That's why I've come here—I think you ought to know. The chap's a stunner. Took on three of those village roughs, and whacked the whole crowd."

Handforth stalked to the door.

"I'm going to see Huggins!" he declared firmly. "I want a word with him! And, what's more, I want a word with those rotten snobs."

CHAPTER VII.

TELLING THEM OFF!

THE common room was crowded when Handforth looked in.

He had already been to Archie's study, but neither Archie nor Alf Huggins were there. So Handforth had come along to the common room.

"Oh, here you are!" he said warmly.

The two strangely assorted chums were standing in one corner, chatting with Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey. Most of the other fellows were on the other side of the room.

"Of course, the chap's proving his commonness every hour of the day," Armstrong was saying. "But I think this is about the limit! Fighting with village roughs! Engaging in a rotten brawl!"

"Horrible!"

"Degrading!"

"Giving the school a bad name!"

The snobs stated their opinions in no uncertain terms.

"Oh, what's the good of talking?" said Fullwood sourly. "The fellow's an absolute cad! You can't expect anythin' better. He won't stay here for more than this one term—that's certain!"

"I wish it was certain!" growled Gulliver.

"It is!" replied Fullwood. "Lots of us are gettin' up a big protest. An' our paters will write to the Head, too. Why, the school authorities wouldn't dare to let that gutter brat remain here after the term's over."

Handforth turned, and looked at the snobs.

"Still talking about Huggins?" he asked. "By George! You never give the chap a minute's rest! Every time I come here, you're jawing about Huggins—running him down, and kidding yourselves that you're gold and he's dross! My goodness! I've never seen such a lot of dross in all my life! You're nothing else but dross!"

"What's dross?" demanded Armstrong angrily.

"That's right—show your ignorance!"

"I'll bet you had to look it up in the dictionary," snorted Armstrong.

"Dross," said Handforth, "is waste matter! Dross is scum!"

"Scum!" roared Fullwood.

"Exactly!"

"Are you callin' us scum?"

"I called you dross—and I've told you what dross is!" replied Handforth sourly. "As for Huggins, he's true blue! He's gilt-edged! He's jolly well fitted with jewels in every hole!"

"You—you funny idiot!"

"This evening he found a whole crowd of village roughs ill-treating a dog—and he fought the whole lot—single handed!" went on Handforth enthusiastically. "Isn't that

what you call doing the right thing? Wasn't that upholding the honour of St. Frank's? The fellow's one of the best we've ever had here. If he wants me for a pal, I'm ready!"

Handforth stalked across the room, and grasped Alf's hand.

"Put it there!" said Handy grimly.

"That's all right!" smiled Alf, looking uncomfortable. No need to make a song about it, mate."

"Mind your own business!" snorted Handforth. "If I like to make a song about it, I'll make a song about it! As for these worms, they can crawl away into their holes!"

He turned and looked at the snobs with supreme content.

"They must have come up after the last shower!" he said disdainfully. "I've seen better things wriggling about in a pond!"

There was an uproar at once.

But neither Handforth nor Alf minded this in the least. And Huggins soon found himself surrounded by all the best fellows in the Remove—including Pitt and Grey and Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson.

"I came in and found them all discussing the affray with the village louts. And Alf was the hero of the occasion. Gradually, matters were changing for him. He was gaining new friends every day. Many of the snobs were beginning to change—although they did not like to admit it. Fullwood and his supporters were not so numerous.

But Ralph Leslie Fullwood smiled in an evil kind of way as he saw these signs of Alf's growing popularity.

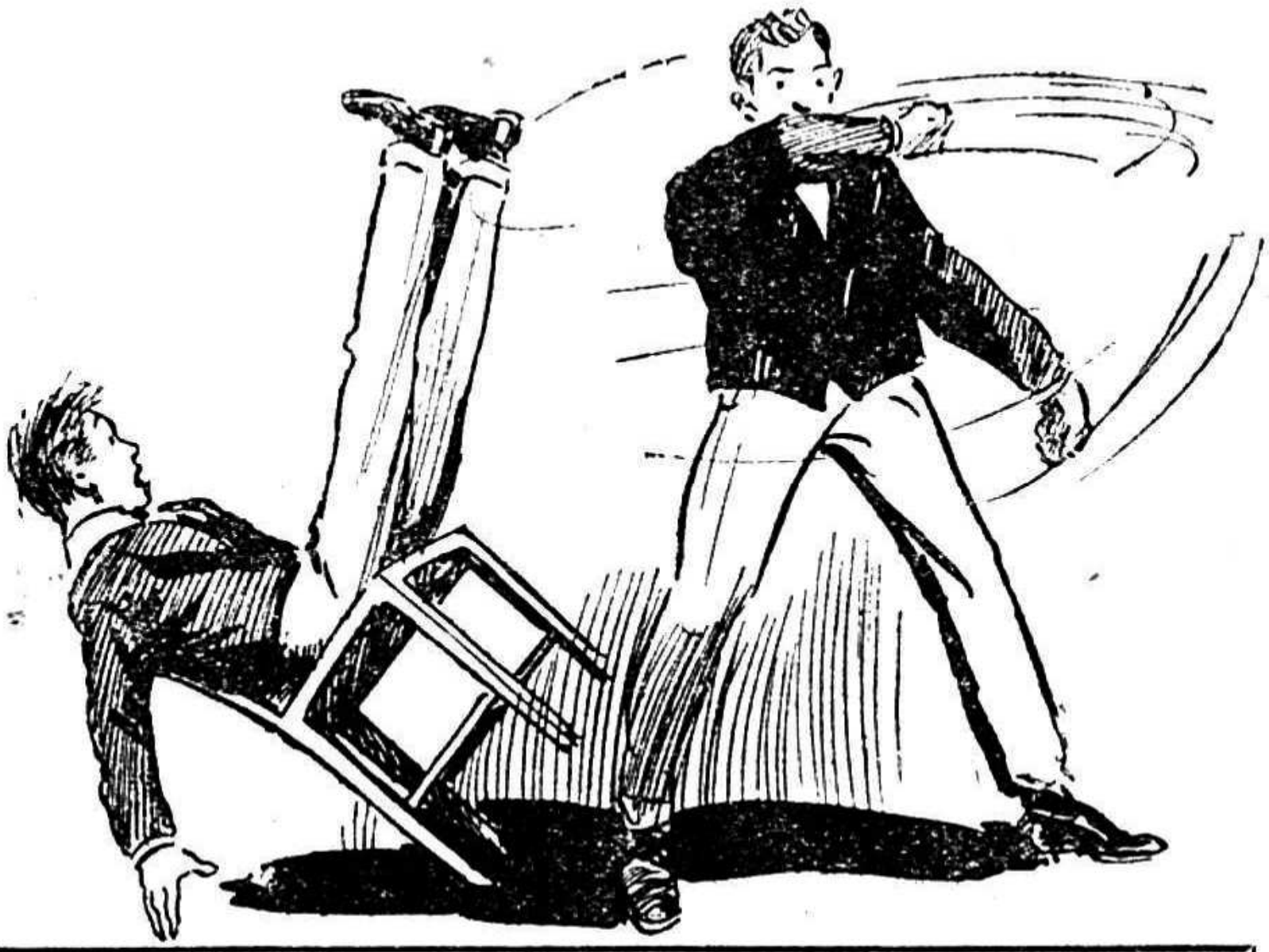
"Come to the study!" he muttered to Gulliver and Bell.

The three leading cads walked out of the common room, and soon afterwards they were in Study A. Fullwood glanced at his watch, and nodded.

"Ten minutes yet," he said.

"Ten minutes before what?"

"I've got an appointment," replied Fullwood. "No, I'm not goin' to tell you anythin' about it now—it'll do later. But I can assure you that Huggins will soon get it in the neck! I'm arranging something, and there'll be an end of this slobbering business."



Handforth was probably picturing himself in the midst of the fight. It wouldn't have mattered if he had continued punching the air. As Willy was describing the little mongrel's sufferings, Handforth suddenly made a terrific swipe and knocked Church over in one fearful drive.

"What do you mean?" asked Bell curiously.

"Even Handforth and Pitt will turn against the beast before the evenin's over," declared Fullwood. "I'm sick of it! The cad was the cause of all the trouble the other day—when I got a floggin' from the Head. I'm goin' to pay him back—I'm goin' to make him squirm!"

"But can't you tell us——"

"Not now—I haven't got it quite fixed yet," replied Fullwood vaguely. "I want you fellows to say that I've been in the study all the time. I'm goin' out—but I'm not supposed to be out. Understand?"

"Do you mean you're startin' some sort of game to-night?" asked Gulliver.

"Yes."

"Then, if you don't mean to tell us anythin' about it, what was the idea of bringin' us here?" asked Bell.

"I brought you here because I didn't want you yellin' about the place, tryin' to find me," replied Fullwood. "I'm supposed to be in the study all the time. This affair's pretty secret, an' I'm not goin' to trust you with it. But you needn't worry—you'll know all about it before long."

"Dash it all, you might be frank with your own pals!" grumbled Bell. "Perhaps we can help you—we hate Huggins as much as you. What's the wheeze? Why can't you tell us the truth?"

"Because I don't choose to," said Fullwood.

He got up and walked out of the study. Then he went straight out into the Triangle and moved quietly across in the direction of the woodshed—which lay dark and deserted.

He pushed the door open slightly.

"You here?" he whispered.

"Yes!" came a voice from within.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UNEXPECTED DISASTER!

FULLWOOD entered the woodshed, and quietly closed the door behind him.

"I didn't think you'd be here just yet, sir," he said, in a low voice. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"It is quite all right, Fullwood—quite all right," said Mr. Snuggs. "I only arrived a moment ago. Well, have you got it?"

"You mean the handkerchief, sir?"

"Of course."

"Yes, I've got it, sir," said Fullwood.

"Good!" came Mr. Snuggs' voice out of the darkness. "Splendid! I think Fullwood, that we shall be able to plan something to-night that will completely rid us of this young wretch."

"I hope so, sir."

"Huggins must go—Huggins must be driven from this school!" said Mr. Snuggs, his voice quivering with passon. "I have had enough! I have been humiliated sufficiently! Never will I consent to put up with that boy's presence for another week!"

"But how can you plan something, sir?"

"How—how?" snapped Mr. Snuggs. "I will tell you how! Give me that handkerchief. You are sure it belongs to Huggins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it from?"

"I found it in his overcoat pocket, sir, in the cloakroom," said Fullwood calmly.

"And it can be identified as Huggins' property?"

"It's got his initials in the corner, sir."

"Splendid! Splendid!" breathed Mr. Snuggs. "We are getting on. Yes, I think I can safely say that we are getting on. But we must be very careful, Fullwood. We must go easily, and then success will be assured."

"That's the idea, sir."

Fullwood's own voice was full of gloating triumph. He was quite sure that Mr. Snuggs had some plan in mind which would ultimately mean the downfall of Alf Huggins.

How ridiculous were these efforts!

If Mr. Snuggs had only known the truth! If he had only realised that he was plotting against the son of one of the Governors, Mr. Snuggs would have had the shock of his life. But he didn't know—and Fate was to step in, and place Alf in the most dreadful position imaginable. It was not Mr. Snuggs' plotting that brought such a terrible position.

On the face of it, it seemed impossible that these two—master and pupil—should be scheming together for the downfall of a mere junior. It was so petty—so cowardly and mean.

But both Mr. Snuggs and Fullwood were caddish—and they were both mean.

Owing to their previous petty tricks, they had both found themselves in serious trouble. They hated Alf with a fierce, intense hatred. And whilst endeavouring to involve him in some trouble, the Headmaster himself had surprised them.

As a result Fullwood had been severely flogged.

And Mr. Snuggs had been reprimanded in the most drastic terms. He had been told, in fact, that his stay at St. Frank's would not be prolonged.

Thus, these two were more bitter against Alf Huggins than words can describe. Alf had done them no harm—he had never tried to injure them in the slightest degree. Yet, because of him, they had suffered. And, blindly, unreasoningly, they had blamed him for everything.

It was proof of their little-mindedness—and indication of their cunning, despicable nature. Even Fullwood, young rogue though he was, could not help feeling some slight sensation of contempt.

And it must not be imagined for a moment that Mr. Snuggs was a typical schoolmaster. He was not. Indeed, it is doubtful if there was another of his calibre in the entire kingdom. He was quite clever—he was an excellent scholar—but there was some kind of kink in his composition.

Hitherto, he had only been very partial to the snobs. But now he had made up his mind to drag Alf through the dust. His vindictive nature compelled him to plot in this way.

And Fullwood was helping—Fullwood was only too pleased to do so. For if the truth ever came out, through some unfortunate mischance, he could always plead that it was Mr. Snuggs who had led him on. Ralph Leslie generally looked after his own skin.

"Let me have the handkerchief, Fullwood!" said Mr. Snuggs softly.

Fullwood took it out of his pocket, and handed it over.

"But what's the idea, sir?" he asked. "What can you do with just an ordinary handkerchief?"

"A great deal, my boy—a great deal!" replied Mr. Snuggs softly. "In the first place, we must so arrange it that Huggins is brought out into the Triangle in about half-an-hour's time. I think I can manage that quite easily."

"And what then, sir?"

"Then, Fullwood—then will come the next big move!" said Mr. Snuggs. "And it is where you come in, too."

(Continued on page 15)

POWERFUL NEW NELSON LEE SERIAL JUST BEGUN!

