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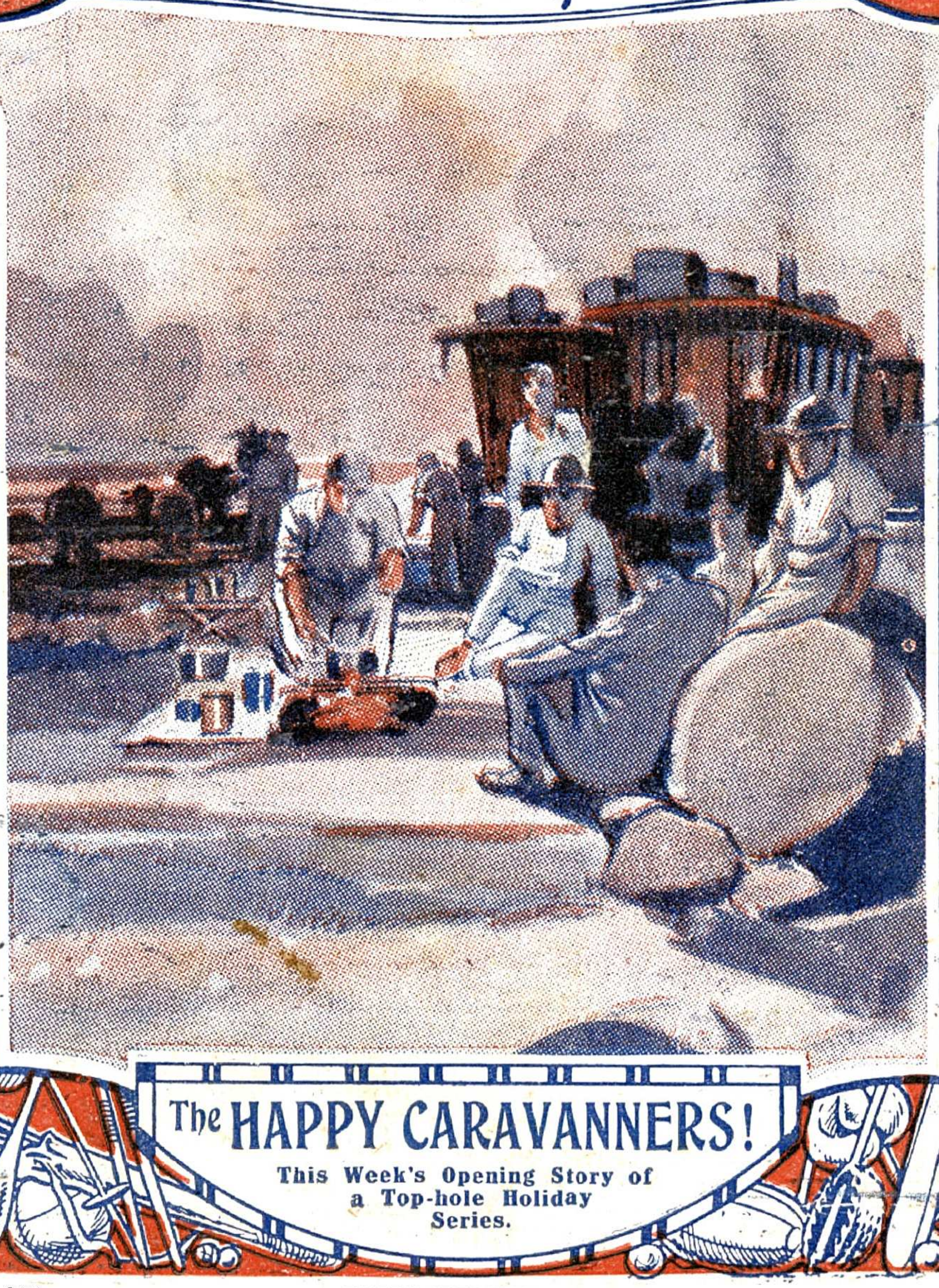
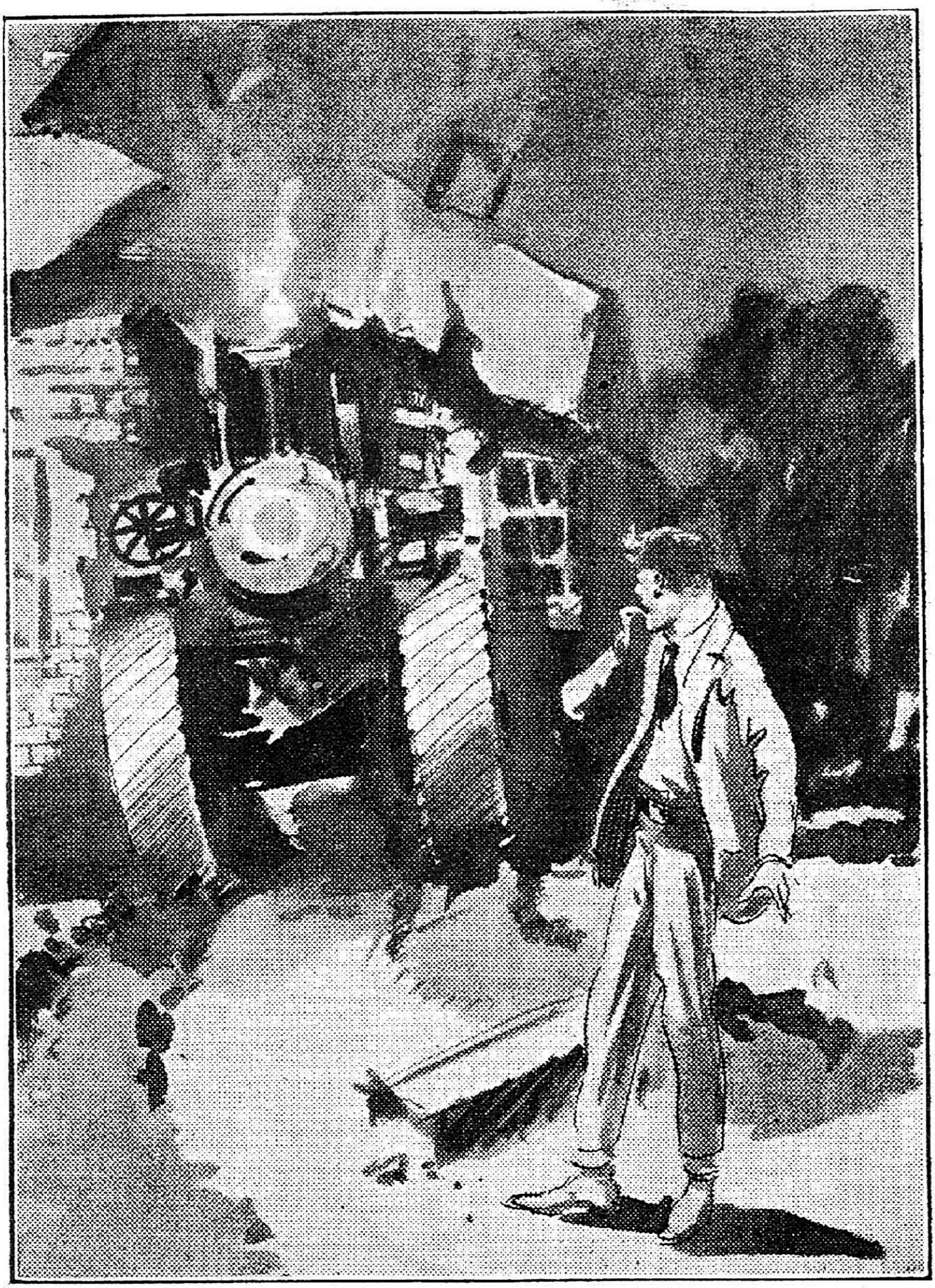


The HAPPY CARAVANNERS!

This Week's Opening Story of a Top-hole Holiday Series.

No. 415. EVERY WEDNESDAY MAY 19, 1923.



The engine came to a standstill in the middle of the farmhouse parlour, hissing with impotent rage. And outside Handforth stood gazing at the destruction with a kind of fixed fascination.

The Happy Caravanners!

If you have ever experienced, dear reader, the joys of a holiday in a caravan, you will share the keen enthusiasm of the famous juniors of St. Frank's in following their coming holiday adventures through the byways and highways of rural England in the splendid new series of which this story is the opening. To be always on the move, with ever-changing scenery looking fresh and green in the warm, spring sunshine, our caravanners look forward to the time of their lives this Whitsun holiday. Their adventures will assuredly be as varied as the country through which they pass. As for the humour, you will be rocking with laughter from the first page onwards of this exhilarating story.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

LAYING DOWN THE LAW.

"WHITSUNTIDE," said Handforth, "is coming!"

"Go hon!" yawned Church. "You don't say so!"

"I do say so—I've just said it!" exclaimed the leader of Study D. "And what's more, Whitsuntide will be here in about a week. We've got to decide what we shall do. You chaps have got to tell me your plans."

"What's the good of doing that?" asked McClure. "It's no good us making plans—you only alter them. We can't call our lives our own, you know. As soon as we decide on a certain thing, you butt in and change everything."

Tea was just about to commence in Study D in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Edward Oswald Handforth and his two faithful chums were seated round the well-filled table, and the May sunshine was pouring through the window.

Outside, the Triangle looked fresh and green and inviting.

Peace reigned within the study—but it was not likely to reign for long. Peace and Study D were unusual companions. But just at the moment the three juniors were discussing the forthcoming holidays.

Things had been rather quiet during the past week. After Alf Huggins—or Alf Brent, as he was now called—had left the school to recover from his injuries, there had been practically nothing doing.

There had been all sorts of exciting times in connection with the bricklayer's son. But these were now over. And Handforth was feeling somewhat impatient because of the lack of thrills.

"We won't talk about the holidays now," remarked Church. "I suggest we go somewhere this evening—to the pictures in Bannington, for example——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Who wants to go to pictures on an evening like this?"

"It doesn't matter whether the evening's wet or fine, does it?"

"Of course it does—in fact, pictures are dotty, anyhow," declared Handy. "Far better go for a row on the river. Or we might do some fishing."

"What about the circus?" asked McClure, stirring his tea.

"Which circus?"

"Well, there don't happen to be half-a-dozen," said McClure sarcastically.

"Haven't you seen the bills? There's a big circus in Bannington this evening—at least, on the outskirts of the town. I thought it would be rather a good idea to buzz over, and have a look at it."

"H'm!" said Handforth. "H'm!"

He thoughtfully munched a sardine sandwich. He rather liked the idea of going to the circus. It hadn't struck him. If he had suggested it himself, he would have declared that the scheme was wonderful. But McClure had mooted it—and out of sheer force of habit, Handforth put his foot down.

"No!" he declared. "Blow the circus!"

"But——"

"Who wants to see a circus, anyway?" demanded Handforth. "Silly rot! Clowns and jugglers and fatheaded trapeze artists. I'm blessed if I'd spend any money, going to a circus! Sheer waste of time!"

Handforth stirred his tea so vigorously that he nearly stirred it out of the cup. He was indignant with McClure for having suggested the circus. He ought to have thought of it himself.

Before Handforth could make any further remarks, the door suddenly burst open, and a cheery-faced fag marched in.

"Hallo, Ted!" he said. "How goes it?"

"Clear out, you young bounder!" snorted Handforth. "If you come here cadging for grub, you won't get any! Not likely! And who told you to march in without knocking? What about your manners?"

Willy Handforth thrust forward a grubby palm.

"Five bob!" he said shortly.

"What?"

"Five bob!"

"What do you mean—five bob?" roared Handforth. "Take that filthy paw away! What have you been doing—cleaning the chimney? My hat! How can I eat my tea after looking at that ghastly thing?"

Willy sighed.

"I can't help your troubles," he said. "Five bob, old son!"

"Are you trying to borrow five shillings off me?" asked Handforth indignantly.

"Well, I've always thought you were a bit dense, but this beats everything!" exclaimed Willy. "Why should I ask for five bob if I don't want it? Do be reasonable, Ted!"

"I'm not going to lend you anything——"

"Oh, yes, you are!" interrupted Willy. "If you refuse to whack out, I shall sit outside the door until you change your mind. And every two minutes I'll give a terrific knock. You've got tons of tin, Ted—don't be mean! I'll pay you back one of these fine days."

Handforth breathed hard.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed, diving down into his pocket. "It's worth five bob to get rid of you! Here you are—clear out! Take the money, and go. I'm blessed if I can understand why I don't slaughter you!"

Handforth minor took the money, and pocketed it.

"Good!" he said. "I really wanted half-a-crown, but I thought I'd better ask for five bob to make certain. It's always well to take precautions. I shall be able to take Chubby Heath, now."

"Take him where?" demanded Handforth.

"To the circus."

"My hat!" exclaimed Handy. "Do—do you mean to say that you're going to squander that five bob on the circus?"

"No."

"But you just said——"

"I'm not going to squander the money at all," interrupted Willy. "It will be well spent, old son. Shall I go into details? Eighteen-pence each for seats, a tanner each for ice-creams, and the rest for sweets."

"Disgusting little gluttons!" said Handforth witheringly. "All right—clear out! Here! Better take another half-crown—in case you're short!"

This, of course, was just like Edward Oswald. He was generous to a degree, and hardly ever refused his younger brother any cash when he required it. He made a fuss, as a rule, but everybody expected that.

Willy departed, highly elated.

"Well, I don't know," said Handforth slowly. "I don't know."

"What don't you know?" asked Church.

"About that circus," replied Edward Oswald. "When you come to think of it, a circus isn't a bad kind of entertainment. I think we'll go, after all. If you chaps start objecting, I'll biff you!"

"Oh, we sha'n't object——"

"That's all right, then," said Handforth. "This is a good idea of mine, and I don't want any rot——"

"A good idea of yours?"

"Yes."

"Why, I suggested the circus," said McClure.

"You—you silly ass!" snapped Handforth. "I'm blessed if you chaps don't always claim all my ideas as your own! Still, we won't argue about it. We're going. And I'm going to pay for the seats. Understand? It's my treat. So don't try any piffle."

He glared aggressively at his chums, as if it would be a crime on their part to suggest paying their own share. And, as soon as tea was over, the three famous chums sallied forth.

They were not the only ones bound for the circus.

For some days past the countryside had been plastered with bills announcing the "stupendous rage of the century." According to these bills, the circus was the most extraordinary collection of talent that had been gathered together under one stretch of canvas.

But as all circuses made this boast, the announcement lost some of its weight.

Furthermore, it was only in the town for one evening. Pitt suggested that this was because the show was so poor that a second audience would never arrive.

However, a good many juniors were chancing it.

Handforth and Co. arrived in the lobby, and found Archie Glenthorne about to set forth. The elegant ass of the Ancient House was attired in a Norfolk suit and a cap—rather unusual clothing for him.

"Greetings, laddies!" he said, adjusting his monocle. "I'm about to set forth on the old pedal machine. I mean to say, I'm going to buzz like anything on the good old bike."

"You can buzz—I sha'n't stop you," said Handforth.

"Oh, absolutely not!" said Archie. "I mean, why? When you come to think of it, why should you stop me? There may be some reasons, but I can't possibly imagine one at the moment. There are rumours, dear old tomatoes, that a circus is about to give a somewhat terrific performance."

"Oh, so you're going to the circus, too?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then mind you keep clear of the ring," said Handforth. "You might get mistaken for one of the clowns, you know."

Archie gazed after the chums of Study D as they marched outside. He wasn't quite sure whether he had been insulted or not. Somehow, he felt that he had. But it wasn't worth the fag of making sure.

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I came out soon afterwards. We were also bound for the circus. The evening was so fine, and as there was nothing better to do, we saw no reason why we shouldn't indulge ourselves.

About half the Remove was setting out on bicycles to go to Bannington. I had my suspicions regarding this particular circus. The very fact that it was only staying one night seemed to indicate that it was an insignificant affair. The various bills informed the public that the show was an extraordinary one. Perhaps it was. "Extraordinary" can apply in more ways than one.

Handforth and Co. were the first St. Frank's juniors to arrive on the scene. They had started out in good time, and they meant to collar some of the best seats. They had even arrived before Willy—who had experienced some little difficulty in borrowing a bicycle. In the end, Willy had borrowed one without mentioning the fact to the owner. According to Willy's idea, this was far safer—and it was undoubtedly more certain.

Handforth stood looking at the tents, and sniffed.

"A pretty mouldy-looking collection, anyhow," he remarked. "My only hat! Did you ever see such a blessed set of tents?"

The exterior of the circus was by no means impressive. The main tent was of enormous age—weather-stained, patched, and torn. The animal tents and the dressing tents were equally dilapidated.

But there were several gaily-painted and excellently equipped caravans. These were the only objects which gave the show a bit of colour. Several shabbily-dressed men were lounging about.

But the gate was not yet open.

The circus was pitched in a meadow, and quite a crowd of children were waiting outside, to say nothing of a considerable number of adults. Handforth pushed his way forward to the gate.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "It's time to go in, isn't it?"

One of the shabby men walked up and removed a stubby pipe from between his teeth.

"I don't reckon as there'll be any show to-night, young gent," he said.

"No show?" repeated Handforth blankly.

"Not as things look at present, anyways."

"Why not?"

"The old man looks like he's in trouble," said the shabby individual. "It's been coming for weeks—and now it's arrived! We've been losing money so fast that you couldn't count it as it trickled away. And the boss has been gettin' deeper and deeper into the mud. He's just about fixed now."

"But how's that going to stop the show?" asked Church.

"'Tain't no good asking me," said the man. "But, as fur as I can see, the whole outfit has been pinched. Understand? Two coves come along only an hour ago—blokes what the boss owes money to. Looks to me as if they've grabbed the whole collection."

The news was not very cheering.

And it turned out to be correct. Before long the proprietor of the circus appeared, and made an announcement to the crowd. He was a stoutish man with a face which clearly indicated that he and liquor had been lifelong friends. He looked worried, and his face was haggard.

He declared that there wouldn't be any show, and gave no explanation.

"Well, I call it a nerve!" said Handforth "We've been brought here under false pretences! If they didn't mean to give a show, what did they bill it for? We ought to demand——"

"It's no good demanding, Handy," interrupted Reggie Pitt. "By the look of this collection of tents, we ought to feel glad. Good money remains in our pockets!"

Archie nodded.

"Well, I mean to say, that's one way of looking at it," he observed.

"At the same time, if the show was advertised, it ought to be given!" said Handforth. "If the circus-owner owes money to somebody, that's his affair. Besides, he'll probably get some money if he opens the doors——"

"There's more in this than meets the eye, Handy," I interrupted. "If any show was possible, it would be given."

"You bet!" agreed Tommy Watson.

We stood looking on, idly wondering if any change would come about. I'd come to the circus, just because most of the other fellows had done so. I didn't quite like the appearance of a gang of common youths, who stood in a group by themselves.

Most of them were from the slum quarter of Bannington, and I knew them to be young rascals of the worst type. Lumpy Bill—one of the worst characters in Bellton—had joined forces with them, together with one or two of his own special pals.

On the gatepost in front of me was one of the gaudily coloured circus posters. It announced in detail the various "famous" artistes who were billed to appear. The circus itself was owned by no less a person than the world-renowned showman, Signor Smallini.

Of course, we had never heard of him, and I don't suppose anybody else had. Undoubtedly, he was the stoutish man with the beery face. He was now walking up and down inside the meadow, talking animatedly with two of his men.

There was a kind of platform fixed up beside the main entrance to the big tent, and it was only a few yards away from the closed meadow gate. Other people were coming up along the road.

Crowds were appearing from Bannington—for it was getting on towards the time that the performance was billed to commence. And as nobody was allowed inside the meadow, the roadway was naturally becoming congested.

After about ten minutes, the crowd was big—there were three or four hundred people there—the majority of them being of the working-class type.

There had been several attempts to get into the meadow, and Signor Smallini and his men had had some difficulty in keeping the crowd out.

"Might as well stop a bit longer," suggested Tommy Watson. "According to the look of things there's going to be an unholy row before long. Some of these common chaps are going to cause trouble."

"Looks like it," I said slowly.

Tommy Watson was quite correct. For only a minute later the gang of young roughs started shouting derisively. They used bad language, too, and threatened to rush the tent unless they were admitted.

Signor Smallini realised that something had to be done.

Obviously, it wasn't sufficient to merely say there would be no show, and to give no other explanation. He mounted to the platform, and lifted one of his fat hands.

"Ladies and gents!" he shouted beerily.

There was a silence and everybody listened.

"Ladies and gents!" repeated the circus proprietor. "I'm sorry there won't be no show to-night. But it ain't my fault. If I could give a performance, I'd give it, seeing as there's enough of you here to fill the bloomin' tent. Just my luck! Fust time I looks like fillin' up, I can't give no show!"