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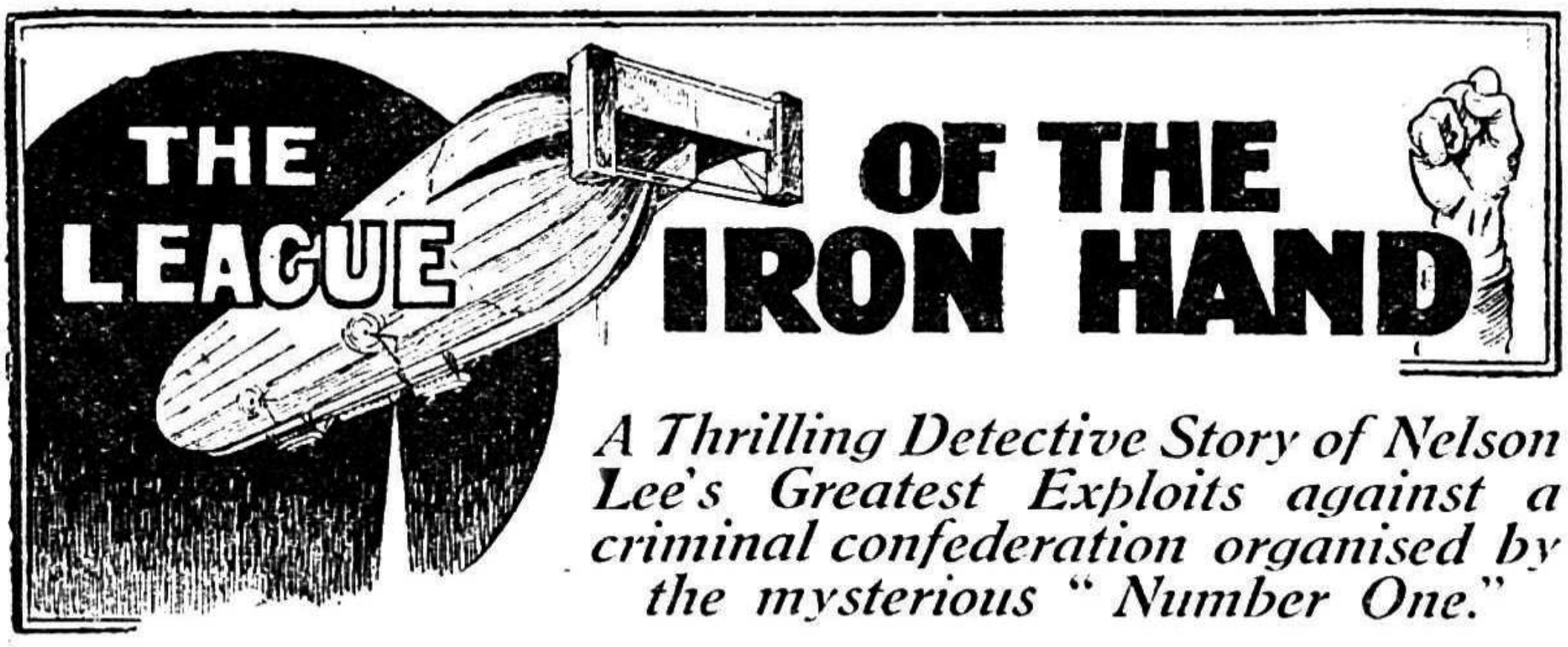

A Thrilling Detective Story of Nelson Lee's Greatest Exploits against a criminal confederation organised by the mysterious "Number One."

FOR NEW READERS.

PAUL HERMAN, millionaire and well-known figure in West-End society, is the head of the League of the Iron Hand, a dangerous criminal confederation, which

NELSON LEE, the famous Gray's Inn Road detective, has set out to crush with

DERRICK O'BRIEN, the young Irish detective, and

COLIN MACKENZIE, the leading Scots detective, hailing from Edinburgh.

Herman, known by his intimates as "Number One" is responsible for a daring robbery, for which Donald Stuart is arrested. Donald Stuart is the inventor of a marvellous new airship, and Herman, with his confederates, intend to steal the airship for their own nefarious purposes, while Stuart is detained. Nelson Lee and his colleagues arrive at the aerodrome just as Herman gets away with the dirigible.

(Now read on.)

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE.

MAC accordingly resumed his story, and related how wishing to hear more of the two men's conversation, he swarmed up the rope.

"At that time," he said, "they were talking about a man named Cundle. One of them said he had long had it on his conscience that they ought to do something for Cundle, and the other agreed, saying that Cundle had behaved like a brick, and had gone to prison without a word.

"No, you don't!" he exclaimed, as Nelson Lee and O'Brien were about to speak. "You're not going to have all the credit to yourselves. I see you have guessed who Cundle is, but so have I. I guessed who he was as soon as I heard them talking about him, and my guess was confirmed when one of them said that he had been removed from Wormwood Scrubbs last week, and was now at Dartmoor. Cundle is that fellow who was convicted of uttering forged banknotes, and was sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude."

"Of course," said Nelson Lee; "the case was one of the sensations of last year. The police were unable to discover where the notes had been engraved and printed; but, as they were found in Cundle's possession, and as he refused to give any information, he was sentenced, as you say, to twenty years' penal servitude."

"And now it appears that he was a member of the League of the Iron Hand," said O'Brien.

"Without a doubt," said Mac. "The notes had evidently been manufactured by

the league, and, as one of the men in the airship said, if Cundle had turned King's evidence and betrayed the league, he would probably have got off. Because he didn't, but took all the blame on himself, and went to prison without betraying them, the two men thought they ought to do what they could, to help him, and one of them was just going to explain how he thought they could help him when they discovered me."

He described how he had dropped into the river, and how he had ultimately escaped.

"When the airship made off," he concluded, "the police-launch picked me up and landed me at Woolwich. Then, after telling my story to the police, I came on here, and here I am."

"So the net result of the information you have gained is this," said Nelson Lee. "The airship was stolen by two members of the League of the Iron Hand, whose names you don't know, and who have taken her to some place north of the River Thames. These two men are evidently acquainted with Willoughby Fairfax and Sir Edgar Fawcett. They are also acquainted with Cundle, who was clearly a member of the league, and who is now at Dartmoor."

"That about sums it up," said Mac.

"Well, now," said Nelson Lee, "O'Brien and I have sworn to devote all our time and energies for the present to the task of unmasking this infamous league. Are you willing to join us?"

"Subject to one proviso," said Mac. "I have come down from Scotland for the purpose of clearing my cousin, Donald Stuart, of the charge of stealing the Marquis of Hummersea's jewels. I have little doubt in my own mind that the robbery was the work of the league, in which case my object is the same as yours and O'Brien's. But my first business, as you will understand, must be to go down to Moscar Grange and investigate the circumstances of the robbery."

"Subject to that proviso," said Nelson Lee, "you are willing to join hands with O'Brien and myself?"

"Heart and soul!" said Mac.

"Then what I propose," said Nelson Lee, "is that we three form an alliance—England, Scotland, and Ireland—against the League of the Iron Hand."

"Agreed!" cried the other two.

"My next proposal is," said Nelson Lee, "that you two fellows take up your quarters here for the present. Is that agreed?"

"Yes," said the other two.

"And, finally," said Nelson Lee, "I propose that our plan of campaign be as follows: I will take Sir Edgar Fawcett, and shadow him, and keep a strict watch on his movements. O'Brien will go to Rycroft by the first train in the morning, and shadow Fairfax for the next few days. Mac will go to Moscar, and as soon as he has finished his investigations there he will go down to Dartmoor and obtain the governor's permission to interview Cundle. He will then endeavour to persuade Cundle to tell what he knows of the league. Is that also agreed?"

"Yes," said O'Brien. "Here's my hand on it."

"And mine," said Mac.

The three detectives joined hands, and in this typically British fashion the triple alliance was duly and formally ratified.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWO "SHADOWERS."

ON the following morning O'Brien set out for Rycroft, and Mac for Moscar, leaving Nelson Lee in London to dog the movements of Sir Edgar Fawcett.

Lee quickly found that he had chosen for himself what looked like being a most uninteresting and wearisome task. For Sir Edgar had been warned by Herman that he must not communicate with any of the members of the league, or visit any of the "district lodges," until he—Herman—wrote to him.

On the first day that Nelson Lee shadowed Sir Edgar, the latter spent most of the day at the Centurion Club, of which he, like Herman and Fairfax, was a member. In the evening he dropped into the Empire Theatre for an hour or two, and finally returned to his flat in Cadogan Square.

The following day—Friday—Sir Edgar left London and went down to Yeovil, in Somerset, in order to spend the week-end with a friend—a friend, it may be added, who had not the remotest suspicion that Sir Edgar was connected in any way with the League of the Iron Hand. As a matter of course, Nelson Lee followed Sir Edgar down to Yeovil, but he might as well have stayed in London for any good he did.

The baronet returned to town on Monday night, and Tuesday morning found Nelson Lee, in a fresh disguise, patiently keeping watch on Fawcett's flat in Cadogan Square.

Not till nearly noon did Sir Edgar emerge, and get into a taxi, which took him to the Centurion Club, in Piccadilly. Nelson Lee followed in another taxi, and took up his position at a spot commanding the portals of the club.

He had been there barely five minutes when a cab drove up and deposited Mr. Willoughby Fairfax, who, after paying his fare, ascended the steps of the club and disappeared from view.

At the same moment there alighted from another cab, some thirty yards away, a man who, although disguised, was at once recognised by Nelson Lee.

It was no other than Derrick O'Brien!

The young Irishman dismissed the cab, then crossed the road and took his stand—though he did not know it—just in front of Nelson Lee.

"Now, I wonder what I'd better——" muttered O'Brien to himself, when somebody behind him seized his arms and pinned them to his sides.

"Trapped!" hissed a fierce voice in his ear. "So you thought we didn't know that you were shadowing Mr. Fairfax? Keep still, and not a sound, as you value your life."

Though completely taken by surprise, O'Brien never for an instant lost his head. Ere he could take any action, however, the grip on his arms was suddenly released, and a voice, which he instantly recognised as Nelson Lee's said:

"Sorry if I startled you, old man, but I simply couldn't resist the temptation."

"So it's you, is it, you old omadhoun!" laughed O'Brien. "Sure I won't deny that you did startle me more than a bit; but, bedad, it's lucky for you, my boy, that you let me go so quickly, or I might have damaged you past repair. Now, tell me what you're doing here?"

"Sir Edgar has just gone into the club," said Lee.

"So has Fairfax," said O'Brien.

"I know," said Nelson Lee; "I saw him. Where has he come from, and what has he been doing since last Thursday?"

In reply to this question O'Brien briefly recounted how he had for the past six days "shadowed" Willoughby Fairfax without discovering anything of importance.

On the Friday, Fairfax had journeyed from Rycroft to Southampton. There he had gone aboard his steam yacht Mimosa, and O'Brien had not seen him again until the Tuesday morning, when he had come ashore, journeyed to London by train, and been driven straight from Waterloo to the Centurion Club.

"And there he is at the present moment," concluded O'Brien, with a rueful grin, "and here I am, and goodness knows where he'll be off to nixt! 'Tis hopin'-I am that you've had betther success than I have!"

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, old chap," laughed Lee, "for I've had no luck as yet, either."

And he proceeded to relate his dull and fruitless experiences of the past six days.

"Then you haven't really discovered any proof that Sir Edgar is a member of the league?" said O'Brien when Nelson Lee had concluded his tale.

"Not a scrap," admitted Lee. "At the same time, it's rather significant, don't you think, that he and Fairfax, who is certainly a member of the league, should come to the same club at the same hour?"

"M'yes!" said O'Brien. "It may be only a coincidence, of course. But I suppose you'll wait here till he comes out and then resume your shadowing?"

"Certainly," said Lee. "And you, I presume, will do the same with regard to Fairfax?"

"Of course," said O'Brien.

At that moment an electric brougham pulled up in front of the club, and Paul Herman stepped out and strode into the building. Both detectives recognised him at a glance, for he was one of the best-known figures in London society; but neither dreamed for an instant of connecting him in any way with the League of the Iron Hand.

In about half an hour's time they saw Paul Herman leave the club, but attached no importance to the fact. Five minutes later they saw Sir Edgar Fawcett come down the steps, and turn off in the direction of Piccadilly Circus.

"Here's my man!" said Nelson Lee. "I must follow him, of course. You'll wait here for Fairfax, I presume?"

"Of course!" said O'Brien. "Au revoir, and good luck to your shadowing!"

"Same to you!" said Nelson Lee; and he glided away in Sir Edgar's wake.

It would be wearisome to enumerate the various streets through which the detective shadowed his quarry. It is sufficient to say that he ultimately saw Sir Edgar turn into a dingy thoroughfare in Soho named Lord Street, and disappear into a not-too-respectable-looking shop, the window of which was surmounted by a sign bearing the legend "S. Bernstein, dealer in antique furniture, jewellery, china, etc."

For nearly an hour the detective loitered outside this shop, waiting for Sir Edgar to reappear. Then the shop door opened, and the baronet came out.

He took a few paces along the street, stepped into the doorway of a vacant shop, and drew from the inside pocket of his coat a cigar-case.

And with the cigar-case there came out what looked like a letter, which dropped to the ground, unnoticed by Fawcett.

Nelson Lee saw the letter fall; saw the baronet clip the end off a cigar; saw him light the weed; and then saw him beckon to the driver of a passing taxi.

"Centurion Club!" said Fawcett, as he stepped into the cab.

Then the taxi whizzed off, and Nelson Lee, looking up and down the street, could see no cab which he himself might charter. That fact, however, did not bother him. He had heard Fawcett's instruction, and could follow him presently.

Meanwhile, he would possess himself of that dropped letter—if letter it was.

He crossed the street, stepped into the doorway of the unoccupied shop, stooped, and picked up the letter.

For a letter it proved to be. It was enclosed in an ordinary commercial envelope, and was addressed to "Sir Edgar Fawcett, Bart., Cleveland Mansions, Cadogan Square, S.W." The postmark showed that it had been posted in the west district of London at 1.45 on the afternoon of October 11th.

Lee drew out the folded sheet, and saw at a glance that the missive was an apparently meaningless jumble of letters and signs. In other words, it was written in cipher; and, as people do not write cipher letters unless they are writing about something which they desire to keep secret from prying eyes, it did not need any

special acumen to arrive at the conclusion that this cipher letter referred to some transaction in connection with the League of the Iron Hand.

"At any rate, I'll take possession of it for the present, and try to decipher it afterwards," Lee mused, as he thrust the letter into his pocket.

Then he made his way to the end of Lord Street, found a cab, and was driven to Piccadilly, there to resume watch again on the entrance to the Centurion Club.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CIPHER LETTER.

IT was not until past eleven that night that Sir Edgar Fawcett emerged from the club. And even then Nelson Lee's infinite patience met with no reward; for the baronet simply strolled to his flat in Cadogan Square, and, after watching there for half an hour, Lee saw the lights extinguished, and came to the correct conclusion that Fawcett had gone to bed.

So, feeling tired out, and sick of his wearisome task, Lee decided to take the risk of losing sight of his quarry. He made his way to Gray's Inn Road, ate a light meal, and himself went to bed.

But at ten o'clock next day he was back at Cadogan Square, and two hours later saw Sir Edgar Fawcett come out.

Except that there was no visit to the shop of the antique dealer in Lord Street, the baronet's movements were pretty much the same as they had been on the previous day. So, again taking a risk, Nelson Lee, after seeing the lights of the Cadogan Square flat extinguished, returned to Gray's Inn Road.

A pile of letters were awaiting him there, but before he could start opening them, Derrick O'Brien—who had been provided with a latch-key—entered and flung himself wearily into an armchair.

"Hallo!" greeted Lee. "What are you doing here, old chap? Why aren't you shadowing Fairfax?"

"I am!" said O'Brien. "Faith, you wouldn't have me stand shivering outside the club all night while Fairfax is sleeping in a cosy bed inside, would you?"

"Ah, then Fairfax is staying at the club, is he?"

"Yes; he came up from Rycroft by the last train, and went straight to the Centurion. I managed to find out from one of the attendants that Fairfax had booked a bedroom at the club for to-night; so I thought it safe to come along here for a few hours. Had any news from Mac?"

"Not since Saturday, when I got a few lines saying that he had left Hartop Manor and gone down to Dartmoor to try and pump Cundle."

O'Brien nodded.

"And what's been happening to yourself?" he asked.

"Oh," answered Lee, a trifle ruefully, "I've had no more luck than you. From his flat to his club, and from his club to his flat, has been Fawcett's monotonous programme—with one exception."

"Ah! What was the exception?" asked O'Brien.

Nelson Lee described how he had on the preceding day shadowed Sir Edgar Fawcett to Lord Street, and picked up the cipher letter.

"Here it is," he said, when he had concluded his story. "I haven't had time to examine it carefully yet, but I've had one or two shots at it, without, however, being able to decipher it."

He handed the letter to O'Brien, who studied it with the profoundest interest.

"It won't be an easy cipher to solve," said O'Brien—"I can see that at a glance. But we'll have to solve it somehow!"

"Well, try your hand on it now," said Nelson Lee, "while I run through these letters and see if there's anything that requires answering."

O'Brien accordingly armed himself with a pencil and a sheet of paper, and sat down at the table.

For nearly a quarter of an hour neither of the detectives spoke. Then Nelson Lee, who had meanwhile been opening his letters and reading them, suddenly uttered a startled exclamation.

"Good heavens! There's no wonder Mac didn't write to us!" he exclaimed. "He's unconscious!"

"Unconscious!" gasped O'Brien. "What's happened?"

"Here's a letter from the Governor of Dartmoor," said Nelson Lee. "Listen!"

"'Dear Mr. Lee,—As I do not know the address of any of Mr. Mackenzie's relations, and as you and he, I believe, are working in partnership at the present time, I think I ought to let you know that he was attacked this afternoon and seriously injured by one of our prisoners, named Cundle.'"

There is no need to reproduce the whole of the governor's letter. It is enough to say that he described how Mac had obtained permission to interview Cundle, and how the latter had attacked him, and then attempted to escape.

"Mr. Mackenzie was struck down with such brutal ferocity that our doctor fears his skull is fractured. He is still unconscious at the time of writing. The doctor hopes and believes he will pull through all right in the end; but in the meantime I thought I had better let you know what had happened at the earliest possible moment."

"Poor old Mac!" said O'Brien, when Nelson Lee had finished reading the letter. "He may be dead by now."

"Oh, no; I don't think that's at all likely!" said Nelson Lee. "If had died of his injuries, the governor would surely have wired before now. However, I must

go down to Dartmoor at once, and find out exactly how he is. If he is still unconscious when I get there, I shall ask the doctor's permission to wire for a London specialist."

"When will you start?" asked O'Brien.

"Now," said Nelson Lee, glancing at his watch and jumping to his feet. "It's quarter-past one, and there's a train from Waterloo which will land me at Tavistock at eight. But I've no time to lose if I'm to catch the train. Get me a taxi, will you, whilst I toss a few things into my bag?"

By the time the cab arrived, Nelson Lee had packed his bag and was ready to start.

"Wire how Mac is as soon as you get there, won't you?" said O'Brien.

Chuckling softly to himself, Bernstein stooped, gripped the detective by the coat-collar, and dragged him out into the shop.

"I will," said Nelson Lee, as he stepped into the taxi. "By the way, I've left that cipher letter on the table upstairs. Take care of it for me, there's a good fellow."

"If I manage to decipher it before you come back," said O'Brien, "and there's anything in it that calls for action, what shall I do?"

"Act just as you think best," said Nelson Lee. "Now, driver, Waterloo, as fast as you can!"

O'Brien returned to the room upstairs, where he seated himself at the table again and resumed his study of the cipher letter.

When he had asked Nelson Lee what he should do if he managed to decipher the letter, he had not merely asked an idle question. As a matter of fact, at the moment when Nelson Lee had interrupted him to read the Governor of Dartmoor's letter, the Irish detective had already got on the track of the solution. At least, he thought he had; and when he resumed his investigations after Nelson Lee's departure he found that his surmise was correct.

Once he had struck the trail the rest was comparatively easy, and by quarter-past two he had transcribed the jumbled letter and signs into ordinary English. And this is what he read:

"Dear Sir Edgar,—With reference to the contents of the jewel-case which you left here during my absence yesterday afternoon, I quite agree with the remark you made in your note that their value would be greatly diminished by removing the stones and re-cutting and re-setting them. At the same time, you must remember that the Marquis of Hummersea's jewels are as well known on the Continent as they are in England, and I am strongly of opinion that it would be most dangerous to attempt to dispose of the various articles without first altering their appearance. However, I will write to a friend of mine in Amsterdam, and ascertain if he is prepared to take the risk, and in the meantime I will keep the things here,

and do nothing till I hear from him.—Yours obediently, S. BERNSTEIN."

There was something approaching ecstasy in the look on O'Brien's face as he read this epistle. Here was proof beyond all reasonable doubt that Sir Edgar Fawcett, and not Donald Stuart, had stolen the Marquis of Hummersea's jewel-case. And he had entrusted the disposal of the plunder to Samuel Bernstein, the antique-furniture dealer, to whose shop, in Lord Street, Soho, Nelson Lee had shadowed Sir Edgar the day before.

"There can be no doubt now that Bernstein is connected with the League of the Iron Hand, even if he isn't an actual member," mused O'Brien. "Sir Edgar took stolen property to him to dispose of, and Bernstein would hardly write to him in cipher, unless he were connected with the league."

"This letter was written last Thursday," he continued, glancing at the postmark on the envelope. "If Bernstein wrote the same day to his friend in Amsterdam, he could hardly receive a reply before Monday—the day before yesterday. He says he will keep the things and do nothing till he hears from his friend. Ten to one, therefore, the jewel-case is still at Bernstein's. If I could only secure the jewel-case, and so obtain convincing proof of Stuart's innocence! And why shouldn't I? Lee told me to act as I thought best."

For a moment longer, but only for a moment, he remained undecided. Then a look of resolute determination came into his face.

"I will!" he said. "I'll go to Bernstein's to-night, and break into the shop, and either find the jewel-case or satisfy myself that it isn't there!"

CHAPTER X.

BERNSTEIN AND THE "BURGLAR."

LORD STREET was deserted and veiled when O'Brien turned into it an hour after midnight. Bernstein's shop and the house above the shop—for Bernstein lived on the premises—were enshrouded in darkness and silence. Not a glimmer of light was anywhere to be seen; not a sound was to be heard.

By the light of his pocket electric lamp, the Irish detective examined the shop door. Having convinced himself that it was hopeless to attempt to gain admittance in that way, he stole down the covered passage at the side of the shop, and found himself in a little stone-flagged yard.

The back door of the building opened into this yard, and was flanked on each side by a window. The door proved as hopeless as the door at the front. The windows, however, were more vulnerable, and in less than five minutes O'Brien had forced back the catch of one of them, had raised the lower sash, and had climbed into a little room which appeared to be used as an office.

Finding nothing of importance there, he made his way into the room on the other side of the passage leading from the back door. He searched the room, but saw no sign of the jewel case.

Lamp in hand, the detective glided down the passage and entered the shop, which occupied the whole front of the premises. Here the first thing that attracted his attention was the door of a safe which was built into one of the walls, and which was large enough to be worthy of the name of a strong-room.

"If the jewel-case is here, it's in this safe, for a thousand pounds!" he muttered to himself.

Having made a careful examination of the lock of the safe, he pulled out a bunch of skeleton-keys and set to work to try to pick the lock. A quarter of an hour, half an hour, three-quarters passed; then at last his patient efforts met with success. With an almost inaudible click the bolt of the lock shot back, and the contents of the safe were at his mercy.

Replacing the keys in his pocket, he opened the big steel door, which was over six feet in height, and directed the rays of his electric lamp into the interior of the safe. It was high enough and wide enough to permit of two men standing upright inside. There were shelves along each side, and across the back, and as the light of O'Brien's lamp swept over these shelves, a stifled cry of triumph rose to his lips.

For on one of the shelves, at the back of the safe, stood a morocco-leather jewel-case, and on the front of the case was the well-known crest of the Marquis of Hummersea.

Quivering with suppressed excitement, O'Brien stepped into the capacious safe with the intention of securing the jewel-case. As he stretched out his hand to lift it from the shelf, however, a stealthy footstep fell on his ears, and, on turning swiftly round, he was petrified with dismay to perceive the [illegible]-dressed figure of Samuel Bernstein glid[illegible]-wards the safe.

Bernstein was a German Jew who had lived most of his life in England, and who spoke the language as fluently as any native.

He had joined the League of the Iron Hand two years before the date of our story, and had since risen to the rank of "district officer," which was the highest rank to which an ordinary member could attain.

He lived alone in the house above his shop. His business as a dealer in antique furniture and curios was merely a blind, his real business being that of a "fence," or receiver and disposer of stolen property.

It was for this reason that Paul Herman had invited him to join the league; and it was for this reason, too, that Herman had suggested to Sir Edgar that Bernstein should be entrusted with the task of disposing of the Marquis of Humersea's jewels.

On the night whose events we are now describing, Bernstein had been roused from sleep by the ringing of an electric alarm bell in his bedroom, which told him that somebody had opened the office window. Hastily donning his trousers, and drawing a

revolver from under his pillow, he had crept downstairs, and had reached the shop just in time to see O'Brien step into the big safe, and stretch out his hand to secure the Marquis of Hummersea's jewel-case.

Bernstein, of course, could only see O'Brien's back. Believing that the man in the safe was an ordinary burglar, he raised the revolver with the intention of firing at him, but ere his finger could press the trigger O'Brien heard him, spun round on his heel, and sprang out of the safe.

As the Irish detective was not disguised, Bernstein recognised him the instant he turned round. At the same instant, too, the German changed his plans, and, instead of firing, he leaped at O'Brien, crashed his fist in the detective's face, and sent him reeling back into the safe. Then, in a hundredth part of the time it takes to tell, he slammed the door in O'Brien's face, whipped out a bunch of keys, thrust one into the lock, and swiftly turned it.

O'Brien, as soon as he had scrambled to his feet, hurled himself against the inside of the big steel door, beat on it with his fists and feet, and charged it with his shoulder in a frenzied attempt to burst it open.

"Have another try!" taunted Bernstein with a cackling laugh. "Remember the old proverb: 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again'! But don't hurt yourself, Mister O'Brien! I really wouldn't like you to hurt yourself, you know! Ho, ho, ho!"

The young Irishman started at the sound of his name, and let out an involuntary exclamation of chagrin. Bernstein heard the startled exclamation, and burst into a peal of mocking laughter.

"Oh, yes! I know who you are!" he said. "I recognised you the moment I saw your face! What a pity you didn't disguise yourself before you embarked on this little ad-[illegible]!"

"[illegible]on't see what difference that would have made," said O'Brien. "You would doubtless have acted just the same, even if you hadn't recognised me!"

"Not at all!" retorted Bernstein. "If I hadn't recognised you, I should have taken you for an ordinary burglar, and I should have shot you dead on the spot, instead of making you a prisoner."

"Then I'm glad you did recognise me!" said O'Brien, with a forced laugh.

"Are you?" said Bernstein grimly. "You may have reason to change your mind by-and-by! Of course, it all depends on yourself, whether you prove reasonable or obstinate. But it is quite possible you may be very sorry by-and-by that I didn't shoot you before I recognised you."

"I hardly think so," returned O'Brien, with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. "However, we shall see what we shall see! In the meantime, I'm curious to know why the fact that you recognised me caused you to take me prisoner instead of shooting me."

"I'll tell you," said Bernstein. "It was because I wish to obtain a little information from you."

"Information about what?"

"About the League of the Iron Hand. Oh, yes! I can guess what brought you here to-night, but I wish to find out how much you know. When a famous detective like Mr. Derrick O'Brien breaks into my shop and opens my safe, it is safe to conclude that it was because he suspected I was a member of the league, and wished to obtain some proof of the truth of his suspicions. Am I right?"

O'Brien gritted his teeth, and shook his fist at his invisible questioner, but did not speak.

"Silence gives consent!" said Bernstein. "Now, what made you suspect that I was a member of the League of the Iron Hand?"

Still O'Brien did not speak.