"Why can't you?" demanded somebody.

"Because I ain't got no hartistes!" replied Signor Smallini.

"No hartistes!" murmured Archie. "I mean to say, that's somewhat frightful, don't you know! The poor old chappie is absolutely stumped. I must remark, however, that his accent is dashed foul—and far more reminiscent of Billingsgate than Italy!"

"He never saw Italy!" sniffed Handforth.

"Listen!" murmured Church.

"Things ain't been goin' right with me just lately," continued Signor Smallini, in a mournful voice. "I've had bad luck, ladies and gents. I've been givin' a good show, and we ain't took enough money to feed a pair of bloomin' mice! Crool 'ard times, nowadays—that's what they is! Anyways, the hartistes ain't 'ad no pay for three weeks, and now they've gorn and chucked me. Walked out this arternoon, and left me in the lurch. I can't give a show without the hartistes, can I?"

"Hard lines!" said Pitt. "We condole with you, old chap!"

"Thanks, young gent," said Signor Smallini gratefully. "It gives a man 'eart to 'ear a kind word—blowed if it don't! Seein' as I'm makin' this 'ere speech, I might as well do it proper. Not only am I left without no performers, but the 'ole show has been seized, 'cos I owe some money. So I 'opes as you'll all go away, quiet-like, and leave me to my troubles. And with this 'ere apology, ladies and gents, I 'umbly and respectfully bid you good-hevenin'."

Signor Smallini bowed, and then watched the crowd.

"Well, that's that!" said De Valerie. "The circus is a bit of a frost—and although the stout old chap looks a bit beery, I can't help feeling sorry for him."

"Yes, it's pretty rough luck," agreed Pitt.

"Hallo!" put in Jack Grey. "What are those roughs up to?"

We turned our attention to the gang of young hooligans, who had listened quietly to the speech. They were the only ones who had seemed likely to cause any trouble. And now, instead of going away, as the proprietor asked, they had become active.

Several of them had pulled up numerous clods of earth from the hedge bank. And they proceeded to use these with effect.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

The clods of earth were hurled through the air—aimed at Signor Smallini as he stood on the platform.

Several of them struck the tent, and the circus proprietor looked startled. Then, before he could dodge, or get away to safety, one of the clods hit him squarely in the chest. He staggered, and another clod caught him in the face. He put up

his hands blindly. The clods were now coming in a regular fusilade.

"Yah! We'll show yer!" yelled Lumpy Bill. "Take that!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Give 'im some more!"

The roughs, not content with pelting Signor Smallini, now burst through the hedge with wild yells.

"We ain't going to be done!" shouted one of them. "It takes a better man than him to fool us. We'll tear the blinkin' tent down, and set it a-fire! Come on, mates."

"Hooray!" roared the other roughs.

And they charged in a determined body for the platform. Things were beginning to look ugly. This disorderly mob might not go to the length of setting fire to the tent—but there was no question that they would cause a great deal of wanton damage.

Handforth looked round, his eyes gleaming.

"Buck up, St. Frank's!" he roared. "Are we going to stand by and see this?"

"No!" bellowed a score of excited voices.

"Good!" thundered Handforth. "Fair play's a jewel! We'll protect old Beery Face, and send these cads about their business!"

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, St. Frank's!"

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF ARCHIE!

HANDFORTH led the way.

This, of course, was only natural. The celebrated leader of Study D was a born warrior, and his happiest moments were when he was in the thick of a battle. If there was no prospect of a real fight, Handforth would frequently get up some excuse to precipitate one.

This affair looked like developing according to his own special taste.

There were twenty or thirty St. Frank's juniors on the spot. They needed no second bidding. They simply charged over the gate, and rushed off to the rescue of Signor Smallini.

The roughs had not been expecting anything of this kind—they had probably believed that they would have the "show" entirely to themselves. There were no policemen within a mile or two, and they looked forward to a regular orgy.

Signor Smallini was in a bad way.

He attempted to get down from the platform, but before he reached the ground he was seized by Lumpy Bill and several other roughs, and thrown down. The young hooligans piled on him unmercifully.

"We'll show yer!" said Lumpy Bill grimly.

"Schoolboys, hey!" he said harshly. "D'you think I want you dratted young himps runnin' loose over my property? I'll give you just ten minutes to get out o' this medder!"

"'Ere, look-out!" gasped one of the others. "These 'ere school kids are comin'!"

"Let 'em come!"

A moment later the fight was raging thick and fast.

Handforth was in the very forefront of the battle. I was with him, and Pitt and Grey and Watson were by our side. We lashed out, right and left. Faintly, we could hear the screams of some of the women in the roadway.

The affair looked far worse than it actually was.

"Absolutely!" gasped Archie. "What-ho! Where, as it were, is my true and trusty blade? This is the time when a chappie needs a vast assortment of frightfully effective weapons."

Archie was in the thick of it, too.

In spite of his elegant ways, he had the pluck of a dozen. He didn't care for fighting, mainly because it ruffled his clothes. But once that point was overlooked, Archie would fight with the best.

He simply lashed out for all he was worth. Handforth was doing great things. He had already knocked down three of the roughs, and his deadly "right" was just as busy as ever. Tommy Watson and I were using our fists to the best of our ability.

And, at last, we forced our way through to the spot where Signor Smallini was still sprawling in the grass. The circus proprietor was seized, and dragged out of the heart of the melee.

"Thanks, young gents—thanks!" he gasped. "Jumpin' kangaroos! I thought it was all hup with me."

"You're all right, Mr. Smallini," I said. "We'd better take you somewhere for safety."

"Into that there caravan!" said the showman. "That big 'un—with the red sides. That's my own van—the one I lives in! Thanks, young gents—I never knowed as there was such good 'earts."

"Somehow or other, we managed to get Signor Smallini through the crowd of struggling figures.

And at length we mounted the steps at the rear of the red caravan, and literally pushed the unfortunate man inside. Then we closed the door on him, and stood on guard.

"Three of you chaps had better stay here," I said breathlessly. "If anybody tries to rush the van, yell for help."

"All right!"

I hurried back into the battle.

It was still proceeding with as much vigour as ever. The Bannington crowd had gained the upper hand for a short time. Even Handforth had been unable to turn the tide in our favour. But now that Signor Smallini was out of the way, we had a better chance.

On the top of this, the circus men—there were only two or three of them—had plucked up enough courage to take a hand. They were merely the fellows who looked after the horses, and at first they had been decidedly scared.

But now that they had time to collect their wits, they entered into the fight. Their activity proved the turning point.

They were of very little use as fighters, but their participation in the fray acted as a kind of moral support. The ruffians were gradually getting the worst of it. Handforth was now fighting with terrific energy.

His face was bloodstained, his hair was towsled, and he was streaming with perspiration. His jacket had been flung to the winds, and he was using both his fists with enormous effect.

"Take that!" he roared.

Biff!

"And that!"

Biff!

"And that—and that—and that!"

Biff! Biff! Biff!

"Yaroooh!" howled Church. "You—you silly ass! You sloshed me that time!"

"Shouldn't get in the way!" panted Handforth. "My hat! Here's Lumpy Bill! Lemme get at him! I've owed him a couple of swipes for weeks! Hi! Come back, you cad!"

Lumpy Bill was not particularly courageous. As soon as he found the fight was going against his own gang, he thought it high time to retire. And when he found the redoubtable Handforth fairly on his track, he did retire. He fled across the meadow as fast as his clumsy feet could carry him. And Handforth went charging in pursuit.

This, in fact, was the signal for the roughs to break up.

Bruised, sore, and thoroughly defeated, they scooted in all directions. And the St. Frank's party held the fort. They had gained the victory with full honours. And a rousing cheer went up from the women and the children and the old folks in the road.

"My! Ain't they grand!" said one of the women. "I always said that these schoolboys was made of the right stuff! Fancy them roughs setting on a poor old man like that! They ought to be ashamed of themselves!"

"So they did!"

"Pity the police ain't near by," remarked another.

In a surprisingly short time peace reigned. The roughs considered that the neighbourhood was unhealthy. They vanished out of it completely. The other people began trickling away. And as the dusk grew deeper the scene became quiet and rather forlorn.

But the St. Frank's juniors remained on hand—to deal with any further trouble that might arise.

Handforth and Archie and several of us went to the red caravan after we had washed ourselves in a big tub of water that stood handy. We thought it just as well to have a word with Signor Smallini before leaving.

"I don't know how to thank you, young gents!" said the circus proprietor, as we walked into the little place. "You've saved the show—that's what you've done! As fine a set of young gents as ever I did see!"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "We had to swipe those hooligans!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "What I mean to say is, we couldn't stand by, dear old lad, and see you wallowing in large chunks of trouble. We simply had to dash in like anything and do things."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Smallini," I said.

The circus proprietor gave us all a grateful look.

"But I do mention it, young gents," he said. "I don't know 'ow to say what I want to say—and I can't give you no reward, because I ain't got nothing, and I don't want to hinsult you."

"Oh, that's all right—don't be a fat-

head!" said Handforth. "What's the idea of calling yourself Signor Smallini? I'll bet a penny to a quid you were never born in Italy."

Our host gave a feeble grin.

"I ain't sayin' as you're not right, young gent," he admitted. "The fact is, I ain't never set foot houtside of England in all my born days."

"Gadzooks!" murmured Archie. "Most remarkable, dear old tulip! You never set your foot houtside of—— I mean to say, outside of——"

"Oh, dry up, Archie!" said Handforth. "Don't interrupt!"

"But, my dear tomato——"

"You're good to look upon, but when you make a sound, you spoil everything," said Handforth. "If you'd only keep quiet, Archie, you wouldn't be so bad. In fact, I might even like you."

"That's dashed priceless," said Archie. "I mean to say, I'm feeling absolutely overwhelmed. To think that you might like me! Handforth, it's as good as coming into a bally fortune. I mean, life seems worth while! Existence becomes something to delight in!"

Handforth pushed up his sleeve.

"I'm ready for some more fighting, if necessary," he said grimly. "I don't want any rot—and I won't have any rot! Now, Signor Smallini, what about it? I don't believe you're Italian at all."

"Go hon!" grinned Pitt.

"Well, he isn't," insisted Handforth.

"You're quite right, young gent—I ain't!" admitted the showman.

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly. "What did I say?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling asses——"

"My dear Handy, don't orow so much," I grinned. "Anybody can see with half an eye that Mr. Smallini is not an Italian—and I have a very strong suspicion that his name isn't Smallini at all," I added drily.

"Which you're right, young gent," said the showman. "Sam Small—that's the name I've allus gorn by."

"Sam Small, what?" repeated Archie. "I mean to say, somewhat incongruous! Bally queer how names go by opposites, what? There's Fatty Little, for example—a dashed walking elephant, don't you know. And you, Mr. Small, can scarcely be described as a skeleton. No offence, of course, but you gather the old trend?"

Mr. Small nodded.

"I reckon as how I do," he said. "In this 'ere business, young gents, it wouldn't do for a man to call himself by his right name. I dunno 'ow it is, but in the show business a bloke must make himself out to be an Heyetalian, or else a Frenchy, or somethin' like that!"

"It's the same on the stage," I agreed. "An English girl is a marvellous dancer—but she never meets with any success until she gives herself a Russian name. It's queer how the English people disparage their own!"

"We don't want to go into any arguments like that!" snorted Handforth. "Who's talking about Russian dancers? If it comes to that, I think they're rotten. I saw one once in London. My only hat! Dancing! It was nothing but dotty capering! I went asleep through the whole turn!"

"If you were asleep, how could you tell it was rotten?" asked Pitt.

Handforth glared.

"I've got eyes, haven't I?" he demanded.

"But if you were asleep——"

"I wasn't asleep to start with!" hooted Handforth. "You—you silly ass! Come outside, and I'll slaughter you!"

"Young gents—young gents!" protested Mr. Small. "This ain't the way! I don't want to see you fightin' among yourselves. What with all the worries I've 'ad of late, I don't know whether I'm on my 'ead or my 'eels."

"No wonder you squirm!" said Handforth sympathetically.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, eels generally squirm—what?"

"Eels?" I grinned. "Who's talking about eels?"

"My dear old tulip, I distinctly heard Mr. Small say——"

"Well, never mind!" I interrupted. "We've done all we can, Mr. Small, so I think we'll leave you in peace. I hope you get over your troubles, and we shall look forward to seeing the show at some other time."

"Thanks, young gent—but I don't think as 'ow you'll have the chance," replied Mr. Small. "I don't know what's goin' to 'appen—and that's a fact! I owes money, y'see, and all the stuff's goin' to be pinched—sold over me 'ead, as you might say."

"That's pretty tough," said Pitt.

"It's awful 'ard lines, sir," declared Mr. Small. "'Tain't as if I deserve it. The show was all right—a good show. But, somehow, the people wouldn't come. If only I could sell these 'ere caravans privit—well, then, I could pay out these blokes and have enough left over to set myself on me feet agin. Then I'd get a manager's job what's been offered to me."

"I'm awfully sorry, but we haven't any particular use for half-a-dozen caravans," I said gently. "If we could help, Mr. Small, we would."

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I mean to say, these caravans are rather priceless, don't you know. I always thought they were dashed grubby things—the same as the gipsies use. Queer how a cove can be mistaken."

Archie looked round with added interest.

This particular caravan was, indeed, a nice little affair. It was beautifully fitted up inside, with everything neat and orderly, and looking quite fresh. There was plenty

of room, too—much more than one would have supposed.

"Topping!" added Archie approvingly.

"I've allus took a pride in this 'ere van," said Mr. Small, with a sigh. "The others ain't so nice—still, they ain't bad. It'll be a 'ard wrench to give up the old life, but it's got to be done."

"Gadzooks!" said Archie.

He looked at us in a startled kind of way.

"A bee, or a wasp, or something?" asked Pitt.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "If you are inquiring if I've been stung, dear old lad—positively no. The fact is, a somewhat juicy brainwave just whizzed into the old noddle. I was just thinking of this and that when—zing! It bally well arrived."

"Mind it doesn't bite you!" advised Jack Grey, grinning.

"A really priceless idea!" went on Archie dreamily. "In fact, I didn't think the old bean was capable of it. Absolutely not! But there you are—these things happen. They sweep a chappie off his dashed feet, don't you know."

"Don't jaw so much—what's the idea?" demanded Handforth.

Archie started.

"Well, as a matter of absolute fact, I rather think I shall preserve it for the moment," he replied. "Pray don't be offended, sweet ones—such a thing would distress me beyond measure. In fact, it would distress me even more than that. Anon, I shall reveal the wondrous scheme."

"You—you funny lunatic!" said Handforth. "I'll biff you if you don't——"

"Oh, leave him alone, Handy!" I interrupted. "If he chooses to keep the idea secret, it's his business. I don't suppose it's particularly marvellous, anyhow. Archie isn't famous for brain work."

"Oh, all right," growled Handforth. "Brainwork?" he added. "Huh! A chap can't do brainwork without a brain! Come on—let's be getting back."

Mr. Small again thanked us warmly for our help, and we piled out of the caravan. The other juniors were waiting for us. It was now getting quite dusk, and everything was quiet and at rest.

The road was clear, except for one or two small urchins who hoped against hope that further fighting would take place. Lumpy Bill and the other roughs had cleared completely off.

"Well, there's no need for us to stay here any longer now," I remarked. "We might as well be getting back to the school. We haven't seen the circus, but we did have some entertainment."

"Rather!" agreed Handforth. "Better than the circus, too!"

"Of course, you would say that!" exclaimed Church. "I've never known such a chap for fighting! The way you sloshed was awful, Handy. It wouldn't have mattered if you'd confined your attentions to the roughs. But as often as not you biffed one of us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

We all got our bicycles, and prepared to start.

"Where's Archie?" inquired Pitt, looking round.

The one and only Archie Glenthorne had vanished. Then we discovered that somebody had seen him going back into Mr. Small's caravan. Two or three of us started in that direction, but before we arrived the door of the caravan opened, and Archie appeared.

"Priceless, Mr. Small—absolutely priceless!" he exclaimed, beaming. "I mean to say—— What-ho! What-ho! It seems, dear old lads, that you have come for me—what?"

"Yes, we have!" said Pitt. "What have you been doing?"

Archie beamed again.

"Well, to tell the absolute truth, I've been—— I mean to say, the thing's a bally secret. Kindly refrain from making close inquiries, dear one. Before long, you will know the truth."

"What game has the fathead been up to now?" asked Handforth. "Look at him—grinning all over his face, and looking as pleased as a cat with two tails. He's been doing something."

"I expect the soft-hearted ass has given Mr. Small some money," said Pitt. "That's about the size of it. Anybody can get round Archie. He's too generous for this life."

Archie had a dreamy look in his eyes.

"On the road so blithe and free," he murmured. "'Neath the laburnum tree. Gadzooks! Poetry, don't you know! When I feel like this, I simply can't help it! The jolly old rhymes simply burst forth. I mean to say, rolling along to liberty, leading the life that's free——"

"Oh, don't listen to him—he's touched!" growled Handforth. "It must be the mild evening! What he really needs is a ducking—to cool him off!"

And the crowd started back for St. Frank's. But there was a good deal of curiosity about Archie. He still remained in a condition of ecstatic exuberation. On the way home, he sang slightly to himself. And upon his face there was an expression of joy and contentment.

What scheme had the Genial Ass got in his mind?

CHAPTER III.

THE BIG IDEA.

"READY?" asked Reggie Pitt, looking into Study C.

"Ready for anything," I replied promptly.

"No, ass—I mean for the rehearsal," said Pitt. "Most of the other chaps are in the common-room,

waiting. You don't mean to say you'd forgotten? We haven't got much time left—only a day or two before the holidays."

It was the following evening, and Tommy Watson and Sir Montie and I were just finishing our prep. Reggie Pitt came into the study, and gazed at us severely.

"Well, you're a fine set!" he exclaimed. "Fancy forgetting the rehearsal!"

"We hadn't forgotten it—but prep. came first," I replied. "You can tell the fellows we shall be down there within five minutes. Has all the crowd turned up?"

"Yes—everybody."

"Good! If you wait a minute, we'll go with you."

"I'll wait—and make sure!" said Pitt grimly.

The rehearsal he referred to was very necessary. About a week previously we had been invited to attend a garden party at Colonel Glenthorne's London house. This garden party was due to take place during Whit-week. There were about a dozen of us invited, including Pitt and Handforth and Co., and a lot more.

Reggie had suggested that we should do something a little out of the common. His idea, in fact, was to give a minstrel show. The others had fallen in with the suggestion with much heartiness.

And, having agreed upon this, rehearsals were planned. At the garden party we should appear with black faces, minstrel clothing, and everything. After we left St. Frank's we should have very little chance of getting together, and so we were seizing every opportunity now.

Pitt had only to wait a minute or two, and then we accompanied him down to the common-room—which had been commandeered for the rehearsal. Handforth was there, of course—and Handforth was laying down the law.

"Oh! So here you are!" he said, glaring at us. "What's all this rot about you and Pitt being the corner men?"

"That's right!" I agreed.

"Why, you rotters," said Handforth wrathfully, "the corner men in a minstrel show are the comedians. What about me?"

"Well, of course, you're a comedian all right—we all know that!" I said soothingly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A really first-class comedian," I went on. "At the same time, Handy, I rather think your comedy is spontaneous and unconscious. If you were shoved on the stage to make yourself funny, you wouldn't do it. So we're giving you one of the fat singing parts, and Pitt and I will be the comedians."

Handforth was not very pleased.

"Well, of course, I'll admit the show will be a rank failure unless I do most of the singing," he said. That goes without saying. "But I reckon I ought to be one of the corner men!"

The argument lasted for several minutes. but finally Handforth was convinced. In order to bring peace to the meeting, we advised him to start rehearsing one of his own special numbers.

"Good!" he said. "Now, lemme see! I'll sing 'Auntie Susie's Picnic!' I've learnt all the words by heart."

"Ass!" put in Pitt. "That's a comedy song. I sing it!"

"Oh, do you?" demanded Handforth. "Then why have I learnt the words?"

"Goodness knows!" said Pitt. "I'm not much good at riddles! If you like to be ass enough to learn a song you haven't got to sing—well, that's your funeral. You're billed to warble serious ballads."

Handforth snorted.

"Look here!" he said aggressively. "Look here!"

"We're looking!" said Pitt. "It's a bit of an ordeal, but we're looking!"

"Listen to me!" roared Handforth, glaring. "I've heard enough rot about these songs! I might waive the point about being dished out of a corner seat; Nipper and Pitt can be corner men. I don't care! But I'm blowed if I'm going to be stopped from singing a funny song!"

"But my dear chap, any song you sing will be funny!" I pointed out gravely. "If we put words to Chopin's Funeral March, you'd sing them in such a way that the audience would rock in their seats!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, of course, there's something in that!" admitted Handforth, quite unaware that his leg was being pulled. "Everything depends upon the way a song is sung. When I sing a song, I sing it properly! And I'm going to sing 'Auntie Susie's Picnic.' You can go and eat coke! Now, strike up! Gimme the opening bars!"

Handforth looked round.

"Great pip!" he said, breathing hard. "Where's the orchestra?"

The orchestra was, as a matter of fact, tuning-up in one of the corners. But owing to the general noise the orchestral efforts were—fortunately—drowned. I may as well explain that the orchestra consisted of a cracked violin and a mouth-organ and a Swanee whistle. The musicians were Solomon Levi, Owen major, and Cecil de Valerie. I looked forward to the efforts with misgiving.

"Hi!" roared Handforth. "Start the music, you fatheads!"

"Wait a minute!" said De Valerie. "This whistle wants oiling, and Solly's fiddle is short of two strings!"

"Well, let us hope the mouth-organ's all right," I grinned. "Do your best, anyhow. We haven't got any too much time."

After several efforts, the orchestra managed to strike up something which bore a faint resemblance to a tune. Morrow, of the Sixth, afterwards told us that he opened his study window in order to throw a boot at the cats. He didn't realise at the moment that the strains were caused by a jazz band.

Handforth stood forward and threw his chest out.

"Er—lemme see!" he began. "How does it go? Auntie Sue——"

"'Have you heard of Auntie Sue'," prompted Pitt, in a whisper.

Handforth glared.

"Idiot!" he snorted. "Of course I have!"

"No; I mean——"

"Stop!" bellowed Handforth, gesticulating for the orchestra. "Asses! You've got half-way through the verse and I haven't started. Have I heard of Auntie Sue!" he added, glaring at Pitt. "You—you babbling lunatic! Ain't I singing the song now?"

"Well, you may be, but it doesn't sound like it," replied Reggie gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You don't seem to catch on," continued Pitt. "'Have you heard of Auntie Sue' is the first line of the song. Understand?"

Handforth started.

"My goodness!" he said. "That's right! Why the dickens didn't you say so at first? All right—all right! You needn't prompt me any more! I've got it all; we'll start straight away!"

The other minstrels breathed a sigh of relief. If things went on at this rate, nothing would be done.

Handforth began:

"Have you heard of Auntie Sue,
Whose picnics on the farm,
Are the best that ever grew?
Oh, gee! There's lots of fun,
Fine and sunny weather,
The best that ever grew——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, Handy!" moaned Pitt, holding his sides. "I thought you knew it by heart?"

"So I do!" roared Handforth.

"But you've got it all mixed up!"

"Just give me time, and I'll get it clear!" said Handforth doggedly. "I thought there was something wrong somewhere. I mean, sunny weather can't grow can it? There's a line missing, I believe ——"

"Listen to me!" interrupted Pitt. "I'll give you the first verse and the first chorus. Then, perhaps, you can remember the rest. Here we go:

"Have you heard of Auntie Sue,
Whose picnics on the farm
Are the best you ever knew?
Away from strife and harm.
Fine and sunny weather,
Oh, gee! There's lot of fun,
Boys and girls together,
When school is through and done.

"Down at Auntie Susie's picnic,
In the hollow by the stream,
With a dozen jaws all busy,
And cheeks all smeared with cream;
And the gang lost little Tommy,
Till they found him bright and gay,
With his face inside a melon,
On Aunt Susie's picnic day."

"Good!" said Handforth approvingly. "Of course, there are two or three more verses, and I know them all. Now I'll start straight away and show you the real way to sing it. I'll do the chorus first!"

"But what about the verse?"

"This is a rehearsal!" retorted Handforth. "I think I'm a bit groggy on the chorus. I admit it. Now, off we go!

"Down at Auntie Susie's picnic,
Er—close by the old mill stream,
With a dozen chaps all eating
Tarts and buns and cream;
And little Tommy got lost,
And—lemme see—er——"

"That's a good line!" remarked Tommy Watson, approvingly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience howled. Handforth's rendering of the chorus was quite remarkable. He had not only forgotten the correct words, but he adopted a melody of his own which was absolutely foreign to the composer's effort and rather reminiscent of "Coal Black Mammy." The juniors howled themselves hoarse.

And, in spite of all Handforth's shouts, entreaties and threats, he was gently but firmly pushed aside; and others rehearsed—with greater success.

It was not only necessary to learn the songs, but Reggie Pitt and I had quite a number of jokes which we should trot out to the audience at the garden-party performance. And we wanted to make them as funny as possible.

Upon the whole, I was fully satisfied.

"I think we shall do splendidly," I said at length. "Another rehearsal before we leave for the holidays, and we shall be practically all right. As for you, Handy, I think you'd better stick to 'The Village Blacksmith.'"

Handforth snorted.

"What about 'Auntie Sue'?" he asked.

"That's Pitt's song; you're better at the serious stuff," I replied soothingly. "When it comes to singing a good baritone song, Handy, you're a marvel! But every chap ought to realise his own limitations."

"Oh, well!" growled Handforth. "I'm not satisfied. I'll learn those words thoroughly, and if Pitt peters out, I'll step into the breach!"

"That's some consolation, anyway," said Pitt.

He turned, as the door opened.

"No admittance!" he said sternly. "Rehearsals in progress! Nobody's allowed in here until—— Oh, it's Archie!"

"Absolutely," said Archie Glenthorne, gazing in through his monocle.

"All right; we'll admit you," I chuckled. "Considering that this minstrel show is to be given at your pater's place, we can't very well debar you from looking in. Everything is going fine, Archie."

Archie beamed.

"Well, as it were, that's rather topping," he said. "But, dear old lads, the brain has been buzzing somewhat. The works in the upper section, in fact, have been doing vast and large quantities of overtime!"

"But what's the result?" I asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, there's going to be no minstrel show—that is, at the garden-party," replied Archie. "What I mean is, we shan't be there, dear old lads. Absolutely not! I mean to say, if the whole bally crowd of us is waltzing about at the seaside, we can't very well be in London—what?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" I demanded.

"Yes!" said Archie.

"What?"

"I mean to say, absolutely!" went on Archie. "What, so to speak, am I talking about? You see, laddie, a somewhat ripe idea whizzed out of the offing and attached itself to me. In fact, I might even describe the idea as being not only ripe, but positively juicy."

"It's bound to be—if you thought of it," sniffed Handforth "I expect it's over-ripe—in other words, rotten!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "You may have observed, dear old lads of the village, that I was closely engaged with Mr. Small for quite a considerable length of time last night?"

"Yes, we all noticed it," I replied.

"In point of fact, I was chatting with the dear old tulip for a consid. period," went on Archie. "We got together, as it were, and exchanged views of life. We hobnobbed considerably. And the result is of a concrete nature. I thought possibly you might like to hear of the glad tidings."

"I suppose you gave the old chap some money?" asked Pitt.

"Absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "Merely a matter of a hundred or so quids ——"

"A few what!" shouted the juniors.

"You see, it's like this," said Archie, as the amazed fellows crowded round. "To be exact, it's not only like this, but it's like that! My pater happens to be wallowing in fearful quantities of doubloons, and I must admit that when it comes to wallowing, I'm a dashed good wallower! It remains a fact that my own banking account is large, and of the very finest quality. So,

"Durn you!" snarled Mr. Crabb fiercely, as he raised the heavy stick and brought it down upon Pitt's shoulders with such force that the junior staggered and collapsed in the mud.

you see, a few hundreds make practically no difference."

"But why on earth did you give such a lot of money to that drunken old circusman?" I demanded. "My dear fellow, if your pater gets to hear about that, he'll probably stop your allowance——"

"Not at all!" interrupted Archie. "Absolutely not! You see, I used the money for a somewhat ripping purpose. You may remember having observed the few goodly caravans in the offing? Well, to put it bluntly, it struck me that these caravans were rather priceless sort of——"

"You've bought them?" yelled Pitt suddenly.

"Absolutely!"

"Bought all those caravans!"

"Lock, stock, and, in fact, barrel!" replied Archie calmly. "The jolly old articles are now in the hands of some ripping coach-building bounders in Bannington. I interviewed a gentleman this morning, who has assured me that large alterations will be put into immediate execution. Decorations, and so forth. Curtains, carpets, fresh paint, and all that kind of rot. You gather my meaning? It struck me that we might as well have everything clear and bright and fresh, don't you know. By the time the caravans are delivered—in the course of a

few days—they will be in a dashed ripping condish."

We looked at Archie Glenthorne rather blankly.

"But—but why did you buy them?" asked Tommy Watson breathing hard.

"Why?" said Archie. "Of course!"

"What do you mean—of course?"

"Well I mean—there you are!" said Archie, who was always about an hour getting to the point. "What about a holiday? I mean to say, on the open highway, don't you know! Rolling along the good old turnpike—camping here and camping there. Doesn't it strike you as being the one and only?"

"Great Scott!" said Pitt. "You—you mean that instead of having an ordinary kind of holiday, we shall go on a caravan tour?"

"Absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "In fact, absolutely twice!"

"Why, that's the best idea of the term!" declared De Valerie enthusiastically. "What a great wheeze! Just think of the fun we can have, going about in those caravans, camping just where it pleases us! We can go to the seaside; we can stop just where we like, and—and everything!"

"As you say, dear old carrot—and everything!" agreed Archie, beaming.

The room was now buzzing with talk.

"Look here, let's get this straight!" I said. "Are we to understand, Archie, that you are inviting us to go on this caravan tour with you?"

Archie nodded.

"That, so to speak, is the idea," he replied.

"You've bought the caravans, and you want us to come?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then, of course, we accept—and thanks awfully!" I declared heartily. "It's a fine idea, old man. We ought to enjoy the Whitsun holidays tremendously. What do you other chaps say?"

"You bet!" said the other chaps in one voice.

Archie looked round, smiling with delight.

"Then, old tulips, we can consider that a bet?" he asked. "We can, as a matter of fact, look upon it as all settled—what?"

"Absolutely!" grinned Pitt.

"Of course, I'll come; I don't mind being in the thing!" said Handforth, with an air of graceful condescension. "As a matter of fact, I thought of this idea long ago. It struck me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It struck me yesterday!" went on Handforth grimly. "Only, of course, I didn't like to suggest it because—— Well, caravans cost a lot of money. I didn't dream that Archie would whack out a giddy fortune like this!"

"All right, Handy—we understand!" chuckled McClure.

"Understand what?" demanded Handforth, glaring.

"Oh, nothing!"

"Yes, that's about what you could understand—nothing," said Handforth. "Your intelligence is exactly suited for it. But, as I was saying, I don't mind coming on this trip if Archie wants me to."

"It's not a question of whether Archie wants you to—it's a question of whether we shall let you come!" declared Pitt. "I think I'll put it to the vote. Shall Handforth come, or shall Handforth not come?"

"Not!" shouted a dozen voices.

Edward Oswald looked round, startled.

"Why, you—you——"

"There you are!" grinned Pitt. "You see, Handy, the fellows are afraid that you'll try to boss things if you come along. We shall have trouble all along the road. As soon as you start any of your usual rot——"

"Well, if you're going to talk like that, I'll clear out!" said Handforth gruffly. "Do you think I want to come on the rotten tour? I wouldn't demean myself by riding in a giddy caravan! Everybody will mistake you for gipsies! Why don't you take some chairs and baskets, and sell 'em on the road?"

Handforth was rather huffy, and didn't seem to realise that his leg was being pulled again. For, of course, he would naturally come with us. His presence would undoubtedly bring a certain amount of trouble in his wake—but that would be all the better, perhaps. There wouldn't be much fun without the one and only Handforth.

He was convinced, at length, that the fellows had only been joking.

"Well, in that case, I'll agree," he said stiffly. "Naturally, I shall expect to drive the first van. That goes without saying. Where I go, everybody must follow!"

"But there's no need for all the vans to go into the ditch!" said Pitt.

"You—you funny idiot!" snorted Handforth. "When it comes to driving, I'm absolutely an expert. And I've got an idea, too. It's a great idea. I don't want to boast, but I don't mind saying that this wheeze beats anything that was ever thought of."

"But you don't want to boast?" asked De Valerie.

"No!" replied Handforth. "I leave boasting to other people. Now, the idea is that we should visit seaside resorts. Understand?"

"My dear chap, Archie suggested that long ago——"

"Can't you wait?" roared Handy. "What about this minstrel show? Have we got to chuck it up? Why shouldn't we buy some costumes, and give a show on the beach? Why, in that way, we can earn enough money to pay all our expenses. Go to different places, and give different shows. We shall have our faces black, so nobody will know who we are. And think of the tin we can grab!"

"It wouldn't work—we should be chased off every beach we got to," said Pitt gravely.

"Life wouldn't be worth living. Of course, if you agreed to go down with the collecting box, instead of singing, the scheme might work. How would that be, Handy? We make you the money-taker!"

Handforth didn't agree. Indeed, according to his statements, he had an idea that if he fell out of the performance, the performance itself would collapse. But everybody decided that the idea was good.

Nobody could quite understand it—they wanted to know where Handforth had stolen the scheme from. They couldn't realise that he had thought of it himself. Handy's ideas were generally of the wild and woolly variety.

There was a good deal of talk, and it was finally agreed that at least sixteen of us should go. Archie had bought four caravans, and so we should be quite comfortable, and with plenty of room. Four fellows in a caravan would not be overcrowding.

Archie had done the thing thoroughly. He was paying extra heavy rates in order to have the vans completely fitted up in the course of a few days. A whole army of workmen were engaged on the task. It was an expensive job, but this was of no importance to Archie. He had a lot more money than he knew what to do with.

It seemed that our Whitsun holiday was to be unusually interesting.

CHAPTER IV.

WHERE MY CARAVAN HAS RESTED!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE looked rather worried.

"Well, Phipps, here we are!" he observed. "I mean to say, 'tis morning! In other words, to-day we buzz forth into the unknown! The jolly old school breaks up, and we scatter forth in the direction of the four winds. Of course, there might be more than four winds, but you know what I mean."

"Quite so, sir," said Phipps.

"We're on the brink of the holidays," pursued Archie. "Instead of going home, I shall set forth upon an unknown expedition. I shall trust myself to fate, and venture upon the wide highway. And the point which concerns me, Phipps, is a knotty one. What, I mean to say, about you?"

"I, sir?"

"Absolutely," said Archie. "The old brain has been pondering for some considerable time. How shall I proceed to exist without you whizzing about, here and there? How can I go through life without your soothing presence?"

"I have no doubt, sir, that you will be able to get along quite nicely," said Phipps. "I shall be most grateful for the short holiday, and I trust that you will not cause any alteration in the plan. I have made certain arrangements, and I should not like to change them——"

"Oh, absolutely not," interrupted Archie. "So you have decided to go away, what? Splendid, Phipps. In other words, splendid! Do you know, it didn't strike me that you might go away! It never occurred to the old bean!"

Archie and Phipps were in the former's luxurious study, in the Ancient House. Breakfast was over, and the school was humming with activity. For on this particular day all the boys of St. Frank's would leave, and go off for the holidays.

A week earlier Archie had told Phipps that he could take a holiday for himself, as he would not be required. Since then, Archie had been wondering how on earth he would be able to get along without his invaluable valet.

In fact, he had actually decided to take Phipps along with him. After all, it would be better to have the man on the spot. So he had broached the subject as gently as possible. But now that Phipps had mentioned the fact that he had made arrangements of his own, Archie dropped the whole idea.

Of course, he had had to stick to his word.

Phipps had to go—and that meant that Archie would be deprived of the man's services during the holidays. This was just as well, for Phipps would be rather in the way. He would spoil the general effect, in a way of speaking.

While Archie was talking, Phipps glanced out of the window.

"The caravans are arriving, sir," he remarked.

"What?" said Archie. "Oh, good! In fact, dashed good! Supposing we trickle forth and inspect the good work? What about it, Phipps? Shall we emerge?"

"Just as you wish, sir."

They left the study, and a few moments later they were in the lobby. Here, Handforth and Co. were engaged in a little argument. Church was holding his left ear in a tender fashion, and McClure had a handkerchief to his nose. When the chums of Study D argued, violence accompanied it. And it was generally Church and McClure who did all the suffering.

"Now, don't let me hear any more about it!" said Handforth grimly. "If I like to give you chaps a quid each, I'm going to give it to you! If you refuse again, I'll give you something that you won't forget!"

"I'm not likely to forget this for weeks!" growled McClure, inspecting his handkerchief. "My hat! I've lost about a pint!"

"Trouble?" inquired Archie, pausing.

"Of course there is—there's always trouble!" replied Handforth tartly. "If you had study chums like these, you'd go grey!"

"It rather strikes me, dear old lad, that they're the chappies to go grey!" said Archie mildly. "In fact, I sometimes expect to see silvery locks appearing in the heads of these laddies. However, we will not pursue

the subject. I observe that your fist is in close proximity. I rather think this is a time for discretion, eh, Phipps?"

"I imagine so, sir," said Phipps gravely.

"These silly fatheads refused to take a quid each," said Handforth. "I got a big remittance from my pater this morning—ten quid, in fact. I suppose I can give them money, if I like? The idiots refused it!"

This was Handforth to the life. He had got into the habit of punching his long suffering chums for anything and everything. And even when they hesitated to accept his generosity, they were knocked about again.

However, the argument ceased, for Archie mentioned that the caravans were in the Triangle. Pitt and De Valerie and several others came through the lobby just then—having spotted the arrivals through the study windows.

A whole crowd of fellows emerged into the Triangle.

"Fine!" said Reggie Pitt approvingly.

"My hat! Don't they look great?" said Tommy Watson.

"Rather!"

There was every reason for these remarks, for the four caravans in the Triangle were exceedingly pleasant to look upon. They were, of course, of quite a different type to the commonplace gipsy caravan. They were large, roomy, and each vehicle was supplied with a fine pair of horses. The harness was glittering, and the animals themselves were strong and healthy and of excellent breed.

As for the caravans, they were scarcely recognisable as the same vans which we had seen in the circus meadow, less than a week earlier. They were resplendent with new paint—gaily decorated and refined-looking.

And we were even more delighted when we entered them.

The interiors had been beautifully fitted. Clean linen, blankets, glassware, chinaware, cutlery—everything was brand, spanking new. There were neat little electric lamps, supplied from big storage batteries, cooking utensils of the most modern description—and, in fact, the general equipment left absolutely nothing to be desired.

"Why, it's almost too good to be believed!" declared Church. "It must have cost you a terrible amount of money, Archie."

"As a matter of fact, old lad, the bill for all this is being presented to the pater!" he explained blandly. "I spoke to the pater over the 'phone, and he told me to go ahead. So, you see, I went!"

"Great Scott! I should say you did!" said Pitt. "Your pater's a brick!"

"Not at all," declared Archie. "It simply means that he is overflowing with the good old yellow material. It doesn't make any difference to him, dear one. That's why I splashed somewhat. And, after all, the bally caravans can easily be sold when we've finished with them. Looking at it that way, the thing won't cost him much."

None of the juniors complained.

They had never expected to find such luxury waiting for them. They had anticipated a rough-and-ready sort of caravan tour. But this would be doing the thing in style.

Handforth suggested that we ought to have motors, instead of horses, but Pitt shook his head.

"My dear chap, that would take the whole charm away," he declared. "Motors are fine in their place—when you want to get anywhere quickly. But there's nothing to compare with horses for a caravan. We simply go jogging along, at peace with all the world. There's something fine in the idea. Stinking petrol and dust would ruin everything."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie.

Handforth sniffed.

"Oh, of course—you're bound to disagree!" he said. "I didn't expect anything else! Still, on the whole, I'm not grumbling. I'll drive the first van, and I vote that we get away as soon as possible. We ought to be able to camp somewhere near Blackpool y to-night."

"Blackpool!" yelled Pitt.

"Yes!"

"You—you fathead!" said Pitt, grinning. "Blackpool's up north—about two hundred and fifty miles away! The horses look pretty good, but I don't think they're capable of that!"

"Oh, well, then—Ilfracombe will do!" said Handforth.

He was decidedly groggy in his geography, or he would have known that Ilfracombe, too, was out of the question. The scheme was to go along the south coast. It didn't matter where we got by nightfall, either. We should simply choose a good camping ground, and stay there. That was the whole beauty of the trip. We could stay just where we fancied.

Nobody thought much about the weather that morning. The fellows who were going on the caravan tour were envied by all the others—although the others tried not to let this be known.

For days past the juniors had been expressing the hope that the weather would turn out fine for the start. It was fine—in a fashion. A fresh wind was blowing, and only a few clouds were in the sky. But I had observed that the mercury was falling rather nastily in the barometer. I had an idea that the afternoon would bring more clouds, and rain. However, it was no good anticipating trouble. I mentioned nothing to the others.