"Sulking—eh?" said Bernstein. "Ah, well, we'll cure you of that presently! Meanwhile, here are a few more questions I want answered: When I surprised you just now you were in the act of reaching down the Marquis of Hummersea's jewel-case. Did you know it had been stolen by the League of the Iron Hand? Did you know it was in my safe? Was that what brought you here to-night? And if you knew the jewel-case had been stolen by the league and was in my safe, how did you know?"

"You refuse to answer my questions?" he continued, as O'Brien still kept silent. "You won't refuse by-and-by! In the meantime, you now understand why I didn't shoot you when I recognised who you were. You have evidently discovered a great deal about the League of the Iron Hand, and it is imperative, for my own safety, and the safety of my fellow-members, that I should find out at once how much you know."

"And how do you propose to set about finding out?" asked O'Brien coolly.

"I am a dealer in antique furniture and curios," was Bernstein's enigmatical reply.

"Well?" said O'Brien.

"Included in my stock of curios," said Bernstein, "are several ancient instruments of torture, amongst which are a thumbscrew and a rack, dating from the time of the Spanish Inquisition. You said a few moments ago that you were glad I had not shot you when I first saw you. I wonder if you will still be glad when you have had half an hour's experience of the rack and thumbscrew?"

He paused for a moment to let the horror of his threat sink in.

"Well, have you nothing to say?" he asked. "Don't you think it wiser to answer my questions without compelling me to torture you? Hadn't you better tell me all you know about the League of the Iron Hand?"

"I refuse to tell you!" said O'Brien

Bernstein laughed harshly.

"I think I can guess what is passing

(Continued on page xii.)

The Case of the Reflected Clock.

The Adventures of Gordon Fox, Detective.

CHAPTER I.

WILLIAM ASHTON'S SAD STORY. GORDON FOX VISITS BRIXTON PRISON.

THE grey murk of an English dawn, and a primrose flush over the tops of the Sussex downs, greeted Gordon Fox when he stepped ashore at Newhaven in a plaid ulster and a deerstalker's cap. The breath and sight of home were sweet to him, and when he had drunk a cup of coffee at the station, and the boat train had started, after the usual long wait, he felt that, after all, there was no place like London.

He had been out of the British Ilses for more than two months, searching for a Spanish bond-forger in the mountainous country near Madrid, and in that time he had received no letters from home, nor had he glanced at an English newspaper until his arrival in Paris the previous afternoon.

He had bought several at Newhaven, but he did not read them. He smoked and gazed from the window until he reached Victoria, when he drove to Queen Street, Westminster, and let himself into his lodgings. Mrs. Gamage appeared as he put his portmanteau down on the hall bench.

"Glad to see you back, sir," she said volubly. "What a time you've been away! And the letters, and the telegrams, and the people that have been to inquire! There's one waiting for you now!"

"Already?"

"Yes, sir. I told him yesterday you were expected this morning. It's a man that's in great trouble, poor fellow, and you wouldn't believe how often——"

Gordon Fox was halfway up the stairs, and as he entered his sitting-room the visitor rose from a chair—a middle-aged, shabbily-dressed man, with pinched and haggard features, and dark circles under his eyes It was pathetic to see the look of gladness that flashed to his face at the sight of the detective.

"Thank Heaven, sir, that you're back!" he exclaimed. "I was afraid you wouldn't come in time! My name is William Ashton, and I am employed at a printer's establishment in the Borough. Week by week, day by day, I've been here, hoping that you might——"

"One moment, Mr. Ashton. What is your business, if you please?"

"Why, sir, it's about my boy Tom You haven't forgotten him?"

"Tom Ashton?" muttered the detective "Ah, I remember! The bright young newsboy from whom I was in the habit of purchasing papers near Westminster Bridge!"

"Yes, sir. That was my Tom. He used to sell you the 'Daily Mail' every morning, and you always had a kind word, and an extra copper for him, and he got to know about your doings from reading the papers. And now he's in prison, and, tomorrow, he's to be tried at the Old Bailey on a charge of murder! But he's as innocent as a lamb, though appearances are terribly against him. He believed from the first that you were the one man who could save him, and that's why I have ——"

"Let me hear the whole story," interrupted Gordon Fox. "Tell it as briefly and clearly as possible, and don't miss anything."

William Ashton controlled himself with an effort.

"Last January my boy was taken ill," he began, "and when he recovered, the doctor said he would have to give up selling papers in the street, so I got him a place near where we live. It was with Abram Marks, who had a shop in Green Street, Camberwell, and sold ready-made clothing, and did repairs. But he was a hard man, and, what was worse, he had a fiery temper. On the evening of the 24th of February, when Tom had been there for three weeks, he accidentally knocked a pile of clothes off the counter. His employer flew into a rage, and began to beat him with a stick. Tom picked up a flat iron; of course, not meaning to use it. Just then a customer entered—a Mr. Macklin, who had come to pay a bill—and when he saw the row he turned and went off. Immediately afterwards Tom left, vowing that would never come back, and

as he passed a jeweller's shop, two blocks away, he noticed that the time was ten minutes to six.

"He came straight home to our little cottage, but, unfortunately, no one appears to have seen him, and I didn't get home myself that night until after nine o'clock. At half past six o'clock the the same evening, a Mr. Whimper, who had brought a coat to be mended, came into the tailor's shop and found Mr. Marks lying on the floor, with his skull crushed. He was just breathing his last, and a surgeon who was called in declared that he must have been struck five or ten minutes before. The flat-iron, by the way, was lying on the floor, with blood on it. The next morning my boy was arrested and charged with murder, and at the hearing Mr. Macklin turned up and told an absolutely false story. He swore that it was exactly a quarter-past six, by Mr. Marks' clock, when he entered the shop and saw Tom threatening his employer with a flat-iron. Both he and Mr. Whimper have stuck to their stories, so you see how black things are. All is against my poor boy. The evidence will show that he was quarrelling with his employer at 6.15, and that Mr. Marks was found in a dying condition at 6.30."

"Had either of these witnesses any grudge against your son or Mr. Marks?" inquired Gordon Fox.

"No, sir; I believe not. They are respectable gentlemen, with offices in the City. But, all the same, Mr. Macklin has sworn to a lie. Tom was away from the shop before six o'clock."

"Did Mr. Marks live over his place of business?"

"Yes; he owned the whole house. And he lived there quite alone, doing his own cooking."

"Tom picked up a flat-iron; of course, not intending to use it, just then a customer entered and when he saw the row he turned and went off."

"A miser—eh? Had he any relations?"

"There was a nephew—Uriah Bernstein by name—who was employed in a big drapery establishment in Oxford Street. He inherited the property from his uncle, including a thousand pounds that were in the bank, and he lives in the house now. He has sold off all the stock, and, as yet, he hasn't let the shop."

The detective asked further questions without gaining any light on the mystery, and William Ashton finally departed in

slightly better spirits than when he had come. Two hours later, after obtaining the necessary permit, Gordon Fox drove to Brixton Prison and had an interview with the accused lad in his gloomy cell. But Tom Ashton, an intelligent lad of sixteen, could only repeat what his father had already told, could suggest no clue to the real murderer. Paper and pencil were brought to him, and at the detective's bidding he drew a rough, but accurate plan of the shop.

"I've been counting on you, sir," he said when he had finished. "I've prayed every night that you would come back from abroad in time. I knew you were the one man who could save me. You believe in my innocence, don't you?"

"I do," replied Gordon Fox; who, indeed, did not doubt it.

"And you won't let them convict me?"

"My boy, there is very little time before the trial!"

"But you ll save me from the gallows, Mr. Fox? You'll find the murderer before —before they can——"

The lad broke down, weeping bitterly, and the detective's eyes grew dim.

"Cheer up, Tom," he said, with a lump in his throat. "I am going to do my very best for you."

But there was little hope in Gordon Fox's heart as he drove away from Brixton Prison He had solved many a deep mystery, but the murder of Abram Marks promised to baffle him. He went to the City, to the office of the solicitor employed by Mr Ashton, and studied the written evidence that had been offered by the prosecution before the remand of the prisoner. ,He found nothing new, but nevertheless, he came away with a lighter heart, with an idea simmering in his brain, and after lunching in the Strand he hailed a hansom and was driven to Camberwell.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE IN CAMBERWELL—GORDON FOX TRIES AN EXPERIMENT—A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

THE house in Green Street, where Abram Marks had met his death nearly two months before, was a dingy three-story building, and stood at the corner of two quiet streets, several blocks away from the main thoroughfare.

It was impossible to see into the shop, for blinds were drawn tightly down over the door and the windows. There was a private door adjoining, and here Gordon Fox knocked and rang for some time without getting any response. Then he walked along the side street, to the back of the premises and when he was satisfied that he was not under observation—there were trees on the pavement and a church across the way—he sprang nimbly over a low brick wall and found himself in a small garden.

He darted behind an erection of lattice-work, which screened him from view, and not five minutes later he had gained admittance to the house by the scullery window. He went quickly from floor to floor, peeping into every room, until he was satisfied that the coast was clear for his purpose.

"Mr Uriah Bernstein is not at home," he told himself, "and as this is the middle of the afternoon he is not likely to return for an hour or so at the least."

With that Gordon Fox made his way to the shop, which he entered from the rear, by a door at the end of a narrow passage. The room was entirely bare, having been stripped of everything in the way of furniture: but the same paper was on the wall, and this at once took the detective's attention.

On the right-hand wall, as one would enter from the street, was a square discolouration, about six feet by six, the paper it enclosed being of a brighter and fresher hue than that surrounding it. On the opposite wall was another mark, smaller and irregular. The detective had expected to find both, and it was their relative positions that puzzled him, as he stood for a few moments in thought.

"They may not have been sold," he reflected. "At all events, I'll have a look. I want to make absolutely sure."

He went back to the house and began a search that was soon crowned with success; for, in one of the first floor rooms, under a bed, he found what he was seeking —a large mirror and an old-fashioned clock, three feet long.

He brought these to the shop, paid a brief visit to the kitchen, and returned with a chair and several large nails, which he had discovered in a drawer.

Having mounted the chair, which he had placed against the right-hand wall, he drove one of the nails into a hole that was within reach, and hung the mirror upon it. Then he crossed to the opposite wall, and hung the clock in the same manner.

"All is ready for the test," he told himself.

Gordon Fox now did a curious thing. He stepped to the street door, put his back to it, and walked forward to the middle of the room. He paused, turned to the right, and with an eager expression of triumph, gazed at the mirror.

So he stood raptly for a little time, and, as he was looking, he saw something that he had not expected to see; saw reflected in the glass a tall young man, with sinister eyes, and a white face stamped with terror, who gripped in both hands a heavy walking-stick.

He had noiselessly crept into the shop from the house, and was already close behind the detective.

"You scoundrel!" shouted Gordon Fox as he wheeled round.

He had not time to escape the murderous blow that was aimed at him; though, by dodging to one side, he caused the stick to descend on his shoulder instead of his head.

Staggering back, bruised, but not disabled, he evaded a second blow, and snatched up the chair.

"Uriah Bernstein, you have betrayed yourself!" he cried. "This means the gallows!"

"Curse you!" snarled the young man, who was desperate with fear. "You don't leave her alive! I'll fix you!"

With that, dropping the stick, he drew a revolver and levelled it. Crack! Crack! One bullet struck the bottom of the chair and another grazed the detective's ear! Still a third shot missed him as he sprang forward; and the next instant, by a swinging stroke, he felled his assailant to the floor.

As Bernstein leapt up, Gordon Fox—he was himself unarmed—seized his wrist and wrenched the pistol from him. The two struggled briefly, and then, Bernstein having recovered his weapon, he dealt the detective a sharp crack on the skull.

For a few moments Gordon Fox lay half stunned, and when he got to his feet he was alone.

As quickly as he could he hurried through the house and into the garden, where he ran into the hands of a constable, who had been attracted by the shots.

"Where's Bernstein?" he cried. "Where is he?"

"Your pal is out of sight now," replied the constable. "He went through the row of gardens like a bird. But I've got you all right!"

"I am a detective, as it happens," said Gordon Fox. "You have missed a big chance. The man who escaped is Uriah Bernstein, and I charge him with the murder of his uncle, Abram Marks.

"Come, I'll go with you to the station," he added, "and tell my story to your inspector. I want this affair hushed up for the next four hours."

CHAPTER III.

AT THE OLD BAILEY—A SURPRISE FOR THE CROWN—THE CONFESSION.

IT was three o'clock in the afternoon. Rain was falling in the London streets, and within the gloomy and forbidding precincts of the Old Bailey a thrilling drama was being enacted—the stern drama of the law.

William Ashton was among the spectators, and so, also, was Gordon Fox, though neither father nor son had seen him.

Counsel for the Crown had finished their case—woven their deadly web of evidence—and none who had listened, save one, doubted that the prisoner would be convicted.

There was a breathless hush as counsel for the defence slowly rose, and those nearest him wondered not a little at his ill-concealed expression of confidence and triumph. He called upon James Whimper, and one of the two witnesses for the prosecution stood up.

"Mr. Whimper, you have stated that it was precisely half-past six when you entered Abram Marks' shop on the night of February the 24th last, and that you observed the time by the tailor's clock. Where did this clock hang?"

"In its usual place on the side wall of the room, to my left as I entered."

"To your left? Are you certain of that?"

"Absolutely certain!"

"Thank you! That is all!"

James Whimper sat down, and a middle-aged, honest-faced man rose as the name George Macklin was called.

"Mr. Macklin, you have sworn that it was exactly a quarter-past six when you entered the shop on that fatal night?" said the barrister.

"Yes, sir!"

"When you stepped into the tailor's shop, and noticed the clock, which way did you look?"

"To the right, towards Mr. Marks and the prisoner."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am positive of it."

"But wasn't there a large mirror on the right-hand wall?"

"I believe so," said Mr. Macklin, with a puzzled look in his eyes. "Yes, there was!"

"And you still swear that you looked to the right?"

"I do, sir. I cannot be mistaken."

"Then how did you see the clock?"

There was no reply. The barrister lifted his hand with an eloquent gesture.