It was noon before we started.

The juniors had to get their clothing to-

(Continued on page 15.)

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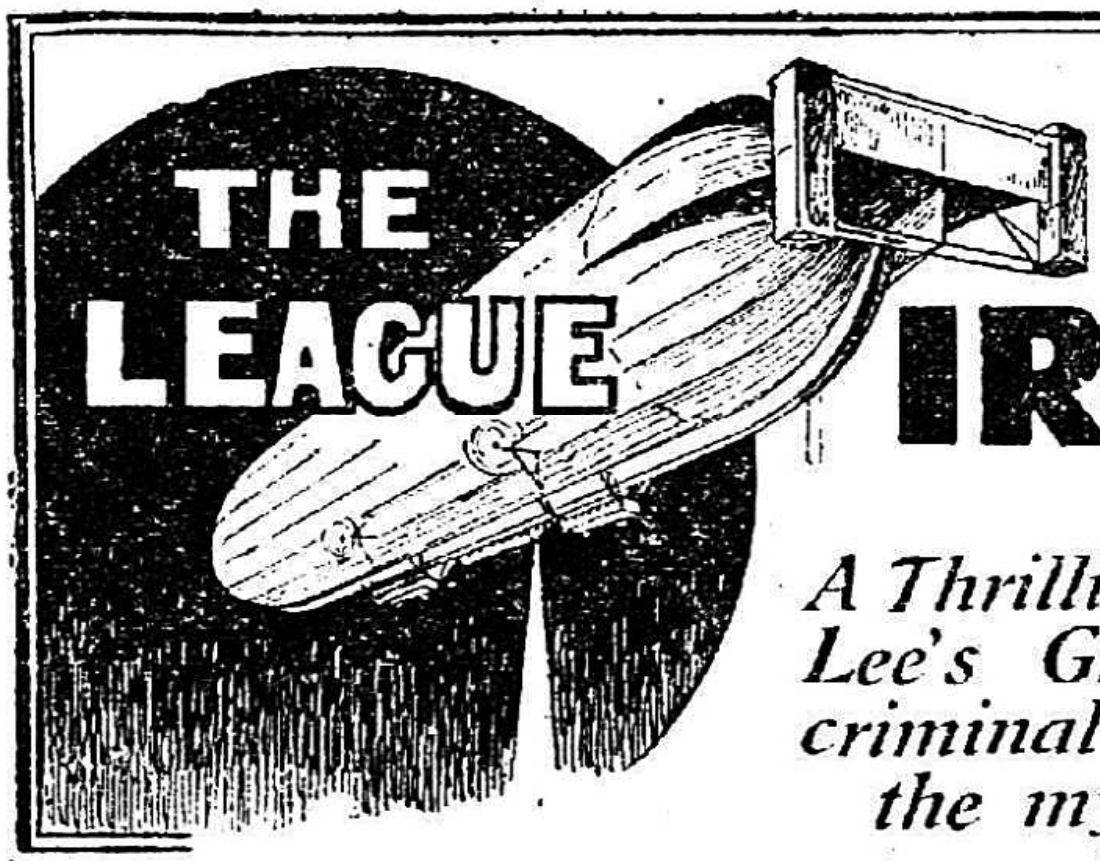


OF THE IRON HAND

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.

In order to facilitate their daring coups, the league steals a marvellous new airship invented by Donald Stuart, whom they kidnap in order to learn the secrets of the airship's mechanism. But Stuart will not divulge. Threats and torture are useless. Number One then kidnaps Stuart's young brother, Jack, and Nipper from St. Frank's College. With these two youngsters as hostages, he hopes to bend Donald Stuart to his will and to threaten Nelson Lee to abstain from interfering with the activities of the League.

(Now read on.)

NUMBER ONE'S THREAT TO NELSON LEE.

"AND where do I come in?" inquired Nipper. Why have you kidnapped me?"

"As a hostage for your guardian's good behaviour," said Herman. "For some time past Mr. Lee has given us a good deal of trouble, and I wish to put a stop to his meddlesome activities. Before I go to bed to-night I am going to write him and tell him you are in my power. I am going to tell him that so long as he leaves us alone you will be well treated and no harm will come to you; but if he persists in annoying us he will be the means of causing you a terrible amount of suffering, and may even compel us to kill you."

"How very cheerful for me!" said Nipper.

"Oh, I don't think you have anything to fear!" said Herman. "Mr. Lee is too fond of you to do anything that would give you pain; and after he has received my letter I have little doubt that he will retire from the contest and leave us in peace."

"I don't think he will," said Nipper. "But suppose he does, how long do you intend to keep me here?"

Herman shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a question which time alone can answer," he said "Meanwhile, I want you

both to understand that you have nothing to be afraid of—at present, at any rate. Of course, if you are stupid enough to give us any trouble you will have to be punished; but so long as you behave in a sensible fashion you will be well treated, well fed, and well supplied with books, papers, games, or anything else in reason that you want. And now I think I hear the butler returning with your suppers."

He unlocked the door and admitted Barker, who bore a tray of provisions, and who was followed by three of the servants, carrying another bed, a supply of bedclothes, and a basket-chair.

"I must leave you now," said Herman to Barker. "Stay with them until they have had their supper; then clear away the things, and make them comfortable for the night, and remain with them until I return."

Leaving Barker in charge of the boys, he made his way down to the library, where he typed the following ultimatum to Nelson Lee:

"Nipper is our prisoner. So long as you leave us alone no harm shall come to him; but if you take any further steps against the League of the Iron Hand I will inflict such tortures on the boy as you have never dreamed of. I enclose a letter from you to him, which I found in one of his pockets, and which will convince you that I am not bluffing, and that the boy is really in my power.—NUMBER ONE."

Having sealed up the two letters in an envelope, and having addressed it to Nelson Lee at his rooms in Gray's Inn Road, he rang the bell and sent for Wilkinson.

"Here is the letter of which I spoke," he said. "As you see, it is for Nelson Lee. I particularly wish him to receive it by the first post in the morning, and at the same time, of course, I do not wish him to know from what part of the country it comes. So take it up to London, post it at the G.P.O., and then come back here."

Wilkinson took the letter, saluted, and retired. Ten minutes later the car was flying Londonwards in the teeth of the pelting rain, and Herman, well satisfied with his day's work, was regaling himself on chicken and champagne.

A BID FOR FREEDOM.

WHEN Herman had finished his supper, he chatted with Cundle for three-quarters of an hour; and then, about midnight, he paid another visit to Nipper and Jack.

By that time the two boys had partly undressed and had tumbled into their respective beds. Barker, in accordance with his instructions, was still mounting guard, and was seated at the table, reading the evening paper.

"All right?" queried Herman, when Barker had unlocked the door and let him in.

"Yes, sir," answered Barker. "They're asleep, I think. Anyhow, they haven't moved or spoken for the last half-hour. Shall I wake 'em?"

"Oh, dear no!" said Herman. "I've said all I want to say to them for the present. I only looked in to see if they were all right. I'm going to bed now."

"Do you wish anybody to sit up with them all night?"

"Not at all! There's no necessity for that. When once the door is locked on them, they're as safe as if they were in gaol."

"Then I may go to bed now?"

"Certainly. You will lock and bolt the door on the outside, of course, and you'd better give me the key, in case I wish to visit them before you're up in the morning."

Barker accordingly transferred the key from the inside to the outside of the door; then he and Herman left the room, first switching off the electric light, and closing and locking the door behind them.

Nipper—who had only been pretending to be asleep—waited until their footsteps had died away; then he slipped out of bed and stole over to Jack's side. Jack was also awake, and for upwards of an hour, conversing in whispers, the two chums discussed the happenings of the day and the probable course of future events.

"As Number One says," said Nipper, "I don't think we have much to fear so far as our precious skins are concerned. Your brother is sure to mend the airship rather than let these ruffians torture you; and my guv'nor, I know, will never lift a finger against the league so long as I am in their power. But think what a glorious spoof it would be for the league if we could escape? We could bring the police here, nab Number One, rescue your brother, and recover his airship."

"It would be ripping!" said Jack, his eyes sparkling at the thought. "But what's the use of talking about it? We can't escape."

"That remains to be proved," said Nipper doggedly. "I wonder if it would be safe to turn on the light for a minute or two?"

"What for?" asked Jack.

"To reconnoitre our position," said Nipper. "It must be past one now, so it's pretty certain everybody in the house except ourselves is fast asleep. Anyhow, I'll risk it."

He switched on the electric light again, and examined the door.

"There's no way out for us here, sonny!" he said, shaking his head. "Nothing less than a battering-ram would break this open, and even if I could pick the lock, the door's bolted on the outside. Let's try the window."

He examined the window, and then discovered for the first time that it was protected by iron bars.

"That's off, too!" he exclaimed, with a disappointed sigh. "I'm afraid you're right, old man. We are fairly caged. Unless,"

he added, as a sudden thought occurred to him—"unless we climb up the chimney. Let's explore."

He glided across to the empty grate, struck a match, and gazed up the flue.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, in a low, excited voice. "We're in luck! This is one of those old-fashioned chimneys with a brick sticking out at intervals all the way up the inside—like steps, you know—for the chimney-sweep's boy to climb up by. It'll be as easy as eating pie to climb up. Are you game to try?"

"I'm game for anything," said Jack.

The two boys accordingly donned their clothes, and five minutes later, after switching off the electric light, they were swarming up the flue like a couple of old-time chimney-sweeps.

Alas for their hopes! On reaching the top of the chimney they found their further progress barred by an iron chimney-pot, surmounted by a revolving cowl.

Bitterly disappointed, they started to retrace their steps. Unknown to them, however, there were several flues leading into and out of this particular chimney, and by some means or other they missed their way. In other words, when at last they crawled out of the grate, at the bottom of the flue, they found themselves not in the room they had just left, but in an empty attic, similar to that in which Donald Stuart was imprisoned, but lighted by a much larger skylight in the roof.

"This isn't our room!" gasped Nipper, after groping about in the darkness. "We've taken a wrong turn, and come down somewhere else. Let's have a light on the scene."

Trembling with excitement, he struck a match by rubbing it on his trousers.

"Gee-whizz! What a sight you are!" he grinned, gazing at Jack, who was grimed with soot from head to toe.

He tried to open the door, but discovered, to his chagrin, that it was locked on the outside.

"There's only one thing to be done," he said, after a moment's reflection. "We must climb out through that skylight and crawl down the roof, and trust to luck to find some way of getting down to the ground. Give us a back!"

Climbing on Jack's back, he opened the skylight and hauled himself out on to the roof. Then, lowering an arm through the skylight, he grasped Jack's upraised hand and hauled him after him.

The night was intensely dark, and rain was falling in torrents. Ever and anon the growl of distant thunder reverberated through the air, and whilst the two were crawling down the wet and slippery slates, a sudden blinding flash of lightning lit up the countryside for miles around.

"Now I know where we are!" exclaimed Nipper triumphantly. "Did you see that peculiar-looking spire away to the left when the lightning blazed out?"

"Yes," said Jack.

"That's Rycroft Church," said Nipper. "Dick and I were here last holidays, and the vicar showed us round that church. This must be Rycroft Hall. By Jove, yes!" he added excitedly. "I remember now. We passed this place on our way to the church, and the vicar told us it belonged to Mr. Willoughby Fairfax. And Willoughby Fairfax is one of the men the guv'nor suspects of being a member of the League of the Iron Hand. This is Rycroft Hall, for a thousand pounds!"

By this time they had reached the edge of the roof, and after creeping along the inside of the parapet for ten or fifteen yards they discovered an iron spouting-pipe, which led down from the roof and presumably ended on a level with the ground.

"It won't be easy to swarm down this pipe," said Nipper. "I think I can do it, and I mean to tray; but don't you think you'd better stay here till I return with the police?"

"No fear!" said Jack stoutly. "If you can do it, I can."

After a further attempt to persuade Jack to remain behind, Nipper lowered himself over the parapet and began to swarm down the pipe. When he had descended a few feet, Jack followed his example; then, inch by inch, the two boys cautiously climbed down towards the ground.

Midway between the roof and the ground the pipe ran past a bedroom window; and as Nipper was passing this window, with Jack's feet almost touching his head, the window was suddenly thrown open and a man leaned out.

It was Paul Herman! The peal of thunder which had followed the lightning-flash had roused him from his sleep, and a moment or two later he had heard a series of suspicious sounds outside his bedroom window. He had instantly leaped out of bed and opened the window, just in time to see Nipper's head disappearing in the darkness.

With a ringing shout of alarm, Herman shot out his hands, and made a grab at Nipper's coat-collar. For one brief instant his fingers clutched the collar; then Nipper adroitly wrenched himself free and hurriedly resumed his perilous descent.

"Guards! Help! Help!" yelled Herman, at the top of his voice. "One of our prisoners is——"

The sentence ended in a startled gasp, for at that moment his eyes fell on Jack, who was clinging to the pipe at the side of the window.

Quick as thought, he flung out his hand and seized Jack by the arm. And the next instant, as Nipper dropped safely to the ground, Herman dragged Jack through the open window, and flung him, half-fainting, upon the bed.

For a moment Nipper hesitated how to act, for his chivalrous nature rebelled

against the idea of running away and leaving Jack behind, whilst his common sense told him that he could not possibly do any good by remaining where he was.

"It won't help Jack if I'm collared, too," he mused. "On the other hand, if I can get clear away from here, I can come back in an hour or so with a party of police and villagers, and rescue both Jack and his brother."

Having arrived at this decision, Nipper pressed his elbows to his sides and dashed away, through the darkness and the rain, in the direction of the gates.

In the meantime, however, the sentries who were posted every night at various points around the house had heard Paul Herman's shout of alarm, and as Nipper darted round the corner of the house he almost ran into the arms of two of these men, each of whom had a revolver in his hand.

"Here he is!" yelled one of the men, levelling his weapon. "Stand, or I fire!"

THE STRUGGLE ON THE BRIDGE.

INSTEAD of obeying the command, Nipper swerved to the right, in the direction of the north-east corner of the extensive grounds which surrounded the Hall. After firing a couple of fruitless shots, the two men scurried after him; but at every stride he increased his lead, and he was just congratulating himself that he had given them the slip, when he was horrified to perceive another sentry right ahead of him.

Again he tacked, and yet again, as another sentry hove in sight; and at last, after a quarter of an hour's breathless running, first in one direction and then in another, he succeeded in shaking all his pursuers off.

Unfortunately, he had changed his course so often that he had completely lost his bearings. He knew that he was still in the grounds of Rycroft Hall, but how far he was from the house, or in which direction the village lay, he had not the remotest notion.

"I'm safe for the present, anyhow," he muttered to himself. "If I leave this spot, it's an even chance I'll walk into the arms of Number One and his crew. I'd better stay here till it begins to grow light, and then steal away to the village."

With this object in view, he selected the driest place he could find, at the back of a clump of bushes, and squatted down. For another quarter of an hour the hissing of the rain was the only sound that broke the silence; then suddenly a confused murmur of voices fell on his ears, whilst at the same instant a loud, deep-throated bay reverberated through the darkness.

"A bloodhound!" gasped Nipper, leaping to his feet as if he had been shot.

He was right. After Paul Herman had recaptured Jack, and had handed him over to the care of the servants, he hurriedly dressed and rushed downstairs. On hearing from the sentries that Nipper had given them the slip, he stormed and raved like a madman, till Barker arrived on the scene and ventured to remind him that Fairfax was the owner of a well-known prize-winning bloodhound, which was then in one of the kennels in the stableyard.

"By Jove, yes! I'd forgotten that!" said Herman, in a relieved voice. "Fetch the dog at once, and take him round to the foot of the spouting-pipe that runs down past my bedroom window. I'll join you there in a couple of minutes."

Whilst Barker and the sentries were carrying out his orders, he ran upstairs to the room in which Nipper and Jack had been imprisoned. After a brief search he discovered Nipper's cap, armed with which he made his way to the foot of the pipe down which the two boys had swarmed.

Barker and four of the sentries were already there with the bloodhound, which Barker held in leash by means of a light steel chain attached to the animal's collar.

"Smell this, old man!" said Herman, holding Nipper's cap an inch or two from the bloodhound's snout. "Now seek him!"

For a second or two the bloodhound sniffed around on the ground; then, with a low-toned yelp which told that he had picked up the scent, he dashed away with a suddenness that all but dragged the chain out of Barker's hand.

"Confound it! Why didn't we think of bringing a lantern?" growled Herman, as he and his companions kept pace with the dog, and ever and anon splashed into a puddle or stumbled over a fallen branch.

"There are several in there," said Barker, jerking his thumb towards the shed which had been built for the accommodation of the stolen airship, and which they were then in the act of passing. "Shall I hold the hound back for a minute while one of these men goes for a lantern?"

"Yes," said Herman, pulling up. "He'd better bring one for each of us while he's about it."

A brief halt was accordingly made whilst one of the sentries ran into the shed and returned with half a dozen lighted lanterns. The hunt was then resumed, and ten minutes later, after zig-zagging across the grounds, first in one direction and then in another, the bloodhound suddenly threw up his massive head and uttered a triumphant bay—by which, one may suppose, he meant to intimate that his quarry was near at hand.

This was the bay which Nipper heard and which rudely dispelled his dreams of safety. As described, he leaped to his feet, and even as he did so a row of twinkling lantern-lights flashed into view not fifty yards away.

In panic-stricken alarm, he spun round on his heel and dashed away at headlong speed in the opposite direction.

A chorus of yells from his pursuers

OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

Quick as thought, he flung out his hand and seized Jack by the arm. And the next instant, as Nipper dropped safely to the ground, Herman dragged Jack through the window, and flung him half fainting upon the bed.

announced that his flight had been discovered, and across the darkness he heard their cries of encouragement to the hound, heard the crackling of the undergrowth, heard the excited yelps of the dog as he strained at the leash in his eagerness to run his quarry down.

Fear leant wings to Nipper's feet, and for half a mile he more than held his own. Then, to his consternation, his further progress was blocked by the high stone wall which encircled the grounds of Rycroft Hall.

He tried to climb over the wall; but the effort proved a failure, and he was on the point of resigning himself to his fate, when his eyes fell on a gate in the wall, a few yards on his right.

He darted to the gate, vaulted over, and found himself on the turnpike road. In which direction the village lay he could not

tell, nor did he pause to speculate. He turned to the left and tore up the road with the speed of a hunted hare.

About two hundred yards beyond the gate, the road was carried over the River Rye by means of an old stone bridge. Owing to the rain, the river was very high, and long before Nipper reached the bridge he heard the sullen roar of the swollen stream as it rushed beneath it.

The sound inspired him with fresh hopes. If he could reach the bridge before his pursuers overtook him—if he could plunge into the river and allow it to carry him down-stream for a little way, he would throw the bloodhound off the scent, and his escape would be as good as accomplished.

Fired by this hope, he ran as he had never run before, and ultimately reached the bridge a hundred yards ahead of his human pursuers—but not of the bloodhound!

For the bloodhound had broken away from Barker's grasp whilst the latter was opening the gate, and had bolted up the road with a speed which left Herman and the others far behind.

And thus it came about that as Nipper staggered on to the bridge, panting and out of breath, a triumphant yelp fell on his ears, and on turning swiftly round he saw the bloodhound's gaping jaws and blazing eyes an arm's length from his face.

Nipper leapt aside as the animal sprang at him; then, ere it could turn, he pounced upon it from behind and fastened both hands in a vice-like grip on the great brute's throat. Then, with the swiftness of a lightning-flash, he jerked his hands upwards and backwards and dislocated the bloodhound's neck.

It was a trick he had learned from Nelson Lee, who had learned it in turn from a Japanese wrestler in Tokio. It was the first time Nipper had practised the trick, but if he had practised it a hundred times he could not have performed it more successfully. For even as he jerked up his hands a convulsive spasm shook the bloodhound's massive frame, and he collapsed in a lifeless heap at Nipper's feet.

All this happened in a tithe of the time it has taken to describe it. Brief as had been the struggle, however, it had given Nipper's pursuers time to draw near; and as he scrambled to his feet two of the sentries rushed on to the bridge, with Barker a dozen yards behind them, and Herman and the other two sentries bringing up the rear.

The foremost sentry dropped his lantern and sprang at Nipper. But Nipper was too quick for him. Nimbly eluding the fellow's outstretched hands, he dealt him a stinging blow behind the ear that sent him sprawling on the ground.

Scarcely had he done so ere the second sentry grabbed him by the arm. With an eel-like wriggle Nipper wrenched himself free and planted his fist between his would-be captor's eyes. As the fellow staggered back Nipper leaped on to the low stone parapet of the bridge, but just as he was about to dive into the river Barker dashed on to the bridge, with his lantern in one hand and his revolver in the other.

Crack!

Quick as thought Barker levelled his weapon and fired. The sharp crack of the revolver was followed by a choking cry from Nipper; and the next instant, as Herman and the other two sentries dashed on to the bridge, Nipper's arms dropped limply to his sides, his legs gave way beneath him, and he pitched head-foremost into the rushing stream.

"Did you hit him?" panted Herman, running up to Barker and speaking in an agitated and excited voice.

"Yes, sir," answered Barker.

"Where?"

"In the head, I think, sir."

"You think!" snarled Herman. "Good heavens, don't you know whether you hit him or not?"

"I do, sir!" said the sentry, whom Nipper had knocked down. "I was nearer than Barker. The bullet struck the lad just above the right ear, and it's a hundred to one he was dead before he fell into the river. Even if he was only stunned, he'll be drowned before he recovers consciousness."

Herman strode to the parapet and gazed into the black and swollen stream, which was rushing under the bridge with the force of a mountain torrent.

"I wish he'd fallen on this side of the parapet instead of into the river," he said. "I suppose there can't be any doubt that he is dead, but all the same I'd like to have been absolutely certain of the fact."

"Oh, he's dead, sure enough!" said Barker confidently. "You can make your mind quite easy on that point."

This, however, was just what Herman could not do. He could not "make his mind easy." On the contrary, the more he thought of what would happen if Nipper had escaped, the more uneasy he became.

"If by any miracle he has escaped," he muttered to himself, as he leaned his elbows on the parapet and stared at the river below, "it won't be many hours before the police are at Rycroft Hall. It isn't likely that he has escaped, but he may have, and I can't afford to take any risks. I'll have to go back to the Hall now, I suppose, but I won't stay there any longer than I can help. I'll invent some excuse for returning to London as soon as we reach the Hall, and I'll go into hiding for a day or two, until I know for certain whether the lad has escaped or not."

As the reader will observe, Paul Herman's uneasiness was solely on his own account. He cared nothing for the safety of the rest of the men at Rycroft Hall, though he knew, of course, that if Nipper had escaped, every one of these men would be arrested. So long as Paul Herman was not at the

Hall when the police arrived, that was all Paul Herman cared about.

"I wonder what excuse I can invent for leaving the Hall in a hurry?" he mused. "I told these fellows I intended to remain at the Hall until Stuart had repaired the airship. How can I explain my sudden change of plans without exciting their suspicions? If they guess I'm running away, and leaving them in the lurch, there'll be open mutiny. I must think out some scheme for getting away."

After throwing the carcase of the bloodhound into the river, the six men trudged back to the Hall. As they turned the corner of the house and made towards the front door, the hum of a car was heard, and a moment later its powerful headlights flashed into view as they came up the drive.

"It's Wilkinson, I expect," said Herman.

His surmise was correct; for when the car pulled up it was Wilkinson who stepped out.

"You're late," said Herman, with a frown. "I expected you back before this. Have you had a breakdown?"

"No, sir," was the reply; "but after I had posted your letter at the G.P.O., I ran down to Walworth Road to see if there was any news."

As the reader will remember, the head quarters of the League of the Iron Hand were situated in Walworth Road.

"Number Fifty-Seven arrived whilst I was there," continued Wilkinson, alluding to one of the "District Officers" of the League. "He wanted to know where you were, and when I told him you were here, he asked me to give you this note."

He pulled out a sealed envelope and handed it to Herman, who broke the seal and hastily perused the contents of the note. There was nothing either urgent or important in the note—which merely told him that a certain robbery had been successfully carried out—and he was about to thrust it into his pocket, when a sudden idea occurred to him.

Here was the very excuse he wanted—an excuse for leaving Rycroft Hall without exciting the suspicions of his confederates.

"This is most annoying!" he exclaimed, staring at the note and tapping the ground with his foot. "It upsets all my plans. I shall have to return to London at once."

"Now, sir?" asked Barker.

"At once," said Herman; "without a moment's delay."

"But I thought you were going to stay here until Mr. Stuart had mended his airship," said Barker.

"That was my intention," said Herman. "I intended to show young Stuart to his brother to-morrow morning, and to compel the latter to repair the airship by threatening to torture the lad. But this note, as I said, upsets all my plans. The airship will have to wait for the present. I must go back to London at once."

"And when will you return, sir?" asked Barker.

"That's more than I can say," said Herman. "I may be able to come back to-morrow, or I may be away for a week or more. Of one thing you may be certain—I shall come back as soon as ever I can, for I'm desperately anxious to have the airship repaired at the earliest possible moment."

He turned to Wilkinson.

"I think I'll run up to London in the car," he said. "It will be quicker than waiting for a train. Is there enough petrol in the tank to carry me to town?"

"Yes, sir," said Wilkinson. "Do you wish me to come with you?"

"Oh, no!" said Herman. "I can drive the car myself. Fetch me my macintosh and goggles, Barker."

He donned the things which Barker brought and stepped into the car.

"Don't tell Stuart that his young brother is here," he said, as he turned the car round. "Keep the two apart until I return, and see that they have everything that is necessary for their well-being—except their freedom, of course."

"If we wish to communicate with you," said Barker, "where shall we write or telegraph?"

Herman pretended not to hear the question, and ere Barker could repeat it the car shot forward, and was quickly lost to view.

THE WAITER AT THE CENTURION.

WHEN once Paul Herman was clear of Rycroft Hall he knew that he was safe for the present, even if Nipper had escaped. For the servants at the Hall only knew him as "Number One." They had not the remotest suspicion that he was Squire Mandeville, of Hartop Manor, and still less did they suspect that he was Paul Herman, the well-known millionaire of Curzon Street.

If, therefore, Nipper had escaped, and if he communicated with the police, and if the police arrested everybody at Rycroft Hall, Paul Herman would still be safe. For even if the servants at the Hall made a clean-breast of everything, they could not supply the smallest clue to Number One's identity or whereabouts.

But Herman's callous selfishness did not end here. In his anxiety to secure his own safety, in case Nipper had escaped, he was not only prepared to leave the servants at Rycroft Hall to their fate, but he was equally prepared to sacrifice one of his greatest friends and most trusty comrades.

As the reader knows, Rycroft Hall belonged to Willoughby Fairfax, who for some time past, by Herman's orders, had been living at the Centurion Club, in London.

If Nipper had escaped, and if the police made a raid on Rycroft Hall, they would speedily discover that Fairfax was a member of the League of the Iron Hand. And when

once they had discovered that fact they would naturally take steps to effect his immediate arrest.

In these circumstances it might have been thought that Herman would lose no time in warning Fairfax of his danger, and in advising him to go into hiding until it was known for certain whether Nipper had escaped or not. But Herman decided otherwise.

If he wished to warn Fairfax—so he argued to himself—there were only two courses open to him. He must either go to see Fairfax at the club as soon as he reached London, or he must write to him the moment he arrived at Curzon Street. And both these courses, in Herman's eyes, were fraught with too much danger to himself to be entertained.

"If Nipper has escaped," he muttered to himself, as the car sped Londonwards through the darkness and rain, "it will be known within a few hours that Fairfax is a member of the league. If it is afterwards known that I interviewed him at his club in the small hours of the morning, suspicion will be directed against myself. It will be known that I was a friend of his, and a watch will be set on my movements.

"On the other hand, if I write to him, my letter may fall into the hands of the police and may afterwards be traced to me. So I've really no choice in the matter. I don't like the idea of leaving Fairfax in the lurch, but, for my own sake, I mustn't go near him or communicate with him until I know for certain that Nipper is dead."

Having arrived at this decision, Paul Herman was shrewd enough to realise that it involved him in another danger. If Fairfax were arrested, and afterwards learned that Herman had left him in the lurch, it was quite possible that he would seek to revenge himself on his former leader by informing the police that Number One was Paul Herman, of Curzon Street. It was imperative, therefore, from Herman's point of view, that he should adopt some plan which would safeguard him from this danger. In other words, he must hide somewhere where even Fairfax's vengeance would be unable to reach him.

This was not a matter that presented any serious difficulty. For, as has been hinted in a previous chapter, Paul Herman had an alias which was unknown to a single member of the League of the Iron Hand.

The ordinary members of the league only knew him as a mysterious individual, of unknown address, who passed as Number One. The members of the Ruling Council—of whom only Fairfax now remained in England—knew that Number One was Paul Herman, of Curzon Street, and also Squire Mandeville, of Harton Manor. But no one but himself was aware that Number One, alias Paul Herman, alias Squire Mandeville, was also "Dom José de Silva."

Dom José, in the eyes of the public, was a wealthy Portugee, who occasionally visited London, and whose possessions included an island in the Azores and a fast turbine yacht. How and why Paul Herman had assumed this character will be fully explained in due course. For the present it is enough to say that his yacht, the San Miguel, was now lying in Plymouth Harbour, and that none of the crew had the smallest suspicion that Dom José da Silva was connected with the League of the Iron Hand.

Bearing these facts in mind, the reader can doubtless guess the plan which Herman had decided to adopt to ensure his safety from arrest, in case Nipper had escaped. To put the matter briefly, he had decided to disappear from London; to reappear at Plymouth as Dom José; to go for a short cruise in the San Miguel, and to keep away from England until it was safe for him to return.

How he carried out this plan need not be described at any length. On arriving at his house in Curzon Street in the early hours of Thursday morning, he stabled the car in the coach-house and let himself in without arousing the servants. Three-quarters of an hour later, disguised as Dom José da Silva, he left the house, walked to Paddington, caught the 5.30 train, and arrived at Plymouth on the stroke of noon.

Half an hour later he was aboard the yacht, and by two o'clock the San Miguel was steaming southwards, en route for Brest.

For the next seven days she cruised up and down the coast of France, between Brest and Bordeaux, putting into port each night in order that Herman might obtain a supply of the latest English papers. And then, at the end of the week, as it was evident from the papers that nothing further had been heard of Nipper, that Rycroft Hall had not been raided by the police, and that Fairfax had not been arrested, Paul Herman decided that his fears had been groundless, and that it was now quite safe for him to return to England.

The Case of the Escaped Convict!

The Adventures of Gordon Fox, Detective.

CHAPTER I.

LOST ON THE MOOR—THE MAN IN THE MIST—AN EASY CAPTURE.

GORDON FOX was utterly, absolutely lost, and he had been in that unpleasant state for not a few hours. Being in need of a rest and change of air, he had come down to Devon with his friend Jerry Larking, who had a little cottage on the north side of Dartmoor; and that morning, the day after his arrival, he had set off for a long tramp, with the above-mentioned result.

A thick mist had closed about him early in the afternoon, then a shower had driven him to shelter among the rocks, and now, after wandering about until twelve o'clock of the autumn night, he was hungry, thirsty and disgusted. Fatigue he did not feel, for he had a frame of iron. He rested his back against a clump of granite, placed his walking-stick beside him, and filled and lit his pipe. For a little time he smoked, seeking consolation from the fragrant tobacco. The air was breathlessly calm. He could hear not the slightest sound, and could see nothing for the mist that was about him like a pall. For miles and miles around him, for aught he knew to the contrary, stretched the bleak and desolate moorlands, inhabited only by a few half-wild ponies.

"Confound that fellow Larking!" he muttered. "Why hasn't he hunted me up instead of leaving me in the lurch like this? I wanted him to come along, but he preferred to go fishing. I may as well stop here until daylight, for there's no chance of——"

He paused, listening keenly. A faint noise had caught his ear, and he knew it to be the pad of footsteps on the spongy soil. They slowly approached; and then, out of the reeking mist, loomed the dark figure of a man. He started as the detective barred the way, and seemed on the point of taking to flight.

"I beg your pardon," said Gordon Fox; "but I am lost. I am stopping with a friend over towards Okehampton. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"You are six or seven miles from Okehampton," was the reply, spoken nervously, and in a voice that indicated refinement. "It lies to the right, over yonder."

"Is there no house or inn nearer than that anywhere on the moor?"

"None that I know of," said the man, whose features were invisible.

With that, without another word, he passed quickly on, and was soon lost to sight and hearing. The detective stared after him curiously for a moment.

"What can that chap be doing here, in the middle of Dartmoor?" he asked himself. "And how can he be so sure of his bearings, when I am utterly at fault? A gentleman, too! I'd swear to that!"

The mysterious stranger did not long interest Gordon Fox. He struck off in the indicated direction, though with scant hope of success; and when he had trudged on for more than an hour, and was under the unpleasant impression that he had been wandering in a circle, as lost men usually do, the mist suddenly rolled away, and he saw the stars shining above him.

He stopped, uncertain of his bearings; and with that a large dog rushed at him over a crest of rising ground, barking furiously. As he swung his stick, keeping the animal at bay, lanterns flashed on the ridge, revealing half a dozen men in uniform. They were warders from Dartmoor Prison, and the next instant they had surrounded the detective.

"We've got him!" cried one.

"No; it's the wrong man!" grumbled another.

"So it is!" assented the first speaker. "Why, I'm blessed if it isn't Mr. Gordon Fox!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"That's right, Hopkins," said the detective, recognising a warder whom he had known in the past. "What's the game?" he added. "An escaped convict, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. He made a bolt from the quarries this afternoon, just as the mist shut down, and we've been searching for him ever since."

"Who was it, Hopkins?"

"Alec Marsham," was the reply.

The detective was silent for a moment, recalling the circumstances of the case. Two years before Alec Marsham, a young man of good family, who had got into difficulties through cards and betting, had forged the name of a wealthy friend to a

bill for a large amount, and discounted the latter with a money-lender. Discovery and arrest had speedily followed, and the prisoner had received a stiff sentence, which caused the death of his wife a few weeks later.

"Marsham can't get away," said the warder, "for other parties are looking for him. You haven't seen anything of him, Mr. Fox?"

The dog ranged in a circle, sniffing here and there at the bushes; while Gordon Fox told how he came to be on the moor, and mentioned the stranger he had encountered.

"That was the convict, sir, no doubt," declared Hopkins. "He must have got hold of a change of clothing somewhere. As for his telling you what direction to go, I judge that he used to be familiar with——"

Just then the dog, which had returned, darted forward with a lusty yelp. Up leapt a man, not ten yards away, and took to his heels to one side. He tripped and fell, rose, and climbed up a flat boulder; and there he waited, with the hound barking below, until the warders had closed around him with levelled rifles.

"Come down, Marsham!" they bade sternly. "We've got you!"

The man quietly stepped to the ground, and held out his wrists for the irons. He still wore the hideous prison garb and cap, with their brown arrows. He was splashed with mud and water, and his face and hands were severely scratched.

"Take me back," he said. "I've had enough of it."

"That's what they all say," replied Hopkins in a jocular tone. "You look a bit thinner for your run," he added, "but it has put a bit of colour into your cheeks."

CHAPTER II.

WHAT GORDON FOX FOUND—AT THE ANGLER'S REST—THE LONDON EXPRESS.

A FEW moments later Jerry Larking came upon the scene, and upbraided the detective for being so careless as to lose his way. Gordon Fox explained to the newcomer what the presence of his companions meant, and then the warders marched their prisoner away.

"Well, we had better be getting on," said Jerry, when the two were alone. "What is it?"

"Give me the light."

Holding the lantern in front of him, Gordon Fox stepped to the spot where he had seen the convict jump up. Beginning here, he followed a dim and ragged impression that was stamped on the wet and mossy ground. It led him for thirty yards, and then ended in faint footprints.

"I thought so," he said. "From here the convict crawled on hands and knees to where we started just now, and he did so after I joined the warders."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the dog was ranging round in a circle that included our starting-point which proves that the man could not then have been lying at the place where he leapt to view. He made his way there afterwards, while I was talking to the party."

"And what is there curious about your discovery?" asked Larking.

"My dear fellow, are you blind? The convict must have seen the warders all the time. Why, then, did he stealthily approach so near to them? Why did he crawl? Why, indeed, did he not take to flight?"

"From what I can make out," replied Larking, "it looks as if the fellow wanted to be caught."

"What else?"

"And he worked the game cunningly, so the warders wouldn't know that he had lost his spirit, and was ready to go back."

"Yes, I certainly believe that the man wanted to be caught," said Gordon Fox, with a smile. "Come!" he added.

Very slowly the two followed the trail by which the convict had come over the rough surface of the moor. It was difficult to observe the footprints, even with the aid of the lantern; but they persevered for more than half a mile, and finally reached a little hollow among the rocks, with a high tor at one end of it. Here the soft ground was trampled.

Gordon Fox knelt down, playing the light, and after a brief examination his nimble fingers moved to and fro. Rising to his feet, he held out his open palm, in which were a number of short, bristly hairs of a brown hue.

"By jove! Somebody has clipped off a moustache!" exclaimed Larking. "What the deuce does this mean?"

Fox made a circuit outside the hollow, flashing the lantern; but when he rejoined his companion he did not tell him that he had discovered the footprints of two men who had approached the tor from different directions.

"Have you finished?" inquired Larking.

"Not yet; far from it. Is there an inn or a house anywhere yonder?"—pointing to the left.

"There is an inn—the Angler's Rest—seven or eight miles distant. It is the only house I know of between here and the Tavistock road."

"Well, I am going there," declared the detective.

Curious though he was, Larking was too tired to insist on accompanying his friend. The two parted, striding off in opposite directions, and, a tramp of several hours—he had the most rugged part of the moor to cross—brought Gordon Fox to the Angler's Rest in the early dawn of the September morning.

It was a little, old-fashioned house, standing in a lonely spot. The tap-room was already open, and the landlord, an elderly man, was smoking a pipe in the doorway.

"I believe a friend of mine is stopping

here," said the detective. "A gentleman who came down for the trout-fishing?"

"I've had only one lodger, sir," was the reply. "If you mean Mr. Philip Burke, I'm sorry to say he has gone."

"Gone?" said Gordon Fox. "Was that unexpected?"

"No; he spoke of leaving this morning. He went to bed early last night, and I called him at six o'clock. I gave him some breakfast, and then he started to walk to Tavistock, to catch the train for Plymouth."

"On the way to London?"

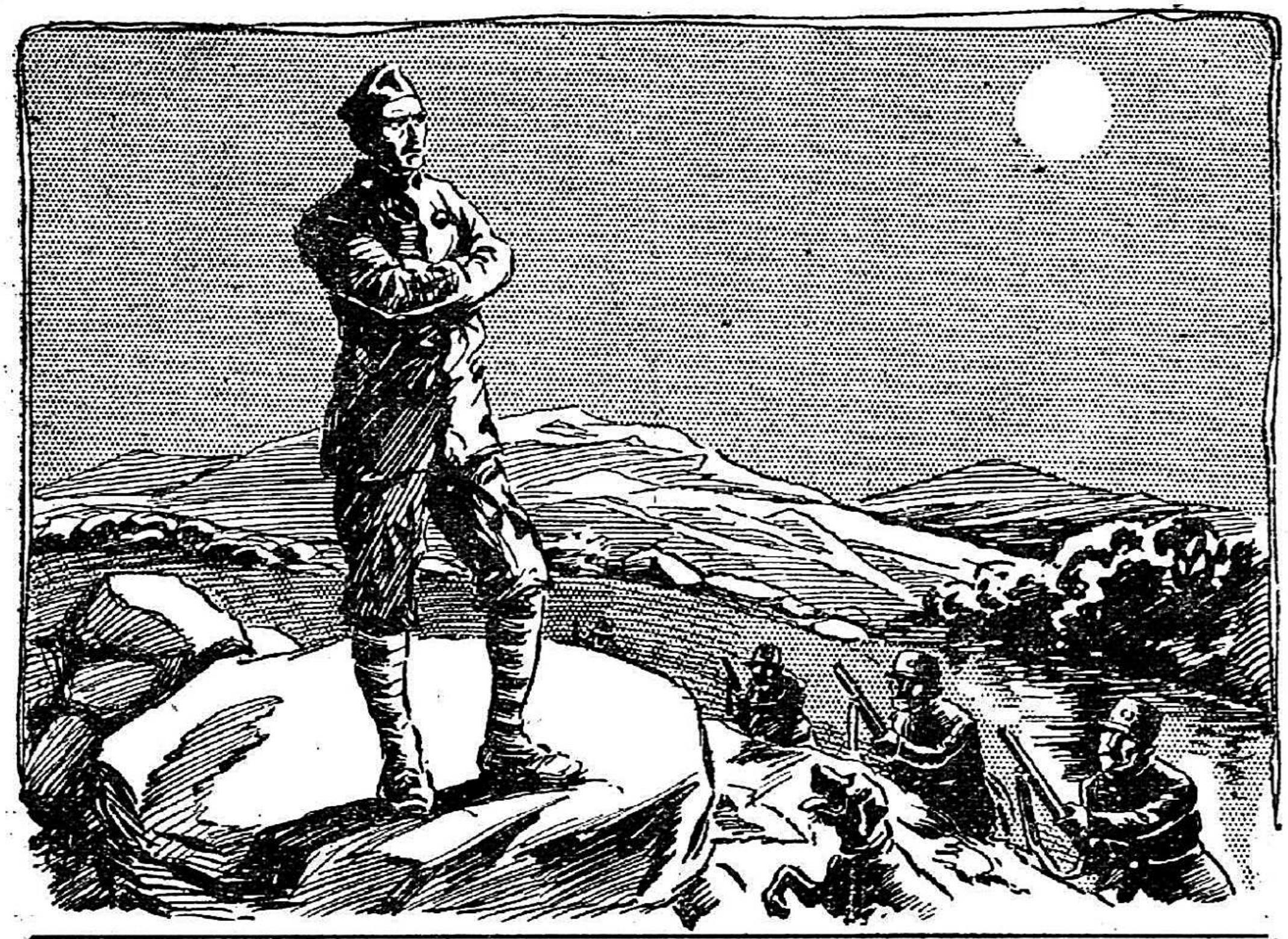
"I believe so."