"My lord, gentlemen of the jury," he cried, "this vindicates the prisoner. The clock hung on the left-hand wall, and the witness swears that he glanced to the right. What he saw was the reflection of the clock in the mirror—a reflection in which the position of the hands were, of course, reversed."

A moment of silence followed, while Tom Ashton, his face flushed with hope, gripped the rail of the dock with trembling hands. Then a storm of applause broke from the spectators, and above it rose the voice of the barrister.

"I call Mr. Gordon Fox!"

The noise ebbed away as the famous detective stepped forward to the witness-box and told his story. Ten minutes later, without leaving their places, the jury rendered a verdict of "Not Guilty!" The prisoner was immediately discharged, and when he had thrown himself into his father's arms, he turned to Gordon Fox and clasped his hand.

"Thank you, sir!" cried the happy lad "I'll never forget this!"

"God bless you, Mr. Fox!" said William Ashton, with tears streaming down his cheeks. "You have saved my boy from the gallows!"

. . . . . .

The next day Uriah Bernstein was arrested at Harwich, where he was trying to escape to the Continent, and in the presence of Gordon Fox and others, after he was brought to London, he made a full confession.

"I'm not sorry I've been caught," he said, "for I should never have known a peaceful moment if that innocent boy had been hanged. I have done him a terrible wrong, and I shall make some amends for it."

Uriah Bernstein was as good as his word, for, two months later, after his conviction and execution, it was found that he had left all of his ill-gotten inheritance to Tom Ashton, who started business as a stationer and news-dealer in the shop where Abram Marks had been murdered, and Gordon Fox had so narrowly escaped the same fate

THE END.

(Continued from page vii.)

through your mind," he said. "You are thinking that I cannot torture you while you are inside the safe—that I shall have to let you out, and that as soon as I open the door you will overpower me."

O'Brien bit his lip, for that was exactly what he had been thinking.

"If you are deluding yourself with any such hope," went on Bernstein, "let me assure you that you are foolish. Before I open the safe door, I shall take steps to render you as harmless as a babe. Now then! What is your answer?"

"You have had my answer!" returned O'Brien through his clenched teeth.

Bernstein turned away from the safe, and O'Brien heard him strike a match and light one of the gas-jets in the shop. A moment later he heard the opening of a drawer and the jingle of glass bottles. Following this came an interval of silence, at the end of which he heard Bernstein approach the safe and remove the key from the keyhole. The next instant a faint hissing sound fell on the detective's ears, whilst at the same time his nostrils were assailed by the sweet and sickly smell of chloroform!

Then O'Brien realised the fate which his cunning captor had prepared for him. Bernstein was spraying chloroform through the keyhole, with the intention of filling the safe with the deadly vapour, and thereby rendering his prisoner unconscious before he opened the door.

Imprisoned as he was in the safe, it was impossible for him to get away from the stupefying fumes of the chloroform. Little by little the deadly vapour would steal away his senses until he became, as Bernstein had predicted, as harmless as a babe.

It was a desperate predicament, yet never did the thought occur to O'Brien to plead for mercy or yield to his captor's threats. On the contrary, the very acuteness of his peril only served to sharpen his wits, and after a few moments of despair his drooping spirits were suddenly revived by a brilliant inspiration.

With an ear-piercing shriek, he flung himself at the inside of the door again, yelling "Police!" "Help!" "Murder!" and altogether behaving like a man half-mad with fear.

Then presently, as though the chloroform were gradually overpowering him, his cries grew fainter and fainter. Finally, after drawing his revolver from his pocket, he sank down on the floor of the safe, groaned feebly for a little while, and then lay perfectly still.

Would his ruse succeed? Would Bernstein believe that the chloroform had stupefied him in so short a space of time? Would he open the door forthwith, or would he go on spraying chloroform through the keyhole until O'Brien was really overcome?

The questions were soon answered, for almost immediately after the groaning had ceased Bernstein withdrew the nozzle of the spray from the keyhole, and laid the apparatus on the counter. Then, thrusting the safe-key into its hole, he unlocked the door and opened it.

O'Brien was lying face downwards at the bottom of the safe, apparently unconscious, and with his right hand doubled under his chest.

Chuckling softly to himself, Bernstein stooped, gripped the detective by the coat-collar, and dragged him out into the shop.

"I hope I haven't given him too big a dose," he muttered to himself. "I don't think I have, for he seems to be breathing quite——"

His musings ended in a startled yell, for at that moment the supposed unconscious detective leaped to his feet and thrust the muzzle of his revolver into Bernstein's face.

(Another Powerful Instalment Next Week).

(*Continued from page 14*)

"I'll do anythin' I can, sir—but I don't want it to be too risky!" whispered Fullwood. "I say, sir, can't we have a light? I can't see a confounded thing in this place. I've got a small electric torch in my pocket——"

"Keep it there!" said Mr. Snuggs sharply. "Good gracious! You must not imagine that we can take such risks. It would be most unwise—most ridiculous. Somebody might come here, seeing a light——"

"Oh, right you are, sir—I understand," said Fullwood. "Well, you were talkin' about——"

Fullwood broke off, for in moving his position he had touched against some object which was leaning against the wall. As a matter of fact, it was a broom which one of the gardeners had left there. It slithered, and Fullwood made a wild grab in the darkness to save it.

But he missed, and thudded against the wall, shaking the little shed quite perceptibly.

"What are you doing—what are you doing?" came Mr. Snuggs' testy voice from the darkness. "Upon my soul! Cannot you keep still? I am surprised——"

And then an extraordinary thing happened.

From high above there came a kind of slithering sound. The roof of the shed was somewhat high, with one or two beams running across. In the darkness, neither of the shed's occupants could tell what had caused that peculiar sound. But Mr. Snuggs looked up sharply.

Crash!

Something struck Mr. Snuggs in the centre of the forehead—a terrible, stunning blow. The master gave one grunting groan, and sank to the floor in a heap, rolling against Fullwood.

There was a dull thud, and then—silence!

CHAPTER IX.

A DASTARDLY PLAN!

"MR. SNUGGS — Mr. Snuggs!" gasped Fullwood hoarsely.

There was no reply.

Fullwood could feel the master at his feet—lying there absolutely inert. The abrupt nature of the disaster—the swift manner in which Mr. Snuggs had been struck down—nearly caused Fullwood to lose his head.

And the blackness of the shed made the whole matter worse.

There was something terrifying about this darkness—something ghastly about the deadly stillness.

What had happened?

What had caused that slithering sound

from above? Why had Mr. Snuggs fallen with such a horrifying groan?

Fullwood fumbled in his pocket with a shaky hand. He had remembered the electric torch. He took it out, and he was so agitated that he could hardly press the button. But he found it at last.

A bright beam of light shot out across the shed. It wobbled uncertainly upon the opposite wall, for Fullwood's hand was still shaky. Then, almost afraid to do so, he directed the beam of light lower. He believed that Mr. Snuggs had had some kind of seizure.

But then Fullwood uttered a strangled, startled cry.

"Good heavens!" he gasped thickly.

There, on the floor, lay Mr. Snuggs. Fullwood's light played upon the master's head and face. Mr. Snuggs was lying face upwards. He was still—horribly still. And on his forehead there was a great gash—a gash which bled profusely. Blood was flowing down and forming a dreadful little pool.

"Oh!" panted Fullwood, panic seizing him. "He's dead—he's dead!"

Just for a second Fullwood was on the point of dashing madly out of the shed, screaming with fear and horror. But then, through all his confusion a ghastly thought came to him.

Unless he was careful, he would be accused!

He had been alone with Mr. Snuggs! The boy stood there, trembling in every limb, and staring down at that still form in a fascinated way. Yes, Mr. Snuggs was dead. He did not move an eyelid.

But how—how?

What had caused this sudden tragedy? And then Fullwood gulped. On the floor, beside Mr. Snuggs, lay a great crowbar, two feet long. It was an enormously heavy thing of iron—with a jagged head.

And Fullwood knew the truth.

The crowbar had been placed across two of the beams above. One of the gardeners had put it there, perhaps—for safety. And when Fullwood bumped against the wall, the slight shake had brought the crowbar down. Obviously, it had been put carelessly on the beam, so that even the merest disturbance would dislodge it.

Nobody was to blame—it was an accident.

The crowbar had come down with terrible force, and Mr. Snuggs had looked up at the same moment. No doubt that jagged end had struck him on the forehead, causing this terrible, fatal injury. It was just one of those happenings in life which come unannounced, and which catch people unawares.

But who would believe that it was an accident?

"Oh, it's terrible! Horrible!" groaned Fullwood hoarsely. "I—I shall be blamed for this! They'll say that I murdered——"

He started back with a gasp.

For Mr. Snuggs had moved!

The Remove Master opened his eyes, and stared unseeingly about him. Then, groaning, he attempted to raise himself on his elbow. Fullwood dropped on his knees, panting hard with sheer relief.

"Oh, sir!" he breathed. "I thought you were dead!"

Mr. Snuggs clutched at Fullwood's arm.

"What—what has happened?" he muttered, in a thin voice. "Who—who are you? Oh! I—I seem to remember——"

"Pull yourself together, sir!" pleaded Fullwood. "We're in the woodshed, you know! That crowbar fell on your head! I—I thought——"

"Ah, yes—quite so—quite so!" murmured Mr. Snuggs weakly. "I remember. Why, good gracious! I—I am bleeding! What—what is this——"

Mr. Snuggs had put a hand to his head, and he now gazed at his hand with utter horror.

"I have been badly hurt!" he shouted out shrilly. "Quick—quick! You must fetch the doctor! I might die! Oh, that would be dreadful! I might die! Go and fetch the doctor, you young fool!"

Fullwood was calmer now. Mr. Snuggs' very liveliness was clear proof that his injury was not fatal.

"But what can we say, sir?" asked the junior huskily. "The Head will want to know why we were in this shed——"

"Ah, yes!" moaned Mr Snuggs. "I am in pain, Fullwood! My head is in a terrible state! I think I am dying!"

And then, suddenly an evil light came into Mr. Snuggs' eyes.

"Wait—wait!" he breathed. "An idea, boy—an idea! We were planning something for Huggins, eh? Something for Huggins! Go—go! Send Huggins here! Tell him that I require him here!"

Fullwood was startled.

"But—but——"

"Go!" said Mr. Snuggs feverishly. "I am badly hurt, Fullwood—I am in a terrible condition! Send Huggins here! Do you understand? At once! At once! Go!"

Fullwood gave a violent start this time. What could Mr. Snuggs mean? Why did he require Huggins? And then, in a flash, a full light of understanding dawned upon the junior. He stared down at Mr. Snuggs in a kind of wild, excited way.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped. "But—but——"

"Send Huggins to me!" persisted Mr. Snuggs, his voice growing much weaker. "It is the only chance! I will take—take advantage of this—this accident! Go! You fool—you fool! Don't you hear me?"

"All right, sir!" panted Fullwood breathlessly.

He didn't exactly know how he got out of the shed.

But he found himself in the Triangle, and he took a deep, breath of the late evening air. The lights gleamed out of the Ancient House windows, and Fullwood looked at them gladly.

It seemed unreal—it seemed that he had just come out of some terrible kind of dream. He was startled beyond measure by the awful suggestion which Mr. Snuggs' order had put in his mind. But Fullwood did not hesitate. He hurried indoors as hard as he could go.

If he had paused to consider—if he had thought this matter out—he might have hesitated. For even Fullwood was not bad right through. There was some good in him. And this dastardly scheme seemed to be beyond the limit of Fullwood's own capacity for wickedness.

But he didn't think—he ran in

It was a piece of pure luck that caused him to run into Alf just in the lobby. And Alf was alone. He looked at Fullwood in surprise as the latter clutched at his arm.

"Huggins!" gasped Fullwood. "Mr. Snuggs wants you!"

"Oh, does he?" said Alf. "Well, I don't want Mr. Snuggs!"

"You've got to go—you must!" said Fullwood urgently. "He's out in the woodshed—he's waiting for you."

"In the woodshed?" asked Alf, staring. "What's he doin' there?"

Fullwood realised that this sounded queer.

"I'll tell you!" he said, forcing himself to be calm. "Mr. Snuggs has been feeling pretty rotten—he's rather sorry about the way he's treated you, an' he wants you there——"

"Another trick, I suppose?" asked Alf contemptuously.

"It's not—it's not!" snapped Fullwood. "You must go—you must!"

"Oh, all right—keep your 'air on!" said Alf. "I s'pose I'd better. It'll only mean another floggin' if I don't obey horders."

But he was suspicious, nevertheless. He could not very well refuse to go—and there was something in Fullwood's tone that rather surprised him. The look in Ralph Leslie's eyes had set Alf thinking.

Something had happened. But what? Why had Fullwood behaved in such a startled, frightened way?

The boy from Hoxton went to the woodshed more out of curiosity than on account of any fear of disobeying Mr. Snuggs.

He had the utmost contempt for the master. It was wrong that this should be—but Mr. Snuggs instilled nothing but contempt into all decent fellows.

Alf arrived at the woodshed, and found the door open. He passed inside.

"My boy—my boy!" came Mr. Snuggs' voice.

"I can't see you, sir," said Alf.

"Here—here—bend down!" breathed Mr. Snuggs. "Yes! Yes! That is right!"

He felt upwards, and grasped Alf's hand in the darkness. Alf started. There was something peculiar about Mr. Snuggs' hand—something very unpleasant. Alf drew his hand away quickly.

"Help!" screamed the Form-master. "Help! You murderous young ruffian! Help! Help!"

Alf staggered back, utterly startled.

"But—but I haven't touched you, sir!"

He stood there, too aghast to collect his thoughts.

And Mr. Snuggs continued to scream with a mad kind of hysterical frenzy.

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CHAPTER X.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION!

ARMSTRONG came to a sudden halt in the lobby.

"What was that?" he asked. "Listen!"