CHAPTER III.

THE COTTAGE AT SHEPPERTON—THE CONVICT'S CONFESSION—GORDON FOX DECIDES.

THERE was an obstruction on the line, and, consequently, the express was late in arriving at Waterloo.

Mr. Burke and the detective broke their long fast in the station restaurant, at tables some distance apart, and at seven o'clock in the evening they were seated, in different carriages, in a train that was gliding out of the big terminus from one of the suburban platforms.



And there he waited, on the flat boulder, with the hound barking below, until the warders had closed round him with levelled rifles.

"Had he a bag with him?"

"Yes, sir; a small one."

"I suppose you have a railway time-book?" the detective inquired.

The landlord brought a "Bradshaw," and a search of the pages relieved Gordon Fox's mind. He found that the London express left Plymouth at ten o'clock and that he could reach the latter place at 9.30 by another train from Tavistock. Having time to spare, he ate a hearty breakfast, smoked a thoughtful pipe, and then walked to Tavistock and caught the train.

A little later he and Philip Burke were en route for London.

It was nearly eight o'clock, and the night was dark and windy, when the two men left the train at Shepperton station. They bore in opposite directions at first, but the detective soon turned round and furtively shadowed Philip Burke, who struck at a rapid pace down the straight and lonely road to the village.

If he looked back at all he did not see his pursuer, who was sheltered by the hedge. At the foot of the road he turned, entered a garden, and was admitted to a pretty cottage that stood near the river.

Gordon Fox paused by the gate.

"What had I better do?" he thought.

After brief hesitation he slipped into the

garden, and round to one end of the house. Here he found a side door, and it was not locked.

He stepped inside, and crept noiselessly along a narrow hall. On his left was a room, with the door slightly open, and as he drew near, pausing to listen, he heard a weak and childish voice

"I'm so glad you've come, father! I'm so glad! I'm goin' to get well now!"

"Of course you are, Jack!" a man's husky voice answered. "It would break my heart if you didn't!"

Gordon Fox peeped into the room, and saw a picture that he never forgot—a woman sitting in a chair, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and a man kneeling by the side of a cot-bed, clasping the thin hand of a little boy of seven or eight, who was propped up with pillows.

The detective gazed for a moment, until he could scarcely see. Then he pushed the door partly open.

"I want a word with you," he said quietly—"a word in private. Be careful! Don't alarm the child!"

The woman half rose, stifling a scream, and fell back. The man turned as grey as ashes.

"All right," he replied, with forced calmness. "Don't worry, Jack," he added. "I'll come back to you."

With that he stepped from the room, closed the door, and led the detective to the front hall, where a lamp was burning.

"I know you?" he said. "I remember your face! You are Gordon Fox!"

"And you are Alec Marsham! I have followed you from Dartmoor."

"And my brother? Have they discovered ——"

"Your brother?" exclaimed Gordon Fox, with sudden intuition. "No; he is playing his part. None can suspect him!"

"But you won't take me back, Mr. Fox—not yet?" pleaded the convict. "You can't be so cruel! Listen to me! Hear my story, and it will move your heart. You will give me a few days' grace, if you know what pity is!"

"Tell me all," bade Gordon Fox.

"Yes, I will tell you," replied Alec Marsham, "and when you have heard me, you won't refuse what I ask. You know my history, though you may not have been aware that I had a twin-brother, John, who was exactly like me in every respect. He was a bachelor, and I had a wife and child. When our father died, we divided the small estate, and the money I received tempted me into evil ways. I lost heavily at cards and by betting on horses, and in a mad moment I forged that bill, believing that I would be able to meet it before it came due. But the crime was accidentally discovered. I was arrested, and convicted, and the horror of it killed my wife. My child—my heart was wrapped up in him—was brought here to Shepperton by my wife's sister

"My punishment began, and the months dragged by. And then—then I learned that my little Jack had been seriously ill, and that his convalescence was very slow; that he was continually crying for his father; and that a visit from me would probably save his life. I had this in a letter from my brother, John, and in the same letter he arranged the plan that was carried out last night.

"There was only the one way. It was necessary for him to take my place, that I might travel to Shepperton without fear of recapture. He had already succeeded in bribing one of the warders, who connived at my escape yesterday afternoon, and did not fire at me when I made a dash into the mist.

"I went to the appointed place, and there, after midnight, I was joined by my brother, who had previously had his hair cropped, and was wearing a wig. We exchanged clothes, John putting on the prison dress, and shaving off his moustache. Then he set forth to meet the warders; while I, wearing the wig and false moustache, went to the Angler's Rest, climbed into my brother's room, and in the morning walked to Tavistock."

The wretched man ceased, and his face was convulsed with agony as he looked at the detective.

"That is all," he said. "Will you rob me of my boy—all that I have to care for except my noble brother? Can you be so hard-hearted?"

"What do you propose to do?" inquired Gordon Fox.

"I want to save little Jack," was the reply. "In a week, if I am with him, he will be out of danger. Give me until then, and I will return to Dartmoor, and have my brother released. That was my promise to him, and I swear the same to you. Do you doubt me?"

"No; I am sure that I can trust you. The path of the evil-doer is hard, and I feel that I cannot add to your misery. For a week you are safe."

"Heaven bless you!" cried the convict.

Gordon Fox pushed him gently aside, opened the door, and passed out into the night. There was moisture in his eyes, and a lump in his throat, as he turned up the dark road that led to the station.

. . . . . .

The detective's confidence was not misplaced. At the end of the week, when little Jack was on the certain way to recovery, Alec Marsham kept his word, and gave himself up. He was sent back to Dartmoor, and, after some delay—the authorities having decided not to prosecute—John Marsham was set free.

Two years later, when the prison doors opened for the convict, he went out to Australia with his son, to begin a new and an honest life.

THE END

(*Continued from page 14.*)

gether, their odds and ends, and a hundred and one things cropped up to delay us. But, at last, we were ready. All the members of the party, naturally, had obtained permission from home, so none of them were expected.

We were going on this holiday free and easy, without a care in the world, and we intended to thoroughly enjoy ourselves. We had made up our minds that nothing should alter that. The weather could do its worst, and we should still be cheerful.

The whole party, when we were ready, was made up in the following manner: Archie, Watson, Tregellis-West, Handforth, Church, McClure, Fatty Little, Pitt, Grey, De Valerie, Somerton, Bob Christine, Dick Goodwin, Singleton, Handforth minor, and myself.

In spite of Handforth's indignant protests, the leading van was in my charge, and the three other occupants of this van were Tregellis-West, Watson, and Archie Glenthorne.

As a concession, I allowed Handforth to drive the second caravan in the line—although I must admit that I had a few misgivings. His companions were Church and McClure and his young brother, Willy. By all appearances, Caravan No. 2 was likely to be a hotbed of trouble.

I had diplomatically suggested that Handforth and Co should be distributed throughout the four caravans, but Church and McClure wouldn't hear of it. Trouble or no trouble, they meant to stick to their leader.

We were just on the point of starting off when Edward Oswald Handforth stared rather aggressively at his minor—who had just appeared, as full of assurance as ever, gaily attired in white flannels and a blazer.

"Ready?" asked Willy. "Buck up, slow-coach!"

"Look here, my son! It's time you caught your train!" said Handforth darkly. "I thought you'd gone hours ago. What are you hanging about here for? You ought to have caught the morning express."

"What for?"

"To go home, of course!"

"But I'm not going home!" said Willy.

"Not going home!" repeated Handforth. "Fixed up some fatheaded idea for visiting one of your grubby pals, I suppose? All right—I don't care! You can go where you like—so long as you keep out of my way."

Willy grinned.

"That'll be rather difficult," he observed.

"Difficult?"

"Well, we shall both be in the same caravan," said Willy calmly.

Handforth burst into a yell.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he roared. "You—you young ass! Do you think you're coming with us on this tour? Why, you young idiot, if you were included in the list, I'd jolly well stand down! I wouldn't go!"

Willy chuckled.

"Sorry, old man—I didn't want to dish you out of your holiday," he remarked. "But it so happens that I'm going. It's all arranged—it's all fixed up. I shall be in this caravan with you and Church and McClure."

Handforth started.

"Look here, my lad!" he said curtly. "You're delaying everything! Clear off, before I biff you one! And don't try to be funny. Hi! I say, Archie! Here, a minute!"

Archie strolled up, resplendent in spotless flannels.

"Good!" he said. "Just upon ready—what?"

"What about my minor?" demanded Handforth. "The young fathead is trying to make out that he's been invited to come with this party. I want you to tell him point-blank that he's not wanted."

Archie looked rather distressed.

"I mean, dash it!" he said. "That is, dash it with considerable vigour. Brothers, don't you know! Kindred love, and all that kind of rot! I mean to say, somewhat lacking—what?"

"I'm not talking about love!" snapped Handforth. "Willy's not such a bad kid—in his place. Is he coming or not?"

"Well, as a matter of absolute fact, old boy, he is!"

Handforth staggered.

"He is!" he roared.

"Gadzooks!" gasped Archie. "Kindly assist me, laddies! The world has become dark—strange sounds buzz in my head. The master voice has somewhat dazed me, don't you know."

"You—you mean to say that Willy's coming on this trip?" stuttered Handforth. "You invited him?"

"Absolutely," replied Archie, recovering slightly. "You see, I thought the dear chappie would be frightfully lonely, and so I expressly extended the good old hand of hospitality."

"There you are!" said Willy, grinning. "What about it, Ted?"

"You—you scheming young bounder!" snapped Handforth. "You plotting little rotter! Doing all this behind my back, and springing out at the last moment! I sha'n't enjoy myself a bit now—you've ruined everything!"

Willy chuckled.

"Well, you see, I thought I'd better not mention it before—because I knew you'd go up into the air," he said. "It's always better to leave painful scenes until the last moment. You see, it's too late for you to cause any alteration now. I'm safe. My ticket's booked, and everything in the garden's lovely."

Handforth's face was a picture. When it came down to rock-bottom facts, he would do anything for his younger brother, but he always liked to give an impression that he hated the very sight of Willy. The latter would be the only Third-Former in the whole crowd, but he was such a cheery,

likeable youngster that all the fellows voted for his inclusion. Handforth had been the only one who had not been consulted.

"Of course, it's a bit thick," said Church, attempting to be diplomatic. "Willy oughtn't to be with us at all—he's only a fag, and therefore an outsider. Still, I suppose we shall have to put up with him——"

"Put up with him!" snapped Handforth, glaring.

"Well, I mean, he really oughtn't to come——"

"You—you selfish rotter!" said Handforth. "So you'd try to bar my young brother, would you?"

"I—I——" gasped Church.

"He's got just as much right to come as you have!" said Handforth curtly. "And if any of you other fellows try to say a word against him, I'll biff you! Now then, are we ready?"

It had suddenly struck Handforth that he was greatly honoured. For two members of the Handforth family were included in the party. This was decidedly a distinction. No other fellow could make the same boast.

Edward Oswald looked at his minor almost with approval.

"Providing you behave yourself, I'll let you come," he said condescendingly. "But don't forget—if you get cheeky, I'll take you in hand!"

"Yes, papa!" said Willy meekly.

He only dodged in the nick of time. Handforth couldn't chase him, because the leading caravan was just getting on the move. Quite a crowd of fellows had paused in the Triangle to see us off.

"Buck up, there, with Angelina!" said Handforth loudly. "Make her move!"

It was quite a chance remark, but from that moment onwards Caravan No. 1 was always referred to as Angelina. This, of course, led to the others being christened, too. No. 2 was called Emma, No. 3, Susie, and No. 4, Lizzie. Pitt was in charge of Susie, and Bob Christine drove Lizzie.

Each caravan was provided with a wide, comfortable seat in front—with cushions and everything. Here we could sit and take in the scenery as we jogged along. There was a kind of hood just over us, affording excellent protection from the sun. We could enter the caravans either from the front or the rear, and inside they were astonishingly roomy.

The beds were so constructed that they were like ship's bunks—upper and lower, two on each side. And during the daytime they were folded back so neatly that nobody would suspect their presence.

There were little folding tables, cupboards with mirror doors, racks containing crockery and glassware, bookshelves, etc. And each caravan was provided with a complete toilet apparatus—a folding wash-basin, a nickel tap, and a water-tank let into the panelling above. There were towel rails, soap racks, and everything that fancy could desire. And the seats—beautifully upholstered—had wide, roomy lockers beneath them. In these we kept all our clothing, clean linen, and other necessary articles of apparel.

We had no fixed programme in mind.

The idea was to jog along in any direction we chose. We had no set destination for any certain day. If we came upon a lane we took a fancy to, we would turn up it, and explore the country in that direction. If we hit a spot in mid-afternoon that looked particularly inviting for a camping-ground—well, we would stop there.

The whole holiday was to be a free-and-easy, go-as-you-please affair, and we didn't intend to be worried by any fixed schedule. With regard to food, we should buy things as we went along.

Fatty Little automatically became chef-in-chief. Each caravan was provided with cooking apparatus—but Fatty, who was in the last caravan of the line—Lizzie—had consented to cook for the whole party. In fact, he had insisted upon it. All he wanted was one or two assistants when it came to the actual mealtime. We should, of course, take washing-up duty, etc., in turn. And all four occupants of each caravan would share equally in looking after their own particular horses.

We passed through Bellton in style.

Of course, everybody in the village knew that we were coming, and it seemed that the whole population was on the look-out. The news that a party of us was setting off by caravan had passed round the village days ago. And we were stared at by old and young alike.

Having successfully passed through this ordeal, we took the road towards Caistowe. We didn't particularly want to pass through Bannington, and travel along the big main roads, with all their motor traffic. It would be far better to stick to the quiet country lanes.

Beyond Caistowe, there was much country that we had never explored, and here we would revel in the joys of finding our way. We reached Caistowe in mid-afternoon, and were quite delighted by the fact that we caused a sensation.

Everybody stared at us—the majority of the children, I think, believed that we were a portion of a travelling circus. A pause was made in the High Street, and Fatty Little descended upon the shops.

It required two assistants to bring out the groceries from one shop alone, and then a baker's man arrived with a basketful of loaves. Archie eyed the proceedings with mild astonishment.

"But, dash it all!" he protested. "I mean, we shall go through other places, sha'n't we? We're hardly setting forth into the wilderness? Surely, dear old lads, it's not necessary to lay in enough fodder for the whole dashed trip?"

"The whole trip!" I grinned. "My dear chap, this is Fatty's idea of to-day's supply.

In fact, he's worried—he's got an idea that we shall be hungry before the morning."

"My only sainted aunt!" murmured Archie. "It seems, dear old fruit, that we ought to have brought an extra caravan—a kind of food department, don't you know. In fact, we could do with a few field-kitchens—what?"

At last we were ready, and we started off again. And it must be admitted that our spirits were not quite so buoyant as they had been at the commencement of the trip. For rain was falling—slow, steady rain, which had a nasty kind of determination about it.

The sky had clouded over completely. Heavy banks of storm clouds were packing up over the entire sky. A chill wind was blowing, and our summery clothing felt somewhat inadequate. The temperature was more like March than May. The English climate was giving us one of those unpleasant jabs in the back for which it is famous.

Some of the fellows started singing—trying to kid themselves that they were as happy as larks on the wing. But after a while they petered out. Everybody got inside, except the drivers.

"This is rotten!" commented Tommy Watson gloomily. "What a dirty trick! Fancy the weather turning out like this! It might have kept fine on the first day, anyhow."

"Dear old boy, a bad beginnin' generally means a good finish," said Sir Montie cheerfully. "After all, a little rain won't do any harm."

"A little," said Tommy. "It looks like developing into a regular flood!"

He was not far wrong.

The rain fell steadier, and with added persistence. It fairly swished down upon the roof of our caravan. The other three were coming along in the rear, separated by about ten yards each.

Somebody suggested camping, but I could see no sense in this. We might just as well keep plodding on until darkness fell.

And, after all, we suffered no discomforts. Even the drivers were well protected. The others, being inside, were as comfortable as they could wish for. Archie improved the shining hour by partaking of a nap.

The roads, by this time, were streaming with water. The wind had sprung up into a half gale, and the trees were whipping about violently. The temperature had dropped so low that there was a feeling of winter in the air.

Under no circumstances could we say our trip was blessed with an auspicious beginning.

I was keeping my eye well open for a likely camping ground. The first favourable spot would be chosen. We weren't going to let darkness overtake us in such a downpour as this.

We had passed through two little villages, and now appeared to be in a dreary, deserted section of country. Well, over to our right lay the sea—although it was hidden from us by the intervening hills and the driving rain.

There appeared to be no houses or cottages—nothing but endless lanes, winding and twisting, already thick with mud. Occasionally we passed an old farm building, but there were practically no signs of human life.

It was growing quite dusk—a premature kind of dusk, for the evening was still young—when I noticed a particularly well-sheltered spot. It was just inside a meadow—a big, open meadow which was quite bare and deserted.

But just here a kind of steep, overhanging bank arose—so high that it nearly deserved the name of a cliff. And in this corner there was comparative peace. That high bank provided complete shelter from the blustering wind. There was ample space for the four caravans, and plenty of grazing ground for the horses. Furthermore, a particularly inviting stream ran near by, just on the other side of the road.

"This," I said, "is where we stop!"

"Good!" declared Tommy Watson. "By Jove, what a topping place!"

Everybody declared that my selection was good. And so it was a case of all hands to the pumps. Trousers were turned up, Macintoshes were donned, and we backed the caravans in a neat row, side by side—right up against the bank, where they lay in complete shelter. The horses were unharnessed, and generally attended to. Fatty Little was the only fellow who was excused this duty. He was busily preparing high tea.

Our most cherished wish was not to be fulfilled to-night. We had pictured ourselves sitting happily round the camp-fire after supper—swapping yarns, and lazily roasting chestnuts in the embers.

Nothing could have been more impossible. The rain was coming down in steady, unceasing sheets. The ground was spongy with moisture. In spite of our mackintoshes, we got half-soaked before the horses had received the attention that was due to them. Above all else, the animals had to be seen to first.

But at last we got inside our caravans.

But it was a miserable kind of party.

We couldn't get together. We had to sit in our respective caravans, and if we wished to talk with any of the other fellows, the only course was to yell. Even the evening meal was a bit of a failure. Fatty had prepared it all right, but by the time it had been divided up, and carried into the different vans, the tea was cold, and the eggs-and-bacon in a similar state.

"Oh, well, we mustn't grumble," I said philosophically. "It's better for the rain to come down now than later on. By the sound of it, it doesn't mean to stop until next year!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to

say, we can't bally well hear ourselves think—what?"

"It reminds me of a joke I heard," remarked Tommy Watson. "Must do something to keep our spirits up! What did Noah say when he heard the rain pattering on the roof?"

"Dear old tulip, I can't imagine!"

"Ark!" grinned Watson.

"Begad!" moaned Sir Montie. "How frightful! Kindly refrain, dear boy!"

Archie adjusted his monocle, and adjusted his feet.

"But, I mean to say," he ejaculated. "That's dashed good, don't you know! Pattering on the roof? Ark! Kindly excuse me, comrades! I must away!"

He plunged out of the caravan, quite careless of the rain. He dived into the welcome portals of the one next door. Handforth & Co. were just finishing their meal.

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "Come to borrow a spoon, or something?"

"Absolutely not!" replied Archie. "What, as it were, did Solomon say when—— No—no! Not at all! It wasn't Solomon! Dash it, I've forgotten the chappie's name!"

Handforth & Co. and Willy stared.

"Must be the rain!" said Willy. "First time I knew that rain turned a chap dotty!"

"Not at all!" said Archie hastily. "This is dashed awk.! What's the name of the dear old blighter who waltzed over the bally floods about five hundred and fifty-three thousand years ago?"

"Noah?" ventured Church.

"Absolutely!" said Archie, beaming. "A thousand thanks, dear old chappie! I mean to say, that's dashed brainy of you! Well, now for it! What, to be exact, did this laddie Noah say when he heard rain whizzing like anything upon the jolly old roof?"

"What did he say?" repeated Handforth, staring.

"Yes!"

"How the dickens should I know, fathead?"

"Listen!" said Archie impressively.

"What?"

"Listen!" repeated Archie. "Ha, ha! Bally good—what?"

Handforth & Co. regarded him blankly. The Genial Ass of the Remove was chuckling with intense amusement. But his listeners could not possibly understand what on earth he was trying to get at. Archie suddenly calmed down a trifle. He adjusted his monocle, and looked at the others inquiringly.

"It appears that the old brains are somewhat sluggish!" he observed. "I mean to say, you don't absolutely grab the joke! What did Noah say when he heard the rain splashing on the roof? Listen! That, I mean, is what Noah said!"

"Better humour him!" said McClure softly. "These are the first symptoms——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Willy. "Oh, you—you hopeless ass! That joke's as old as the whiskers on Mrs. Hake's cat! Noah didn't say listen—he said ark!"

Archie started.

"Gadzooks!" he gasped. "Dear old tulip, you're absolutely right! I must have got somewhat mixed! Ark! That's the bally word!"

Handforth looked at him witheringly.

"I'll give you just one second to get out!" he roared. "My only hat! Fancy having the nerve to come here with a mouldy joke like that!"

Archie fled, much confused. And from the next caravan we heard howls of laughter. They weren't amused at the aged joke; they were amused at the way Archie had recounted it.

"I say!" said Tommy suddenly. "What about getting permission to camp in this meadow. I suppose it'll be all right!"

"My dear ass, how on earth can we get permission?" I asked. "There isn't a house in sight. Of course, in the morning, we'll try to find out who the place belongs to, and we'll ask what the damage is. The owner can't charge much, even if he charges anything at all."

It was rather curious that we should discuss the subject just then, for only five minutes later we became aware of a bellow in a deep, gruff voice. Peering out of the window, I caught sight of a storm-lantern, and I could dimly see that it was being carried by a big, burly man. He was shouting at the top of his voice, above the hiss of the rain and the moan of the wind.

CHAPTER V.

ALL HANDS TO THE PUMPS!

"HI! Are ye all deaf?" The man with the storm-lantern had ploughed his way through the spongy turf right up to the steps of the caravan. I opened the door, and peered out. In this sheltered spot the wind was not driving very fiercely, and the lights from the caravan's interior showed the man up clearly. These lights, as I've explained, were electric, supplied from powerful storage batteries.

"Anything wrong?" I inquired.

"Ho!" said the man. "Look here, my lad, who's in charge of this 'ere circus?"

"It's not a circus," I explained. "We're just a holiday caravanning party. There's sixteen of us—fellows from St. Frank's College. Is anything the matter?"

The man glared.

"Schoolboys, hey!" he said harshly. "D'you think I want you dratted young himps runnin' loose over my property? I'll give ye just ten minutes to get out o' this medder!"

We looked at him rather grimly. The man was big and brutal-looking. His face was

blotchy, and he appeared to be slightly the worse for drink. Apparently he had been on his way home from one of the local hostelries, and he had seen the lights of our caravans in his meadow. His tone did not seem to be promising.

"There's no need to be unpleasant about it," I said quietly. "We're quite prepared to pay any reasonable rental. You see, we spotted this camping-place in the dusk, and it was raining so had, we——"

"I want to hear no excuses!" interrupted the man. "Git out!"

"But look here, Mister——"

"My name's Crabb—John Crabb, of Little Blanding!" interrupted the farmer. "I'm known round these here parts as a man who ain't to be trifled with. This medder is my property, and I ain't goin' to have no dratted schoolboys a-campin' on it. Clear off afore I lose my temper!"

By this time all the fellows from the other caravans had come out upon the little driving platforms, sheltered from the rain by the overhanging hoods. They looked on at the scene with indignation.

To say the least, it was absurdly unreasonable for Mr. Crabb to act in this way. We had done no harm to the meadow, and had offered to pay for the accommodation. It was quite clear that he was an acid, ill-tempered man, and his natural nastiness was made worse by the fact that he was under the influence of drink.

Reginald Pitt had donned his mackintosh, and he jumped down.

"I say, Mr. Crabb, be a sport, you know," he said persuasively. "You can't very well turn us off in this rainstorm. What's your price? We just want to stay here until the morning——"

"I'm not goin' to argue!" interrupted Mr. Crabb. "I'm a man of my word. You're going out of this medder. I don't want your money, neither! Boys are a durned nuisance, and I ain't havin' none of 'em on my property!"

There was something very final about his statement. We couldn't very well defy him—we were, in short, trespassing. But never for a moment had we believed that any man could be so utterly unreasonable—to say nothing of being inhospitable and un-British. It wasn't the kind of night to turn a dog out into.

Pitt looked up at me, as though for guidance.

"I suppose we shall have to find another camping place," I said resignedly. "But I think Mr Crabb might——"

"What!" roared Handforth, from the next caravan. "You're going to give in? You're going to let this—this sour old crab-apple order you about? Why, for two pins I'll biff you one!"

Pitt turned quickly to Mr. Crabb.

"Surely we can arrange it, Mr. Crabb?" he asked, in a final effort. "We can easily fix the price——"

"Durn you!" snarled Mr. Crabb fiercely.

The lighted window was suddenly flung open, and something appeared. We thought it was a head at first. As a matter of fact, it was, but it was covered by a clownish-looking sleeping-cap.

He was apparently not the kind of man to be argued with. In his left hand he carried the storm-lantern, but his right hand carried a heavy stick. He raised this, and brought it down upon Pitt's shoulders with such force that the junior staggered, and collapsed in the mud.

"I'll teach ye to argue with me!" shouted Mr. Crabb coarsely.

Pitt tried to rise, but he was in great pain. In any case, he had no time to take any action. For, with one accord, every one of us literally hurled ourselves at Mr. Crabb.

The four caravans emptied themselves of their human frieght, and Mr. Crabb was lifted high upon the surging flood. He raved and roared and cursed. But that brutal blow—so uncalled for—had roused us to a high pitch.

"Into the ditch with him!" roared Handforth.

"Absolutely!" gasped Archie.

"Let him have it!"

The ditch was quite near-by—as we knew. Mr. Crabb was flung into the air, and he described an almost perfect arc. Then he descended, head foremost, into the deep, muddy ditch.

Splash!

Mr. Crabb completely vanished beneath the thick, oozing mud. He reappeared after a moment, and proceeded to crawl out. His blustering, bullying attitude had vanished. He emerged from the ditch like a whipped cur.

"And don't forget, Mr. Crabb, that you asked for it!" I said grimly "We wouldn't stay in your meadow now, even if you begged us to! We're going to find another camping place!"

"Why, you ass——" began Handforth.

"My dear chap, we can't stay here now!" I said quietly. "We don't want to get on the wrong side of the law, and it's up to us to clear. Mr. Crabb asked for trouble, and he found it!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, he found a somewhat liquid quantity!"

Practically all the other fellows were in agreement with me. After what had happened, we could not remain on the farmer's property. And although it was still raining cats and dogs, and the wind was blustering with more force than ever, we immediately set about rounding up the horses.

Mr. Crabb, in the meantime, had crawled away, cursing under his breath. He apparently thought it very unwise to invite any further attacks. I had half an idea he was hovering near by, watching us harnessing the horses, and preparing for departure.

We simply didn't care. Mr. Crabb had not got more than he deserved.

Twenty minutes later, nearly soaked to the skin, and with mud almost up to our knees, we were ready to depart. The horses were harnessed, and we were about to leave our first camping ground, which had proved so unpleasant.

"The joys of caravanning!" said Pitt, with a grin.

"Oh, dry up!" growled Christine. "If you ask me, this trip is a frost!"

One or two others agreed with him. They could hardly be blamed for having this opinion, for our adventures had been the very opposite of joyous. And the weather seemed to have conspired deliberately against us.

In the same order as before we left the meadow. It was a somewhat difficult business, as the caravan wheels sunk deeply into the sodden ground. However, we were in the lane at last.

Then, with Angelina leading the way, we went onwards through the darkness, through the driving rain and the blustering wind. None of the juniors had gone inside; they all remained in front of the vans. They were wet through, and would be required to do their share later, when a new camping ground was found.

It would be absurd to change clothes now, and even Archie accepted the situation with philosophical calm. He had done his share of the work with just as much energy and cheerful willingness as anybody.

We had seen no more of Mr. Crabb, and were rather pleased to be out of that meadow. It was impossible to feel content in a place where one knows that one is not wanted.

It would be better to camp on the open roadside.

But we couldn't very well do this, because the lane was narrow, with no wide grass borders, as many lanes are provided with. The hedges rose steeply from the high banks on either side.

"Well, this is a lively kind of life—I don't think!" remarked Jack Grey. "I'd like to meet that chap Crabb again! How's your back, Reggie?"

"Sore!" replied Pitt. "My hat! If ever I come face to face with Crabb, I shall give myself the pleasure of punching him in the eye. I don't care if he slaughters me afterwards. I want the satisfaction of knocking him down!"

"You're not likely to get it!" I called out, having heard his words. "I don't suppose we shall ever see Mr. Crabb again. And this lane looks like going on for ever!"

"It's a long lane that hasn't any turning, dear old fruit!" said Archie wisely. "Not, of course, that that absolutely applies. I mean to say, as far as I can see, the jolly old lane is like a snake in a fit of convulsions! Turning and twisting like anything, this way and that way, and every other dashed away. However, if we persevere, I daresay we shall come to the end of it!"

"There's nothing else to do," I replied. "We can't turn back."

And so, for the next half-hour, we continued our way onwards, round curves, up hills and down hills; but still the lane seemed to go on. And then at length it widened out somewhat, and we suddenly came upon two forks, one road branching out to the left, and the other branching out to the right.

"Better toss up!" suggested Watson.

"No; we'll take the right-hand road," I said. "It looks wider, and it's all a matter of chance, anyway."

Owing to the falling rain, and the prevailing darkness, we could only see a few feet ahead of us. But we felt that our troubles would soon come to and end now. Of course, I'd been keeping my eyes open for a likely camping ground ever since we had started. But we had passed nothing but ploughed fields and meadows which looked altogether uninviting and unsuitable.

The character of this new lane began to change. And almost before we knew it, the hedges disappeared. And we found, upon

investigation, that we had driven on to a wide, rugged heath. Clumps of gorse grew beside the road, and the wind was whistling across the open space with much violence.

"Well, we can camp here if we like," I said. "Nobody will turn us off a heath, that's pretty certain. The only thing is, it's rather exposed. But we might go on for miles."

Watson was peering intently over towards the left.

"There seems to be a hollow down there," he said after a minute. "It dips down, you know. It ought to be more sheltered."

"We'll have a look, anyway," I said.

A halt was called, and Reggie Pitt and Bob Christine and I sallied off into the darkness to inspect the proposed camping ground, which, in all conscience, was poor enough. But we felt that anything would do until the morning—until we could see exactly where we were.

After the delightful visions we had had of sitting round the camp fire, this first night's experience was enough to dampen anybody's ardour. The majority of the fellows felt that caravanning was a mug's game.

Having gone over the heath for some distance, our eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness. We could just dimly see a hollow, with gently sloping grass leading down into it. We went down this slope for some distance, and then came to a halt.

"Just the spot!" declared Pitt. "It's sheltered from the wind, too. I vote we camp here. No sense in looking for another place."

We all agreed, and went back.

So the caravans, in single file, were turned off the road and taken across the heath itself. We went down into the hollow easily, with the brakes on. But at last we pulled up, and found that our best hopes were realised. Most of the wind was hurtling across the heath higher up, leaving us nicely sheltered in that comfortable hollow.

But, of course, we still had the pouring rain. I jumped down as an example to the others, intending to get busy unharnessing the steeds.

My feet sank deeply into the turf—in fact, I went in up to my ankles, and could hardly get myself free.

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated. "It's like a bog!"

"Must be the rain—caused the turf to become spongy," said Watson.

"Ass!" I snapped. "Who doesn't know that?"

As a matter of fact, I was a bit anxious. I had noticed that the caravan had moved sluggishly, and now I knew the reason. Lizzie and Emma and Susie were just in the rear, and they had come to a halt, too. I had turned my attention to them, and felt alarmed.

"Here—quick!" I shouted. "We shall have to get out of this as quickly as we can! The wheels are sinking!"

"Gadzooks!" said Archie. "How frightful!"

"Oh, rats! What does it matter?" grunted Handforth. "We can't sink far——"

"Can't we?" I interrupted. "Why, this ground's like a bog! If we don't get out now, while we've got the chance, we shall be absolutely stuck!"

Pitt and Christine agreed with me, and they immediately set about turning their own caravans. But we all found that it was too late. The horses themselves were now floundering helplessly in the soft, boggy ground.

I managed to get Angelina half round, but then I noticed that the off-side wheels were sinking deeply into the mire. Angelina, in fact, had assumed a most pronounced list to starboard.

And, at length, we were compelled to give up.

"Well, this is a fine how-do-you-do!" said Pitt, with a grimace.

"If you'd taken my advice, this wouldn't have happened!" put in Handforth. "Didn't I say that we ought to have kept on the road?"

"You might have said it—but nobody heard it!" I retorted. "In any case, it's no good talking now. The best thing we can do is to unharness some of the other horses, and attach them to the first caravan. We'll try to haul them out of the bog, one by one."

It was, indeed, the only course to pursue.

And this, too, was a failure.

For the horses could not move in the soft ground. Their feet sank in deeply, and they simply floundered helplessly. Before ten minutes had elapsed we knew well enough that the caravans were stranded.

The horses were all unharnessed, and taken up to the higher ground, where they could remain in safety—and where it was fairly solid underfoot. The caravans looked forlorn and sorrowful.

Turned this way and that, they were marooned in the bog, one or two of them sagging steeply sideways. And it was quite certain that the longer they were left, the deeper they would sink.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Watson.

"As far as I can see, there's only one way out of it," I replied. "There's bound to be a farm somewhere near by. We'd better go there—some of us—and get help."

"What kind of help?"

"What we mainly need is rope—plenty of rope," I replied. "And if we can get hold of some hefty cart-horses, all the better. It wouldn't take them long to haul the caravans out. About six of us had better go, and the others can remain here."

"Good!" said Pitt. "I'll come with you."

Handforth also insisted upon being in the party. Church and McClure and Tommy Watson were the others, and Bob Christine was left in charge of the caravans. He

urged us not to be too long. Fatty Little declared that he would be getting some more grub ready.

"This is rather like looking for a needle in a haystack," I remarked, as we trudged along the muddy road. "But I don't think we can do better than go back to those cross-roads, and try the other lane. We're bound to come to a farm-house sooner or later."

"Yes—if we walk all night!" said Handforth.

It was getting quite late by now—just after ten o'clock Such an hour is comparatively early in a big town—but here, in the heart of the rural country, it was very late, indeed.

And it was practically certain that even if we were lucky enough to find a farm-house, the occupants would all be in bed. For farmers are obliged to rise with the lark, and must needs retire early.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can see any reason to be miserable!" exclaimed Handforth. "Later on, we shall grin like the dickens over this adventure. We'll tell all the other chaps, and they'll shriek."

"That's generally the way," said Pitt, as we trudged on. "You don't really appreciate the humour of these experiences while they are happening. Afterwards, you begin to realise that they were quite entertaining."

"Exactly," said Handforth. "My argument. Now, I've got an idea. Why not be amused now? Why not see the fun of it to-night?"

"Good idea!" I declared. "It may be rather difficult to see, but we'll look for it. Let's start singing, to begin with. Might as well practice Auntie Susie's Picnic. I think you're still a bit rocky, Handy."

"Rocky?" snorted Handforth. "Me?"

"Well, you haven't quite got the chorus ——"

"Idiot!" snapped Handforth. "Just listen to this!"

At the top of his voice, he bawled out the verse and chorus. And when Handforth bawled at the top of his voice, the wind and the gale sounded like a mere murmur. The fact that he mixed the chorus with the verse, and the verse with the chorus, was of little or no importance.

"Let's all join in!" roared Pitt.

I just faintly heard his voice, sounding like a whisper in the distance—for it must be remembered that he had to break through Handforth's efforts. We all joined in, and the noise was rather tremendous.

"We shall probably see a report in the paper to-morrow that somebody's earthquake machines recorded something!" grinned Pitt, after the chorus was over. "As for the animals in this district, I expect they've all fled by now."

"Stop!" said Handforth abruptly. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"Can't you see a light over there?" Handforth pointed. This, as a matter of fact, was really unnecessary. For he had only come to a halt because he had seen me peering in the same direction. It was just a little scheme of his to make out that he had been the first to see the light.

"It's a house!" I said. "Success, brothers!"

"Of course it's a light—I spotted it hours ago," said Handforth. "Even if the place isn't a farm-house, we shall probably be able to learn some news."

We walked on a few yards further, and then came to a rutty waggon track which branched off the road at right angles. Proceeding up this narrow lane, where the mud was five or six inches deep, we at length swam into the courtyard of a farm-house. At least, we nearly swam. The water was swirling round us in vast puddles.

A light gleamed from one of the upper windows. It was an old-fashioned place—one of those low, thatched farm-houses that one comes across in many parts of rural England. In the gloom, it seemed to be slightly drunken, the north-east corner being a full yard out of the perpendicular.

"Hi!" I yelled. "Anybody at home?"

"Ahoy there!" bawled Handforth. "Wake up, somebody!"

His voice burst upon the farm-house like a clap of thunder. It rolled and reverberated under the eaves. Reggie Pitt afterwards said that he felt the ground shake. Tommy Watson said the windows rattled.

The result, however, was satisfactory—at least, we thought so at first.

The lighted window was suddenly flung open, and something appeared. We thought it was a head at first. As a matter of fact, it was, but it was covered by a clownish-looking sleeping cap.

"Who's that, drat ye?" growled a harsh voice.

"Jumping cats!" breathed Pitt. "It's old Crabb!"

We certainly hadn't expected this. We had found this farm-house quite by accident, and fate must have ordained that we should find the very dwelling that was occupied by Mr. Crabb. Our spirits fell. We were not likely to obtain much assistance from Mr. John Crabb.

"It's all right, Mr. Crabb—we're not going to bother you!" I shouted. "We've got stuck in a bog, and we wanted somebody to help us out—but we wouldn't ask you. You needn't worry—we're going!"

"Ye'd better!" shouted Mr. Crabb. "I hope the blamed caravans sink altogether! I'm goin' to tell the police about ye to-morrow! Trespassin' on a man's property as though you own it—I'll learn ye."

"Go and eat coke!" snorted McClure.

We turned back, and the window slammed.

"Well, that's that!" said Reggie. "Not very encouraging, eh? We've got to find another farmhouse—and the chances are that it's four or five miles away. And those caravans are sinking deeper and deeper all the time."

"We're in a fine pickle!" growled Handforth. "If I'd have known I wouldn't have come on this beastly trip!"

"I thought you said it was funny?" asked Church.

"Another word, my lad, and I'll chuck you in the duck pond!" said Handy grimly.

We were walking across the yard to the little lane which led to the road. And, suddenly, Reggie Pitt came to a halt. He stared straight in front of him, and we half paused, waiting.

"I wonder!" breathed Reggie. "By Jove! I wonder!"

Handforth gave a snort.

"Look at him—he's wondering!" he said sourly. "All he can do is to stand there in the rain, and wonder! You—you fathead! If you want to wonder, why can't you wait until——"

"It might be done!" said Pitt, absently.

I followed the direction of his gaze, and found that he was looking at a small traction engine which stood just within the yard, covered by a tarpaulin. In close proximity was a big pile of coal, and a huge water butt.

"Who understands engines?" asked Reggie.

"I do," I replied. "Don't you remember that beauty we once made—in the South Sea Islands? If we could get steam up in that mass of scrap iron, this thing will prove mere child's play."

"Well, what about it?" asked Pitt calmly. "I mean, it's absolutely asking to be used! Shall we get steam up?"

"You—you mean——" gasped Watson.

Handforth pushed him aside, and stared at the traction engine.

"By George!" he ejaculated. "Great pip! I've got an idea!"

"What!" said Pitt faintly.

"It just struck me!" went on Handforth, ignoring Reggie's ejaculation. "This thing's a traction engine! Why shouldn't we get steam up, take it down the road, and haul those caravans out of the mud?"