Armstrong was with Griffith and Skelton, of the Remove. They were on their way to the common-room. But they suddenly hurried outside into the gloom of the Triangle. And they were startled to hear scream after scream coming from the direction of the woodshed. And then Fullwood came dashing up from the darkness. Fullwood thought he could improve matters.

"Quick!" he panted desperately. "Mr. Snuggs is being killed!"

"What!"

"Good heavens!"

"Help! Help!" yelled Fullwood, at the top of his voice. "Yell for help, you idiots! Come quick!"

The juniors were absolutely frightened.

"But—but——"

"It's Huggins!" shouted Fullwood excitedly. "I just saw him go in the direction of the woodshed with Mr. Snuggs. He must be killin' him! Rush in an' fetch the prefects—anybody!"

But it was unnecessary.

For just then Fenton of the Sixth came hurrying out.

And behind him were a number of other juniors and seniors—all startled by those terrifying screams which had sounded from the stillness of the Triangle. Windows were being flung open. Boys were shouting to one another down the passages. And a big rush was being made for the open air.

"What's all this noise?" demanded Fenton sharply.

"Oh! Oh! I'm glad you've come!" panted Fullwood, clutching at his arm. "I—I think Huggins is half killin' Mr. Snuggs!"

"Don't talk such confounded rot!" said Fenton angrily. "What's all this scare? Making a fuss over nothing——"

And then, as the crowd increased, Alf Huggins came hurrying up from the direction of the woodshed. His face was deathly

pale, he was dishevelled, and there was a wild kind of look in his eyes.

"Somethink has happened to Mr. Snuggs!" he said hoarsely.

"You've done it, then!" exclaimed Fullwood. "You've done it, you cad! What have you been doin' to Mr. Snuggs?"

"I haven't done nothink!" said Alf, his voice grim and harsh. "I never touched Mr. Snuggs! 'E's lying' there, on the floor of the woodshed——"

"Have you just left him?" demanded Fenton quickly.

"Yes."

"But what is the matter with Mr. Snuggs?"

"I don't know—I can't see in the dark!" replied Alf. "Fullwood told me that Mr. Snuggs wanted me——"

"That's a lie!" shouted Fullwood. "I didn't know anythin' about it! I had no idea that Mr. Snuggs was in the woodshed."

Alf turned, staring dazedly.

"Is this another plot?" he shouted, suddenly blazing into a fierce passion. "Have you been planning somethink else to get me disgraced? You—you rotten cad! I'll——"

"Stop that, Huggins!" shouted Fenton. "Good heavens! What—what's that on your hand?"

Alf looked at his hand dully.

He had known that there had been something peculiar about Mr. Snuggs' grip. But he had seen nothing in the darkness. But now, in the light that streamed out from the lobby, he looked at his hand with fascinating horror. It was red—smeared with red!

"It's—it's blood!" he muttered hoarsely. "It's—it's blood!"

The juniors shrank away, shivering.

"Blood!" gasped Armstrong. "Have—have you done Mr. Snuggs an injury, you murderous——"

"But—but I didn't touch him!" shouted Alf. "I swear I didn't. I never touched him——"

"That's a lie!" shouted Fullwood. "If you didn't touch him, how did that blood come on your hands?"

"Mr.—Mr. Snuggs grabbed hold of me——"

"We can't stop talking here!" interrupted Fenton sharply. "We'll go and see about this. Come on! No, not all of you! You, Huggins, and you, Fullwood! Who's got a light?"

"I've got an electric torch," I said, bringing it out.

Fullwood offered his, as well. And we went hurrying across the Triangle. I had come out just at the end of the little scene, and I could not help being startled.

There was something about this affair which promised to be intensely dramatic. And the very silence from the woodshed was significant. After those screams which Mr. Snuggs had uttered, no other sound had come.

As a matter of fact, the Remove master had been in a kind of panic. After his injury, he had recovered consciousness, but his nerves were upset—he was nearly bordering on hysteria.

And, on the spur of the moment, he had concocted this villainous plan. He had seized the opportunity which Fate had offered.

Even though he was badly hurt, Mr. Snuggs had not forgotten his vindictive plot to ruin Alf Huggins. And those screams of his had exhausted him more than he had reckoned upon.

In fact, after uttering them he sank back in a kind of stupor. The effort had been too much. The Remove master was badly hurt—and he had taxed himself enormously.

Fenton and I arrived at the woodshed almost together. And as we did so two figures loomed up from the other part of the Triangle. We recognised them as the figures of Dr. Stafford and Nelson Lee.

"Oh, guv'nor!" I exclaimed. "I'm glad you've come, sir!"

"What is the matter out here?" asked Nelson Lee sharply.

"He's dead!" came a startled shout from the woodshed.

It was Fenton who had uttered the words, and a moment later the captain of St. Frank's came to the door. His face was deathly pale, and in his eyes there was a look of horror.

"Mr. Snuggs has been killed, sir!" he said hoarsely.

"Great Heaven above!" ejaculated the Head.

Nelson Lee said nothing, but he rushed forward, and entered the woodshed. The juniors and the seniors fell back, startled into complete silence. They were horrified—pale-faced and excited. But there was something in the very atmosphere that prevented them from shouting.

The light from my electric torch, and from Fullwood's torch, played down upon Mr. Snuggs. He certainly looked a ghastly sight. He was not quite unconscious—although he lay still.

Nelson Lee looked at him sharply. Mr. Snuggs was not pleasant. Blood had been streaming down from an ugly gash in the forehead—a gash that looked like some awful kind of wound at first sight. And his face was of a deathly pallor—accentuated by the trickle of blood.

"Well, sir?" asked Fenton anxiously.

"Mr. Snuggs is not dead—so do not be unnecessarily alarmed, Fenton!" exclaimed Nelson Lee quietly. "The injury is serious, but there is very little likelihood of it proving fatal."

"Thank goodness, sir!" said Fenton fervently.

The words were breathed round among the crowd.

And Alf Huggins came up, and stood just at the doorway.

"I didn't do it, sir!" he exclaimed, full of alarm. "Some of the chaps believe I did it, sir. I never! I never!"

"If you did not cause this injury to Mr. Snuggs, Huggins, you have nothing to fear,"

said Nelson Lee quietly. "What is that on your hand?"

"Blood, sir," said Alf. "I—I——"

"Blood!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford, in a strange voice. "Blood! Good gracious! Can it be possible, Huggins, that you have committed this appalling assault upon Mr. Snuggs?"

"No, sir."

"He did!" shouted Fullwood. "He went to the woodshed, sir, and there wasn't another soul near! Then I heard Mr. Snuggs scream out. Huggins was the only one there!"

"You are sure of this?" demanded Nelson Lee sharply.

"Yes, sir — positive!"

"It ain't true, sir—it ain't true!" shouted Alf desperately. "Oh, it's all lies—lies! It's a plot agin me! I come to the shed because Fullwood told me that I was wanted by Mr. Snuggs——"

"Oh!" said the Head. "Then you admit that you came here?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am amazed—I am intensely worried!" said the Head, in a bewildered way. "I—I hardly know what to think! But we must get Mr. Snuggs indoors at once. An inquiry will be immediately held!"

"But—but you don't think I did it, sir?" shouted Alf.

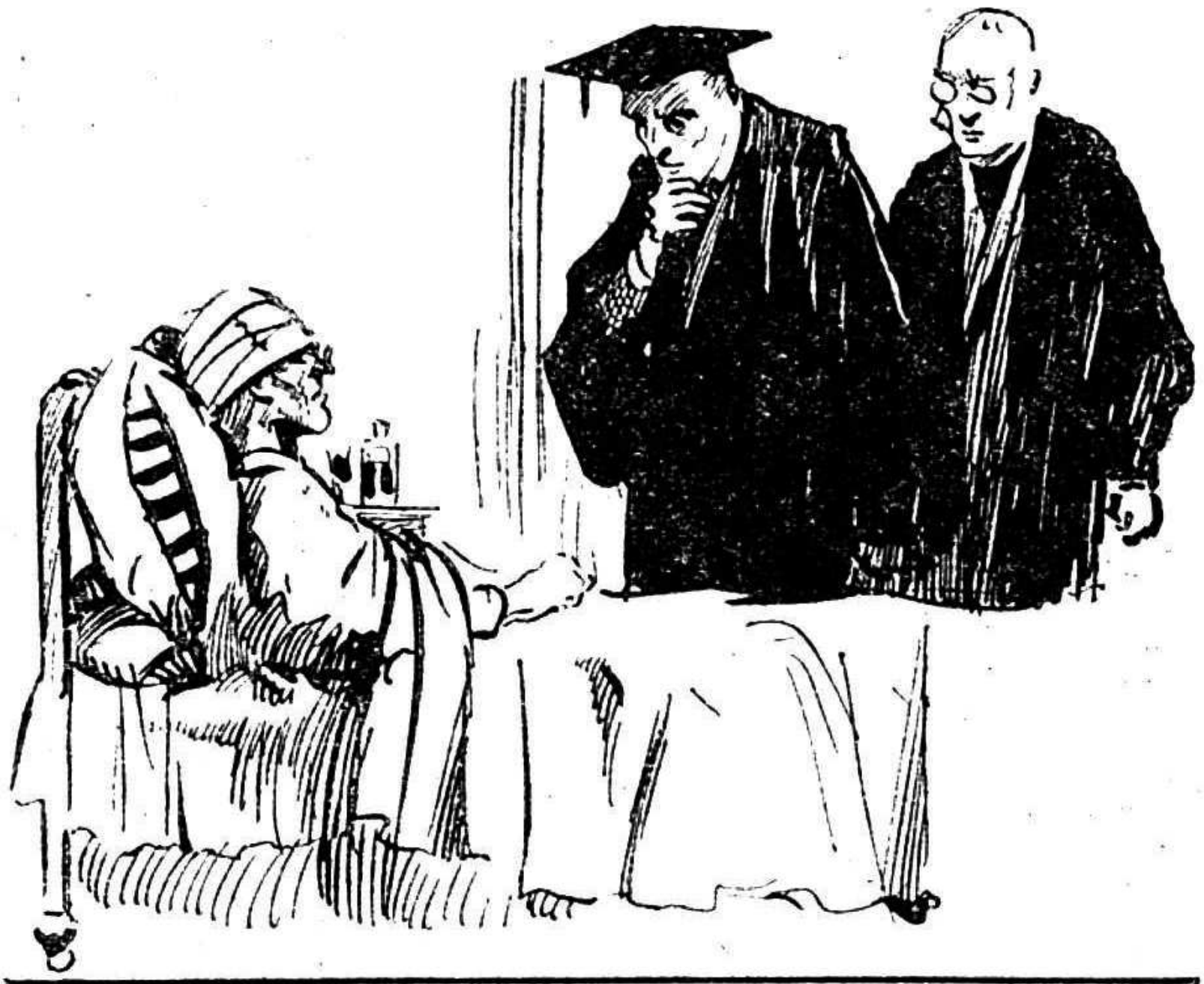
The Head made no reply. His brow was black, and his face was drawn and haggard. Alf turned rapidly, and gazed over the crowd.

"You don't think I done this?" he shouted.

There was no verbal reply—only a series of intense, sibilant hisses. Alf started. The net was closing round him.

Just when he had believed that all was going well—just when his position at St. Frank's was showing signs of improvement!

It seemed that Alf would have to put his back to the wall—and fight!



Nelson Lee was there, looking at Mr. Snuggs, who lay in bed. The Form-master was propped up with pillows. His face was pale, but he had recovered markedly.

CHAPTER XI.
THE INQUIRY!

ST. FRANK'S was in a ferment.

Barely half-an-hour had passed, and seldom before had the old school been in such a condition of feverish excitement. A great deal had happened during that short spell of time.

Mr. Snuggs had been carried indoors, and he had been taken to his own room and laid upon the bed. Nelson Lee had attended the wound, and had applied a bandage. And now Dr. Brett, the village practitioner, had appeared upon the scene.

In the Triangle, and in the lobby and passages, fellows were waiting about, talking in hushed voices. What would the doctor's verdict be? What dreadful news would soon be whispered from mouth to mouth?

The whole routine of the school was at a standstill. And the fellows were waiting—waiting, in a fever of impatience. Both Fullwood and Huggins had been taken to the Headmaster's study.

The reason for this was obvious—they were the two juniors who had been in the Triangle at the very time of the dreadful occurrence. There was no necessity for any others fellows to give evidence.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff!" declared Gulliver. "Huggins did it! Of course he did it!"

"You rotter!" said Handforth fiercely. "He didn't do it!"

"Don't be silly, Handy——"

"Silly!" interrupted Handforth. "Is it fair to accuse the chap before there's been any investigation? They want me on this job! It wouldn't take me long to find out the truth! And I'll bet Fullwood's got something to do with it!" he added darkly.

"That's quite possible," agreed Pitt. "It's rather significant that Fullwood was the

chap to make the discovery. That's the part I don't like. Still, Huggins had blood on his hand—and that's terrible!"

"They won't let me go in the woodshed!" snorted Handforth. "Just when I've got a chance to prove what I can do, too! Isn't it enough to make you disgusted? Two men there—guarding it!"

"That's quite right, Handy," I said quietly. "This may be a police job!"

"Police!" said some of the others, in awed voices.

"It all depends upon Mr. Snuggs' injury," I replied. "We don't know exactly what's happened yet. But he was brutally attacked, and there's just a chance that he might die. And that'll mean—the police!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What an awful disgrace to the school!"

"Didn't we all say that Huggins would bring disgrace on St. Frank's?" demanded Merrell triumphantly. Serve him right! The hooligan ought never to have left Hoxton! This is what comes of allowin' blackguards of that sort to enter the school."

"Shut up, you rotter!"

"Can't you wait until we know the facts?"

"We know all we need!" sneered Merrell. "Huggins admitted that he went to Mr. Snuggs, and the next minute he was seen with blood on his hand! Why, it's obvious!"

"Of course it is," agreed Gulliver. "Snuggs was always down on him, an' I suppose he got into a tearing rage, an' attacked him with that crowbar. It's a certainty he'll die."

"And then Huggins will be hanged!"

"Or sent to a reformatory for life!"

All sorts of wild statements were made—and this, after all, was only natural. And while the excitement was at its height, Archie Glenthorne came rushing along, his face pale, and his eyes gleaming with wild anxiety.

"Dear old lad!" he exclaimed, clutching at my arm. "I've just heard! Phipps told me! I was having forty winks, you know, I mean to say, it can't be true—absolutely not! Say it isn't true, old sportsman!"

"Steady!" I said quietly. "Don't get excited——"

"But Alf, old dear!" pleaded Archie. "Alf, don't you know! He can't have done that frightful thing!"

"I don't think he did," I said. "But the case is black against him. Everything looks as though he attacked Mr. Snuggs."

"Good gad!" said Archie faintly.

Of course he attacked Mr. Snuggs," sneered Gulliver.

"It's proved!"

"It's not proved!" I said grimly. "And there's no need for any of this talk at all! As soon as Mr. Snuggs recovers he'll explain how it happened. Then Huggins will be free from all these cowardly suspicions. Either that, or he'll be condemned beyond hope. And I don't believe that at all."

"Supposin' Snuggs dies without speakin'?" asked Gulliver.

I made no reply. That possibility had occurred to me—but I had thrust it aside as too awful for serious consideration. Then, indeed, Alf would be in a fearful, ghastly predicament!

And while the school waited in a state of suspense, Dr. Stafford was seated in his study. He was just as haggard as before—intensely worried, and waiting for the word from the bedroom upstairs.

Nelson Lee had stated that Mr. Snuggs was not gravely injured—but the Head wanted to hear the opinion of Dr. Brett, too.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Alf Huggins were seated in the Head's study. They were widely separated—in different parts of the room—and they had been commanded not to speak. They were to be questioned later. nothing could be done until the Doctor's verdict came.

Outside, Archie Glenthorne paced up and down, so worried that he could not keep still.

All Archie's usual languor left him like a cloak. His friend was in trouble! His best pal was in danger of being caught in a terrible trap. It was appalling.

Never for one moment did Archie believe that Huggins was guilty.

He thrust the thought completely aside. It was preposterous—ridiculous! The evidence could be as black as thunder, but Archie would not believe it. His faith in Alf was absolute.

And there was something exceedingly splendid in this attitude of Archie's. He didn't want to hear any arguments. He knew one thing—he knew it positively. Alf had not touched Mr. Snuggs.

His hand may have been covered with blood, and he may have been caught red-handed in the woodshed. But Alf didn't do it. Archie didn't trouble to reason the thing out—it wasn't necessary. He based all his belief on the one conviction. Alf was simply not capable of performing such a murderous attack.

Therefore, he was innocent.

Unfortunately, everybody was not like Archie. The majority of the juniors, in fact, were only too willing to seize upon the slightest point. They preferred to believe that Alf had done this terrible thing. It fitted in with their ideas concerning the bricklayer's son.

Archie was still pacing up and down the Triangle, feverishly wondering when the result of the inquiry would be known, when a form loomed up out of the gloom. It was Phipps.

"I've been looking for you, sir," he said.

"Kindly slide, Phipps!" said Archie quietly. "No offence, old bean, but the young master would be alone!"

"I think you would be better indoors, sir."

"Dash it all, don't argue!" said Archie. "I can't go indoors, Phipps—I'm too frightfully upset. The bally old interior atmosphere would choke me. I've got to be out here, where I can inhale large doses of ozone. I'm nearly stifled!"

"It will do no good to worry, sir," said Phipps. "Much as I regret it, Master

Archie, there seems no question about the guilt of Master Huggins. He undoubtedly attacked Mr. Snuggs——"

"What!" interrupted Archie sharply.

"I am convinced, sir——"

"That is enough!" interrupted Archie sternly. "I mean to say, I'm dashed appalled! In fact, I'm shocked! Phipps, buzz away into the offing! Ooze into the next landscape! You bally well offend the eye!"

"I am sorry, sir."

"And so you deucedly well ought to be!" retorted Archie. "I mean to say, the least you can do is to keep your frightful opinions to your frightful self! Can't you wait until the old verdict rolls forth? I regret to say it, Phipps, but I'm wounded!"

"If you will only be reasonable, sir——"

"Enough!" broke in Archie. "Go!"

"But——"

"Why, dash it all, I can't be free from my own bally valet!" exclaimed Archie indignantly. "The whole thing strikes me as being positively poisonous, but unless you leave me within two seconds I shall dismiss you on the spot! And that is that! What about it?"

Phipps bowed.

"As you wish, sir," he said, with dignity.

And he went away, leaving Archie alone with his worry. But he was not likely to get much satisfaction yet.

In Dr. Stafford's study, the Head had become impatient. Dr. Brett was still upstairs, and had so far sent no message down. And at length the Head could stand the strain no longer.

He decided to commence the inquiry at once.

"Fullwood!" he exclaimed quietly. "Come here!"

Fullwood stepped forward.

"I want you to tell me exactly what took place in the Triangle, according to your own observation," said the Head.

"That's easy, sir," said Fullwood. "I was just crossing from the gymnasium. I hadn't got far when I noticed Huggins crossing over towards the woodshed. He went quickly——"

"I never!" shouted Alf hotly.

"Please be quiet, Huggins!" said the Head. "I will give you an opportunity of speaking in a few moments. If you are guiltless, you have nothing to fear."

But Alf was guiltless—and he did fear.

"I paused for a minute, sir," went on Fullwood. "It struck me as being suspicious that Huggins should go to the woodshed. I saw him go inside, and then I heard Mr. Snuggs' voice."

"From within the shed?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what happened then?"

"It was clear to me that Mr. Snuggs and Huggins were quarrelling, sir," said Fullwood. "I was just going over towards the shed when I heard a kind of thud. But a second before that Mr. Snuggs screamed out. It seemed to me that he was in fear——"

"You mean, he cried for help?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you not at once go?"

"The fact is, sir, I was startled," replied Fullwood glibly. "I came to a stop, and hardly knew what to do. Then Mr. Snuggs finished shouting, and there was a terrible kind of silence. I got into a kind of panic, and rushed to the Ancient House, shouting that Mr. Snuggs was being attacked. That's all, sir; the other fellows saw Huggins come up, with his hand all smeared with ——"

"That will do, Fullwood!" interrupted the Head. "You may stand aside. Now, Huggins, come here!"

Alf stood up, and crossed to the Head's side.

"You have heard what Fullwood has said. What is your account of the affair, Huggins?"

"I was in the lobby, sir, and Fullwood came to me, and said that Mr. Snuggs wanted me at once in the wood-shed. I was a bit surprised, but I went there straight away——"

"You don't believe that, sir?" put in Fullwood quickly. "Just as if Huggins would go because I told him to! It's ridiculous, sir!"

"Allow Huggins to speak, Fullwood," said the Head sternly.

Alf set his teeth.

"It don't seem to be any good, sir," he said quietly. "The more I say, the worse it gets."

"Not at all," replied Dr. Stafford. "As I have told you before, I merely want to find out the truth. If the truth is in your favour, Huggins, you may be perfectly frank. You were saying that you went to the wood-shed,"

"Yes, sir."

"You freely admit that you did actually go there?"

"Of course I admit it, sir—I can't do anything else—because it 'appens to be the truth," said Alf. "I went inside, an' Mr. Snuggs spoke to me. I thought his voice sounded a bit queer, and he seemed to be on the floor. Then 'e grabbed 'old o' me."

"Mr. Snuggs was not unconscious, then?"

"No, sir," said Alf. "'E took 'old o' my 'and, then 'e started screamin' in a terrible way. It fair shook me up. An' after that Mr. Snuggs fell back, in a kind o' faint."

"What did you do?"

"I run out, sir, thinkin' that I should get 'elp."

The Head pursed his lips.

"And you solemnly assure me, Huggins, that you did not make this attack upon Mr. Snuggs?"

"I swear I never touched 'im, sir," said Alf earnestly.

"That's a lie, sir!" put in Fullwood. "I swear 'e did!"

Dr. Stafford looked very grim.

"One thing is certain!" he said. "Either one of you two boys is lying in the most barefaced fashion. We shall soon know the truth as to that. I am distressed beyond measure. But there is one point which makes me thankful. Mr. Snuggs himself will be able to prove this thing up to the hilt. For he will be able to say who actually did attack him."

"Of course 'e will, sir," said Alf. "That's why I ain't worryin'. When the truth comes out, I'll be free from all this suspicion."

And just then the door opened, and Dr. Brett walked in.

CHAPTER XII.

THE THUNDERBOLT!

THE Head rose to his feet at once.

"Well, Dr. Brett—well?" he asked sharply.

"I am pleased to tell you, sir, that Mr. Snuggs is in no danger whatever," said the village practitioner. "The injury is, indeed, by no means serious."

Dr. Stafford breathed a sigh of relief.

"I am thankful to hear that!" he said fervently. "You have made a very careful examination, Brett?"

"Mr. Lee's diagnosis was perfectly correct in every detail," said Dr. Brett. "There is no fracture of the skull—indeed, no concussion. The injury merely consists of an ugly gash, and a nasty bruise. Mr. Snuggs will be able to resume his duties within two days."

"This is indeed wonderful!" said the Head. "I had been fearing that the case was much more serious. How is Mr. Snuggs now? Is there any sign of returning consciousness?"

The medical man smiled.

"Mr. Snuggs is already conscious, sir," he said. "I do not wish to be unkind to the gentleman, but I must confess that he has made a great deal more fuss than was necessary. Indeed, I half believe that his own nervousness was the cause of the collapse."

The Head frowned.

"But what of this attack, doctor?" he asked. "What is your opinion?"

Dr. Brett looked more serious.

"As far as I can make out, Mr. Snuggs received a severe blow from some heavy instrument—obviously the crowbar which was found near him," he said. "But the blow was apparently a glancing one."

"It might have been more deadly?"

"I will go further than that," said the doctor. "It was only by the merest chance that Mr. Snuggs escaped death!"

"Death!" ejaculated the Head, startled.

"I really believe so," said Brett. "Had the blow been direct instead of glancing, Mr. Snugg's skull would have been fractured. Whoever committed the assault must count himself lucky, for he had a distinct chance of being placed under arrest for murder. As it is, the injury is slight. A shade of difference in the direction of the blow, and the result would have been appalling indeed."

And soon afterwards Dr. Brett took his departure.

He had bandaged the wound carefully, and had declared that he would look in on the morrow, although there was no fear whatever of any complication. Mr. Snuggs would recover rapidly.

But this made no difference to the murderous nature of the attack. Although Mr. Snuggs was so slightly injured, there had been a possibility of death. The attack upon him had been a brutal, deliberate one.

Nobody considered the possibility of the affair being an accident.

Even Nelson Lee himself had had no time to closely investigate, although he promised himself that he would make a very careful examination of the wood-shed later on.

But, of course, now that Mr. Snuggs had recovered consciousness, the whole affair was simplified. There was really no need for an investigation. For the Master of the Remove would be able to provide a full account of what had happened.

Dr. Stafford rang his bell sharply after the medical man had left. And a few minutes later Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, arrived in the study, Tubbs having fetched them.

They were told to remain until Dr. Stafford returned, and they were to see that both Fullwood and Huggins stayed. Indeed, these two Sixth-Formers were acting as temporary warders.

Dr. Stafford went straight upstairs to the sick-room.

Nelson Lee was there, looking at Mr. Snuggs, who lay in bed. The Form-master was propped up with pillows all round him. His face was pale, but he had recovered markedly.

"I am glad you have come, Dr. Stafford," said Lee. "Mr. Snuggs was about to give an account of the occurrence."

"That was what I was hoping for," said the Head. "I shall be glad, Mr. Snuggs, if you will tell me how you feel."

"Weak, sir," said Mr. Snuggs feebly. "I am in intense agony!"

"I am sorry to hear that——"

"My head—my head!" moaned the Form-master. "It is throbbing in the most violent manner. But I am thankful that I still live; I must be grateful for that."

"You feel that you can talk for a short while?"

"I trust I shall be able to manage it, sir," said Mr. Snuggs.

"I—I greatly dislike bothering you to-night, Mr. Snuggs, but I feel that I must," said the Head quietly. "The fate of one of my boys rests upon your statement. Can you tell me who attacked you so brutally,"

"Yes—yes—of course."

"Will you give me the name of your assailant?"

The Head listened, filled with anxiety.

"It pains me beyond measure to tell you, sir," said Mr. Snuggs. "I would prefer to be silent, but, under the circumstances, I feel that perfect candour on my part is necessary."

"It is the only course for you to adopt, Mr. Snuggs."

"It was a boy who attacked me, sir!" said Mr. Snuggs tensely. "That will astonish you, no doubt. The boy's name is Huggins! He is in my own Form."

Dr. Stafford looked exceedingly sad.

"Huggins?" he repeated. "You are sure of this, Mr. Snuggs?"

"Yes, I am sure," repeated the Form-master glibly. "I happened to go into the wood-shed, and I think Huggins must have been following me. At all events, I had hardly stepped inside when the boy attacked me with that dreadful crowbar."

"But are you quite positive the boy was Huggins?" put in Lee.

"Quite positive."

"You saw him, Mr. Snuggs?"

"Clearly!"

"In spite of the fact that the wood-shed was in intense darkness?"

Mr. Snuggs gave a slight start.

"Yes—er—to be sure!" he replied quickly. "It so happened that I struck a match for my pipe. There could have been no mistake, Mr. Lee. The boy was Huggins. Quite apart from this, it would have been impossible for me to mistake his voice—to say nothing of his coarse method of speech."

"Yes—yes," said the Head. "Exactly."

He spoke mechanically, for he was in a turmoil.

Then there was no doubt about it! Alf was the culprit! Mr. Snuggs was positive—he had seen him, and he had heard him. Mr. Snuggs was absolutely positive on the point.

And it was, of course, impossible to doubt his word.