"What a marvellous idea!" said Pitt enthusiastically. "Look! There's a big windlass arrangement, fixed up, too! I think it's geared to the engine. Why, it'll be child's play to pull those caravans out with this thing."

"Just my wheeze!" said Handforth. "Now, look here, I expect you chaps to back me up! When I think of a good idea of this sort——"

"Yes, when you do, you'd better put a chalk mark somewhere." I interrupted. "It's Reggie's idea, and I don't approve of it."

"You don't approve of it?" repeated Reggie, staring.

"No."

"But what on earth——"

"As leader of the party, I can't give my sanction to the scheme," I said, shaking my head. "The steam engine isn't our property, and we've got absolutely no right to touch it——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "You can look at it that way if you like, but I vote we take the engine and rescue Angelina and Lizzie and Susie and Emma! If we cause any damage, we'll pay for it. We'll pay anything that's demanded—so I don't see how old Crab-apple can say much."

I did my best to dissuade the fellows, but it was quite hopeless. They had made up their minds, and they ignored me. Of course, I was looking at the thing squarely, and I didn't want the fellows to mar the beginning of this trip by getting us into unwelcome notoriety. And to let Handforth loose with a traction engine in the middle of the night was a very precarious proceeding.

Pitt and the others busied themselves about the engine. They were quite careless of the rain now—they didn't mind whether they got soaked through or not—for the simple reason that they were soaked through already.

And they were so engrossed in their work that they didn't notice that the rain ceased after about fifteen minutes. Glancing up, I could see that the sky was clearing somewhat.

The clouds, instead of being a solid mass, were breaking up, scudding across the heavens at a rapid speed, and giving a glimpse, now and again, of stars. And to my astonishment even the moon condescended to glimpse forth on one or two occasions. He appeared now and again, took a hasty look at the earth in a shamefaced kind of way, and then proceeded to dodge behind another cloud.

By this time a fire had been built in the furnace, and the boiler was well filled with water. At this period the moon decided that it would be wise to grow somewhat bolder. He showed himself for periods, sometimes lasting for more than a minute. And he shed a watery, silvery light upon the dripping countryside. Encouraged by these peeps, he finally emerged altogether. In other words, the clouds practically cleared away.

"Well, thank goodness the weather's clearing anyway!" I remarked. "And with the moon out, we can at least see what we're doing. Be careful with those gauges, Handy——"

"Fathead!" said Handforth. "I know what I'm doing!"

The fire had now been lit, and was roaring well. And as the other fellows were determined to proceed with the idea, I took charge. I did so in order to make certain that the boiler didn't burst.

It was some little time before the water boiled. And while we were waiting, we made everything ready for departure. We saw that the big hawser was in order, and that the working parts were thoroughly oiled. A glance had told me that the engine had

been used only the previous day. It was in perfect condition.

At last the safety valve gave a warning hiss, and I mounted upon the footplate. Handforth wanted to mount, too, but I firmly declined.

"Wait until afterwards!" I said. "We'll just see if she runs before we start off. Stand clear, you fellows."

"Look here——" began Handforth.

But he was yanked out of the way by Church and McClure. I seized the throttle lever, and jerked it slightly. The traction engine gave a gurgling kind of grunt, and moved slowly forward, puffing heavily. Working the clumsy steering gear with one hand, I brought the locomotive round in a half-circle. The juniors walked alongside, full of enthusiasm.

"Now we sha'n't be long!" said Tommy Watson.

"Hurrah!"

"Have we got to walk all the way?" roared Handforth. "Look here, I want a ride, you fathead——"

"All right—don't be impatient!" I said. "She's going fine. We shall be able to get those caravans out in next to no time."

I closed the throttle, and the engine came to a standstill. We had plenty of coal on board, so there was no fear of fuel shortage. And the juniors were just proceeding to climb up when an interruption came.

Mr. Crabb came rushing down the yard, excited and furious. He was attired in a dilapidated old dressing-gown, top boots, and the same sleeping-cap that we had seen before. His appearance was quite comical.

"Mercy on us!" he ejaculated. "What'll ye boys be doin' next? Leave that there engine alone! Why, drat ye, I'll have the law——"

"It's all right, Mr. Crabb—don't get excited," I put in. "We sha'n't do your engine any harm——"

"That engine ain't mine!" roared Mr. Crabb. "That engine be the property o' Mr. Ezra Biggs, of Edgemore! He hires it out, he do, an' I'm responsible! Leave it alone——"

"Mr. Ezra Biggs, eh?" I interrupted. "Good!"

"Do you know him?" inquired Pitt.

"No—but I know that Mr. Biggs is one of Colonel Glenthorne's tenants," I replied. "In fact, he's a kind of agent, and I'll bet anything you like that this engine really belongs to Archie's pater! Anyhow, we're safe enough, because Archie only needs to explain to Mr. Biggs, and it'll be all serene!"

"Good!"

"Then we're safe?"

"You bet we are!" I said. "Off we go!"

I was feeling perfectly comfortable now. The information which Mr. Crabb had so generously given us was of the most welcome description. Now I knew that the engine wasn't his property, I went forward with the scheme enthusiastically. Mr. Biggs wouldn't mind in the least, when he got to know. At all events, Archie would see that everything was made right.

"Stop!" shouted the farmer furiously. "Ye young rapscallions! I'll go and fetch the policeman, and have you all put under arrest! We'll see who's master! I ain't the kind o' man to be defied on my own property!"

But Mr. Crabb was defied.

I opened the throttle, all the other juniors piled on to the engine, and we went off in style.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE ROAD ONCE MORE.

"NOT a sign!" remarked De Valerie.

He was standing on the heath, just at the edge of the hollow. With him were Fatty Little, and Handforth minor, and Archie Glenthorne. The moon was shining down in full glory, and the scene looked almost charming.

The spirits of the juniors had revived enormously. The clearing up of the weather had made all the difference in the world. And it is really astonishing how unpleasant, rainy weather can affect the human emotions.

"Oh, they're bound to be coming along soon," said Fatty Little. "Great bloaters! They'll be starving, too! In fact, it'll be a wonder if they have enough strength left to crawl back here!"

"We're not all built the same way as you are, Fatty," said Somerton, who had joined the group. "You can't carry on for more than an hour unless you have a fresh supply of grub, Fatty. I say, they'd better buck up, or we shall never be able to get those caravans free."

He looked at them anxiously. Angelina and her followers were in a bad way. They had sunk deeper and deeper, and were, in fact, so deeply into the bog that some of the axles were submerged. It would be a very ticklish business, getting the vans out.

"I don't see how it's going to be done," declared De Valerie. "It looks to me as though we're in a hopeless mess. We shall be stuck here for days——"

"One moment, laddie," interrupted Archie. "Kindly refrain from the good old conversation. I believe that something's happening. As Noah said—ark!"

The juniors remained silent, and all listened.

And, from afar, there came a curious sound. The wind had died down with the cessation of the rain. The night was becoming quite still. And the fellows could hear a curious rumbling sound proceeding from some uncertain direction.

"Sounds like a landslide!" said Willy.

"Rot!" said De Valerie. "There's a peculiar pumping noise—— I've got it! It must be a traction-engine."

"My only hat!"

The juniors hurried off the heath, and stood upon the road itself. The obvious had occurred to them. It would be a good idea to ask the driver of this traction-engine to lend a hand.

And a few minutes later the engine itself came into view.

We had succeeded in steering the thing down the narrow country lanes. True, we had taken it very easily, and we had progressed along a kind of ziz-zag course. But we had arrived—and that was the main thing.

Somerton and De Valerie and the others came rushing up.

"Hi, driver!" shouted De Valerie. "We want to—— Great Scott!"

He broke off in amazement as he saw who the figures at the rear were. I closed the throttle, and the trusty little engine came to a standstill.

"My only hat!" ejaculated De Valerie. "What next?"

"Next, my son, will be to drag those caravans out," I replied.

"Absolutely," said Archie. "Gadzooks! You must allow me to observe, dear old things, that this is somewhat terrific. I mean to say, what a dashed priceless scheme! Somebody's brain department has been putting in a thick slab of overtime! Absolutely!"

"It was my idea," said Handforth. "Pitt happened to mention it first, but——"

"Don't argue about that!" I interrupted. "Archie, who does this engine belong to?"

Archie looked at me blankly.

"But, dash it!" he protested. "I mean, dash it with considerable emphasis! How, as it were, should I know? I had an idea that you'd borrowed it! Chappie's don't generally find steam-engines lying about loose, what?"

"Why don't you wait until I've finished, you ass!" I said. "We borrowed it—without permission—from Mr. Crabb. But he says that it's the property of Mr. Ezra Biggs, of Edgemore. Isn't Mr. Biggs one of your pater's agents?"

Archie beamed.

"Well, there you are!" he said genially. "What I mean is, absolutely! Why, my dear old tomato-can, Comrade Biggs is one of my pater's best assorted pals! In fact, it's as good as certain that this old steam-machine belongs to the pater himself!"

I was quite satisfied now. There was nothing remarkable in the fact that the engine belonged to Colonel Glenthorne. The latter was the most influential landowner in the whole district of Bannington. Many farms for miles around—reaching as far as Caistowe on one hand, and as far as Helmford on the other—were owned by Colonel Glenthorne.

He gave me a terrific shove before I could be aware of it, and the next moment I fell off the rear and collapsed in the road. Handforth had made up his mind to end the journey by a spurt, and he wasn't going to have me spoil it.

I felt quite comfortable in pursuing the affair now.

The traction-engine was driven right on to the heath—but we took care not to go too far with the movement. We didn't want to get the engine bogged as well. Then, indeed our plight would be even worse.

The rest of the fellows were delighted when they knew what was doing. And all hands were called out to assist. The big hawser was unwound, and nine or ten juniors helped to fix it securely to the first caravan.

And it had to be secured in such a way that nothing would break when the pressure was brought to bear. As soon as everything was ready, I altered the gears, and then started up the engine.

The latter, it will now be understood, was stationary. The engine was working, but it was operating the windlass arrangement. The drum went round and round, the hawser became tight, and the caravan moved slowly and sluggishly out of the bog.

There's no need to go into details.

After a couple of hours' hard, continual work, we had all the four vans well clear of the bog. The horses were hitched up, and Angelina and her three sisters were soon safely upon the road.

They were muddy, splashed, but otherwise unharmed.

As for us, we looked like so many scarecrows.

Oily, grimy, with our clothing drying on our backs, we were thoroughly tired out and weary. All we wanted to do was to get some rest. But, for two or three of us, there was to be no sleep yet.

The bulk of the party could take it easy,

but the traction-engine had to be returned to Crabb's farm—we couldn't leave it stranded on the heath. It had done its service well, and deserved to be escorted home.

An arrangement was soon made.

I proposed to take the engine back, and the caravans could come along by the same lane—for it had been decided that we should camp in a little clearing that Reggie Pitt and I had spotted about half a mile from the farm. It was nobody's property, being a kind of open space in the lane itself.

By the time I had put the engine up, and walked down the lane, the other fellows would have made the camp, and everything would be quiet for the night. And at last we should get our well-deserved rest.

But, of course, there was a hitch.

And it is necessary for me to add that Handforth was the hitch. He flatly refused to agree to the plan. And when Handforth flatly refused anything, it meant trouble.

"No!" he said firmly. "I don't agree."

"But, my dear chap——"

"I don't agree!" insisted Handforth. "The scheme's all right, except for one little thing. You stay here, Nipper—and I'll take the engine back!"

I sighed.

"Look here, Handy, we want that engine to go back in one piece," I said patiently. "Besides, we want to see you again. Much as we love you, we couldn't bear the thought of attending a funeral to-morrow!"

Handforth glared at me.

"You—you funny lunatic!" he snorted. "Are you trying to make out that I can't drive that traction-engine?"

"No," I replied.

"But you just said——"

"I'm not trying to make out anything," I interrupted. "I'm simply stating a fact. You can't drive it——"

"I can't!" hooted Handforth.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "No offence, Handy, old scream, but there you are! A fact, as it were, is a fact! Kindly take the advice of one who knows, and tumble into your little cot!"

"Never!" declared Handforth. "I'm going on that engine!"

I breathed hard.

"Oh, all right!" I said, knowing that argument was useless. "If you're so dead set on it, you can come with me."

"Good! And can I drive?"

"Yes, if you like."

So we started off.

The traction-engine gave a terrific bound forward as Handforth opened the throttle. He didn't open it gently, but flung the lever right over. I only just grabbed the steering-gear in time.

"Whoa!" gasped Handy. "You—you ass!"

"Not so fast!" I exclaimed. "We can't go at full speed, you ass!"

In a moment we were going at a more sedate pace, and Handforth insisted on taking the steering-wheel. Somehow or other, he managed to keep control. This, I think, was mainly because I continually gave him directions.

Handforth was sound enough in the main, but he was always liable to take chances. But with me behind him, he didn't have the opportunity.

We were just nearing the gates of Crabb's farm when he jerked the throttle open wider, and the engine moved forward at a faster speed.

"Steady!" I said. "That gate isn't any too wide."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "I want to make a good spurt for the last!"

"But you'll never get through," I insisted.

At the same time I reached forward and closed the throttle. Handforth opened it again. I closed it. Handforth reopened it.

"Look here!" he roared. "Who's driving this engine?"

"Both of us!" I replied.

"Are we?" he yelled. "We'll soon see!"

He gave me a terrific shove before I could be aware of it, and the next moment I fell off the rear, and collapsed in the road. This was merely one of Handforth's impulsive tricks. He had made up his mind to end up the journey by a spurt, and he wasn't going to have me spoil it.

He opened the throttle wide, and the engine puffed vigorously and bounded forward. Then Handforth described a graceful curve, and entered the farmyard in a perfect sweep.

At least, this is what he intended doing.

The curve, actually, was a trifle erratic, and the fact that one of the gateposts got in the way was a mere detail. The traction-engine took it in its stride. There was just a crash, a lurch, and the engine was in the yard.

"My hat!" muttered Handforth. "I must have grazed something!"

He grabbed at the throttle, and pulled. The throttle refused to budge. In his previous exuberance, he had jammed it over so vigorously that it was now firmly fixed.

"Great pip!" he gasped wildly.

He tugged for all he was worth, but the throttle refused to budge. And the engine, it must be remembered, was now careering along like a wild thing. In his excitement, Handforth even forgot to attend to the steering. And the traction-engine was making a bee-line for the front wall of the farmhouse.

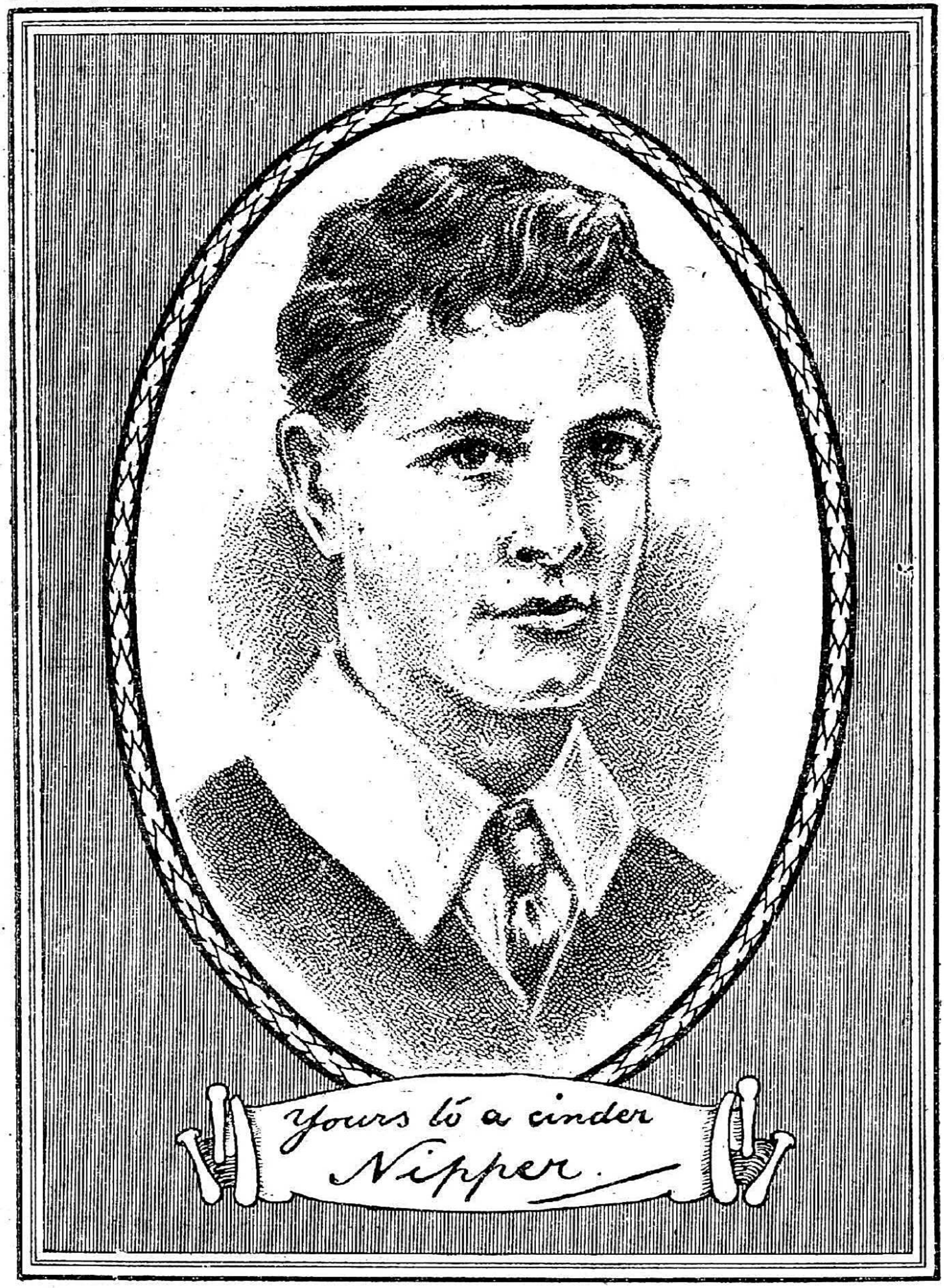
Handforth stuck to his post like a hero. At the last moment he gave the steering-wheel a wrench, intending to turn round in a circle. But he had no sooner done this than the front wheels caught in a

(Continued on page iii of cover)

OUR STUDIO PORTRAIT STUDIES

OF FAMOUS ST. FRANK'S CHARACTERS.

No. I. NIPPER (Richard Hamilton).



(Continued from page 26.)

big rut and straightened themselves out again. Handforth gave one despairing bellow, and dropped off behind.

The traction-engine, triumphant, made up its mind to pay off a few old scores against Mr. Crabb. Hissing and gloating with victory, it charged like a bull at the farmhouse walls, choosing a particularly vulnerable spot.

Crash!

The engine proceeded to plough its way through the farmhouse. It entered in fine style, making a vast gap in the front wall. Having progressed serenely across the living-room, it now made a valiant attempt to gain an exit by means of the rear wall. But the wreckage and the confusion defeated this fell intent.

The engine came to a standstill in the middle of the parlour, hissing with impotent rage. And, outside, Handforth stood gazing at the destruction with a kind of fixed fascination.

"Oh, you—you hopeless lunatic!" I gasped, rushing up to him.

"It—it wouldn't stop!" he ejaculated, coming to himself. "That's right—blame me! How could I help it? Somebody locked the throttle!"

I gave it up. In any case, it was no good crying over spilt milk—or arguing over a wrecked farmhouse. Mr. Crabb came along and did all the arguing. I really thought he was going into an apoplectic fit.

In the end, Archie had to be fetched, and as soon as Mr. Crabb knew that he was the son of Colonel Glenthorne, his tone changed somewhat. Archie calmly told him to send the bill for damages in to his pater.

And Mr. Crabb had to be satisfied with this.

And Handforth solemnly vowed that in future he would take good advice when it was given to him. This mood, as we knew well enough, would last about a couple of hours.

And the next morning, with the sun shining gloriously, we restarted on our travels—with Whit Monday just at hand. We meant to enjoy ourselves—and we certainly did!

I'll tell you all about it next week—so look out!

THE END.

COMING ATTRACTIONS.

NEXT WEEK.

THE MERRY MINSTRELS!

Another Rollicking Story of the Schoolboy Caravanners, including a splendid full-page sketch by Mr. BRISCOE of BRIGHT-SIDE-ON-SEA, which is one of the places visited by the juniors next week.

ANOTHER PORTRAIT STUDY COMING!

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press (1922), Ltd. The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, 13/- per annum; 6/6 for six months. Abroad, 11/- per annum; 5/6 for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company (Canada), Limited.

No. 415. D/R **May 19, 1923.**