The Head had every reason to distrust the Form-master. But, at the same time, it never crossed Dr. Stafford's mind that Mr. Snuggs could be so appallingly wicked as to accuse the boy when he was inocent. Somebody had attacked Mr. Snuggs, and if not Huggins, who?

Besides, Huggins had been found in the most suspicious circumstances. He had even had blood on his hand when he went among the other boys. All these things,

coupled together, made the thing a certainty.

Even Nelson Lee, astute as he was, had absolutely no reason to coubt Mr. Snuggs' word. And it was quite impossible to surmise that the affair had been an accident. That was the last thing that anybody would think of.

If Mr. Snuggs had been a criminal, it would have been different. Then, perhaps, his word might have been doubted. But he was a schoolmaster—a man of education and refinement. That he should stoop to such base villainy was not to be imagined.

"I am distressed beyond measure, Mr. Snuggs," said the Head quietly. "From the first I suspected that Huggins was guilty, but I hoped against hope that you would be able to tell some other story. It is appalling—so appalling, indeed, that I am at a loss."

Mr. Snuggs looked at the Head intently.

"Do not be harsh with the boy, sir," he said. "I wish to plead with you for him. I want to assure you that I bear him no ill-will—no malice. I am only sorry for the wretched lad."

Dr. Stafford was completely deceived by this cunning attitude.

"You are too generous, Mr. Snuggs; but I need hardly say how relieved I am to hear you speaking in that way!" exclaimed the Head. "I was afraid that you would wish to inform the police."

"Good gracious me, no," said Mr. Snuggs hastily. "The police? Never, sir! The boy committed a brutal assault, but to see him in grave trouble is the last thing I desire. I wish you to be gentle with him, sir."

"He must leave the school Mr. Snuggs!"

Mr. Snuggs looked sad.

"That, alas! appears to be necessary," he said, in a mournful voice. "But I really believe he attacked me in a fit of ungovernable temper. I cannot think for a moment that it was premeditated. And I should like you to send him away quietly—so that there is as little fuss as possible. It would distress me beyond measure to be the cause of this lad's complete downfall. I am gravely concerned for him."

"Your bearing, Mr. Snuggs, does you credit!" said the Head. "I am delighted, sir. I had hardly hoped that you would be so generous."

And, a few moments later, Dr. Stafford left the sick room.

He went downstairs slowly—worried more than he could possibly tell. For his position was difficult. He knew that Alf Huggins was really the son of Sir John Brent.

And this boy had to be expelled!

The Head was thankful, indeed, that Alf was here under an assumed name. At least, Sir John would be spared that terrible disgrace. The outside world would never know the truth.

When the wretched boy left, Alf Huggins would vanish for ever. There would be no disgrace upon Sir John Brent. It was the one consolation in the whole of this terrible, distressing affair.

But Dr. Stafford was grim.

The boy had committed a terrible offence, and for him to remain in the school was absolutely impossible. The Head was sad, too. It pained him terribly to know that this boy could be so vindictive—so brutal, and, above all, that he could be untruthful enough to maintain his innocence in the face of absolutely conclusive evidence.

The only way was to be firm; the boy deserved no pity.

The Head reached his study, and went inside. He dismissed the two prefects at once.

"Well, sir?" asked Alf, unable to contain himself. "Is Mr. Snuggs all right? Has he told you what happened, sir?"

"Mr. Snuggs has told me," said the Head coldly.

"Oh, crikey! Thank goodness for that!" said Alf, with relief. "Then you knows it wasn't me, sir! You know I never done it ——"

"Boy!" thundered the Head. "How dare you?"

Alf stared at him dazedly.

"But—but——"

"How can you have the utter audacity to pretend that you are innocent?" demanded Dr. Stafford, his voice quivering with indignation and anger "You are guilty! You know you are guilty!"

Fullwood listened to the words, gloating with inward triumph.

"Guilty!" gasped Alf hoarsely. "Oh, sir! You—you don't mean to say that Mr. Snuggs accuses me? Me? Me?"

"Mr. Snuggs has told me the truth——"

"He's told you lies, sir—horrible, vindictive lies!" shouted Alf passionately. "If he says I did it, he's a scoundrel—a blackguard! I didn't touch him! I swear it, sir! I swear it before——"

"Silence!" commanded Dr. Stafford harshly. "This—this is appalling! Do not dare to utter another word, Huggins! You are only making matters twenty times worse by this astounding attitude. You will leave the school in the morning!"

"But, sir——"

"I will listen to no further falsehoods from you!" exclaimed the Head, his voice quivering. "Be silent, you wretched boy!"

Alf stood there, swaying. He was dazed—bewildered. But the truth was clear to him, in spite of the whirling condition of his brain. Mr. Snuggs had deliberately lied in order to get him kicked out of the school.

The heavens had fallen—the thunderbolt had come!

CHAPTER XIII.

DESPISED BY THE SCHOOL!

FULLWOOD was flushed and victorious.

He left the Head's study with information that he knew would thrill the whole school. He had seen Alf taken away—led off like a prisoner between two prefects—bound for the punishment room for the night.

And Fullwood ran as hard as he could go to the junior quarters. He knew that everybody would be waiting to hear the verdict.

And he was right.

When he arrived in the Remove passage, he found it crowded. All the study doors were open, and the fellows were crowding in and out, talking in groups, and discussing the thing in excited whispers.

Fullwood's arrival was like a bombshell.

"Well, it's all over!" he said, trying to be calm. "He's sacked!"

"Sacked!"

"My hat!"

"Then—then he's guilty?"

"Guilty!" sneered Fullwood. "Of course he's guilty! The Head's seen Snuggs, and Snuggs explained the whole thing—how that rotten kid rushed at him with the crowbar, and bashed him about! The truth's all out, and Huggins is in the punishment room."

"My goodness!"

"Then—then it's true!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

Although most of the fellows had been expecting it, the news, nevertheless, came as a tremendous shock.

"I don't believe it!" shouted Handforth, above the din. "I don't believe it!"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" said Armstrong sourly. "It's been proved up to the hilt. Didn't we see Huggins' condition? Hasn't Snuggs explained all about it——"

"But—but it seems impossible!" muttered Handforth dazedly.

For once the leader of Study D was subdued.

More than anything else, he wanted to believe in Alf's innocence. But when he came to consider the matter, there appeared to be no hope. And, in spite of himself, Handforth had to accept the verdict.

But there was one fellow who would not believe.

The news of Alf's proved guilt spread through the school like wildfire. And Archie Glenthorne heard echoes of it out in the Triangle, where he was still wandering aimlessly about in the darkness.

He came indoors, and listened dazedly.

"It's rough on you, Archie, after what you believed of the chap," said Pitt gently. "You had faith in him, and now it's all destroyed in one blow. Rough luck, old man!"

Archie looked at him coldly.

"Destroyed?" he repeated. "Absolutely not!"

"Silence!" commanded Dr. Stafford harshly. "This—this is appalling! Do not dare to utter another word, Huggins! You will leave the school in the morning!"

"But you don't mean to say——"

"Alf is true blue—as true as a die!" declared Archie. "Dash it all, I believe in him as much as ever! You poisonous rotters! You foul bounders! Haven't you got any more faith in the chappie than to turn against him like this?"

"But it's proved!" said Pitt weakly.

"Dear old tulip, it doesn't matter to me whether it's proved, or whether it's not proved," said Archie, with hopeless logic. "I know bally well that Huggins is innocent. Why, dash it all, he's white! He's white clean through! I may be a frightful sort of ass, but when it comes to knowing a chappie's character, I'm absolutely there! There's been some frightfully fearful mistake!"

And Archie hurried off to Dr. Stafford's study. He was so anxious that he forgot to knock. He walked straight in, and found the Headmaster pacing up and down, alone.

"What are you doing here, Glenthorne?" demanded the Head curtly.

"The fact is, I had to come!" said Archie. "I mean to say, about Alf! Alf, don't you know! It's not possible! I don't like to say so, sir, but it strikes me that you've bally well made a most ghastly sort of bloomer!"

"How dare you, Glenthorne?" demanded the Head. "This is a piece of sheer impertinence——"

"Not absolutely, sir," interrupted Archie. "I should say, absolutely not! The idea,

you see, is so dashed imposs. that the brain cells positively won't grab hold of it. Alf is one of the lads. I mean to say, Alf is as straight as a deucedly straight piece of string! He couldn't do it, sir—he didn't do it! I don't believe it! In all sorts of different positions, I don't believe it!"

The Head looked at Archie sternly.

"My boy, it is splendid to see such staunch loyalty, but I can assure you that this loyalty is sadly misplaced," he exclaimed. "Huggins is guilty. You may go! I cannot discuss the matter with you!"

"But—but—I mean!" protested Archie. "It's not absolutely a fact that you're ordering me to buzz off? Can't I have a little chat with the old lad? About five minutes, sir—or, say ten minutes? I'd just like to assure him that I don't believe any of this priceless piffle!"

"You cannot see Huggins to-night, Glenthorne," replied the Head sternly. "Indeed, you will not see Huggins again!"

"Oh, but dash it all——"

"You will not see Huggins again!" repeated Dr. Stafford.

Archie turned, and walked out in a dazed kind of condition. He didn't remember what happened afterwards. But he had a hazy kind of recollection that he paced up and down the corridors.

The next lucid thing he knew was that the whole school had been called together in Big Hall. He found himself in his place without having any remembrance as to how he got there.

And the school was unusually subdued.

Only the faintest of faint whispers passed from fellow to fellow. There was a hush over the whole assembly. This affair was so grave that the juniors, in particular, were in a state of something like awe.

And then the Headmaster appeared, and the hush became almost painful.

"It is not my intention to keep you long, boys," said Dr. Stafford quietly. "But it is necessary that the main facts of this most unfortunate affair should be made clear to you. It would be distressing in the extreme if exaggerated and wild stories were to get about."

He paused, and the school hung on his words.

"Mr. Snuggs, I am happy to tell you, is not badly injured," continued the Head. "He will be able to resume his duties within a day or two. But the attack upon him was a blackguardly one. Huggins, of the Remove, is guilty of this act. But Mr. Snuggs has desired me to be merciful."

"The rotten hypocrite!" muttered Handforth fiercely.

"Mr. Snuggs is greatly distressed," proceeded Dr. Stafford. "He has explained that the boy attacked him in a moment of temper. It was over in a flash, but the damage was done. And Huggins will leave the school in the morning."

"Serve him right!" said Gulliver audibly.

The Head frowned.

"I am sorry to hear any such expression from any boy!" he exclaimed. "Huggins has sinned, and his punishment will be drastic. At least, you will refrain from gloating over his downfall. You will not see him again, for when the school rises in the morning, Huggins will have gone."

"But has it been proved, sir?" asked Handforth boldly.

"There is no question, my boy. Huggins' guilt has been proved to the very hilt!" replied Dr. Stafford. "I have nothing further to say, except that I shall admire you if you refrain from any noisy demonstration."

A few minutes later the school dismissed.

And, somehow, the Remove was silent. There was no jeering, no loud expressions of exultant joy. Fullwood and Co. and the other fellows in their set, were the only ones who loudly proclaimed their satisfaction.

The majority of the fellows were quiet.

Now that Alf was going—now that he had met with this downfall—many of the juniors were beginning to think of his good points. They felt half sorry for him.

"After all, he's not to blame so very much!" growled Hubbard.

"Not to blame?" said Bell staring.

"No! Look at the way Snuggs used to persecute him," said Hubbard. "He was at him from morning till night. He never gave the chap a minute's rest. Wasn't it enough to goad him on? I tell you straight, I'm sorry for the poor kid!"

"Same here!"

"Hard lines on him!"

"It's rough on Archie, too!" remarked De Valerie. "Didn't you see him just now? The poor chap looked dazed."

"Oh, well, he and Huggins were as thick as thieves," said Owen Major. "And the queer part about it is that Archie still believes in him."

"Oh, he's a fool!" said Marriott.

Yet, in all truth, Archie Glenthorne was the one sensible fellow of all. His instinct told him that Alf Huggins was innocent. His faith was blind. He knew—he absolutely knew—that his chum was as true as steel.

And he was thunderstruck.

He could only sit in his study, staring before him with dull, listless eyes. It seemed that the end of all things had come. Just when he had begun to enjoy life, this was the result!

But, gradually, Archie lost that dazed look. An idea was coming to him—gradually forming in his mind.

And, although Alf Huggins had been publicly expelled—although he was booked to leave St. Frank's in the early morning—some very remarkable things were destined to happen before the boy from Hoxton left the school. Alf's back was to the wall, and there was some fight in him yet!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My Dear Readers,

The circumstances under which Huggins was found guilty by the Head of brutally assaulting Mr. Snuggs were all in favour of the latter's story corroborated by Fullwood. The fact that the Form-master had been badly injured, narrowly escaping death, removed any suspicion that the whole thing had been an ingenious plot against the Hoxton boy. It seemed absurd to suggest that Snuggs would deliberately wound himself in order to make it appear that he had been set upon by a boy who, above everyone else at St. Frank's, had most reason to owe the Remove master a grudge. That it could have been an accident would not have occurred to anyone, for accidents do not often fit so easily into the motive and opportunity presented in this case. In expelling Huggins, the Head was not to be blamed. Had the affair been taken to court, the unfortunate boy would have been convicted by any jury on the evidence.

NELSON LEE MAKES SOME DISCOVERIES.

To a shrewd observer like Nelson Lee, Huggins's alleged guilt had one obvious flaw. Instead of Huggins having a grudge against Snuggs, it was more probable that the Remove master would be seeking to avenge himself against the lad, for it was on account of the latter that Snuggs was under notice to leave St. Frank's in disgrace. Huggins had already triumphed over Snuggs, and there was no occasion for him to take the law of retribution in his own hands. Reasoning on these lines, Nelson Lee was able to make some surprising discoveries in favour of the accused lad. But, in the meantime, Huggins suffers the penalty of his supposed crime, and all this is admirably told in next week's story, "DOWN AND OUT, or, Hounded from the School!"

THE EDITOR.

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