GIVEN AWAY — DETECTIVE STORY SECTION AND FINE PORTRAIT STUDY OF E. O. HANDFORTH!

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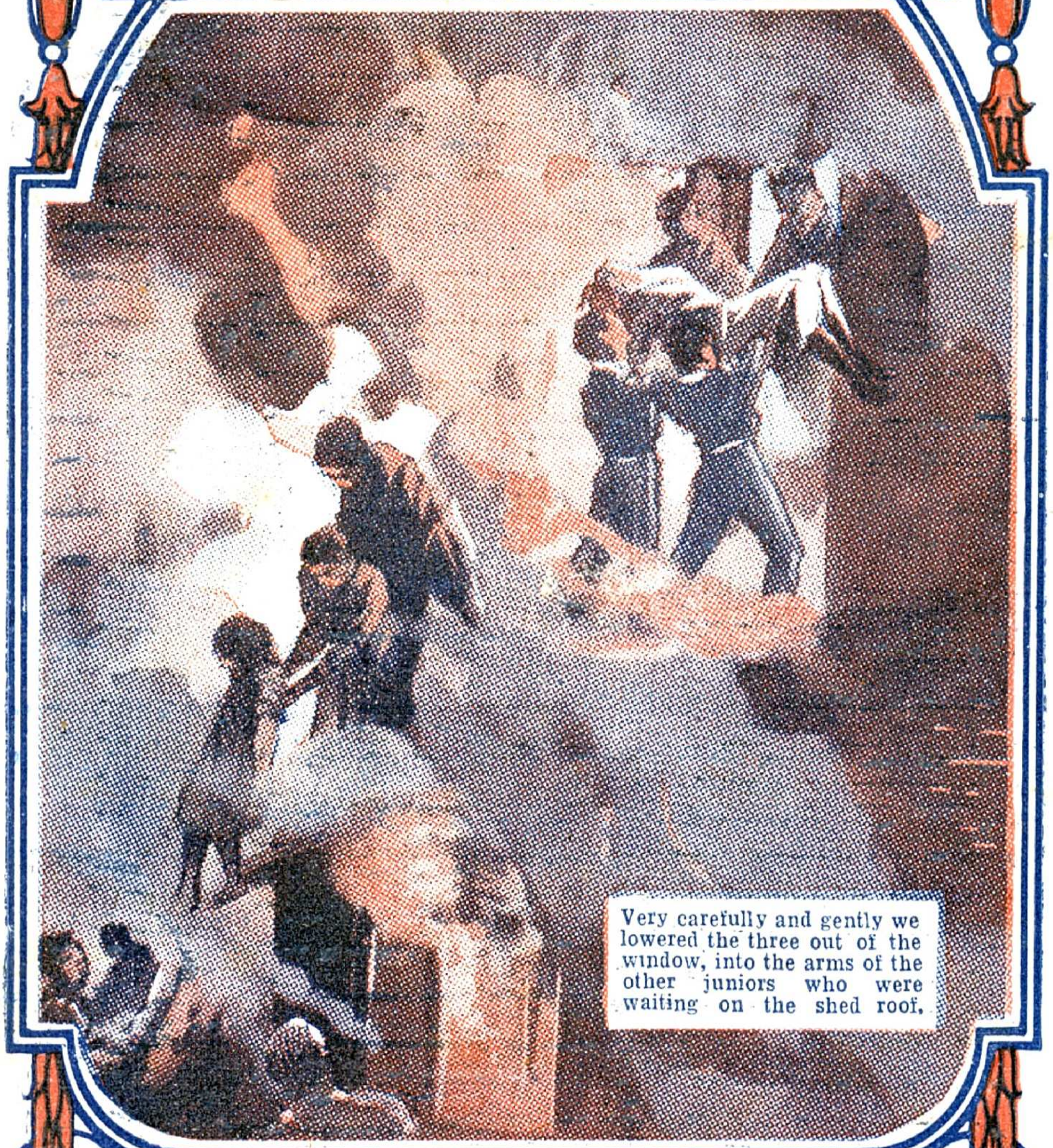
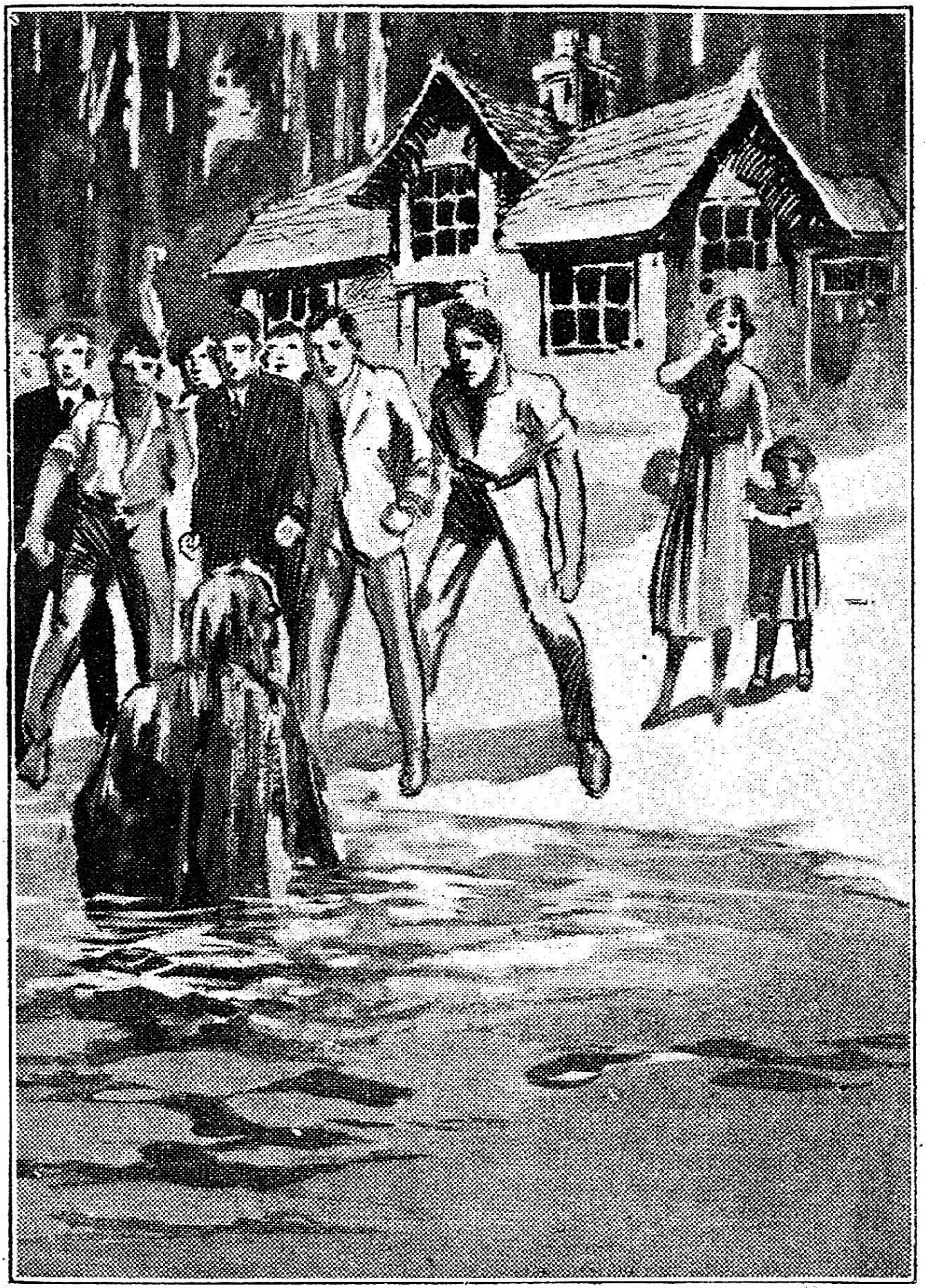


Very carefully and gently we lowered the three out of the window, into the arms of the other juniors who were waiting on the shed roof.

The Cover Picture above is only one of many stirring incidents occurring in This Week's Caravan Holiday Story :—

JOGGING ALONG THE HIGHWAY!

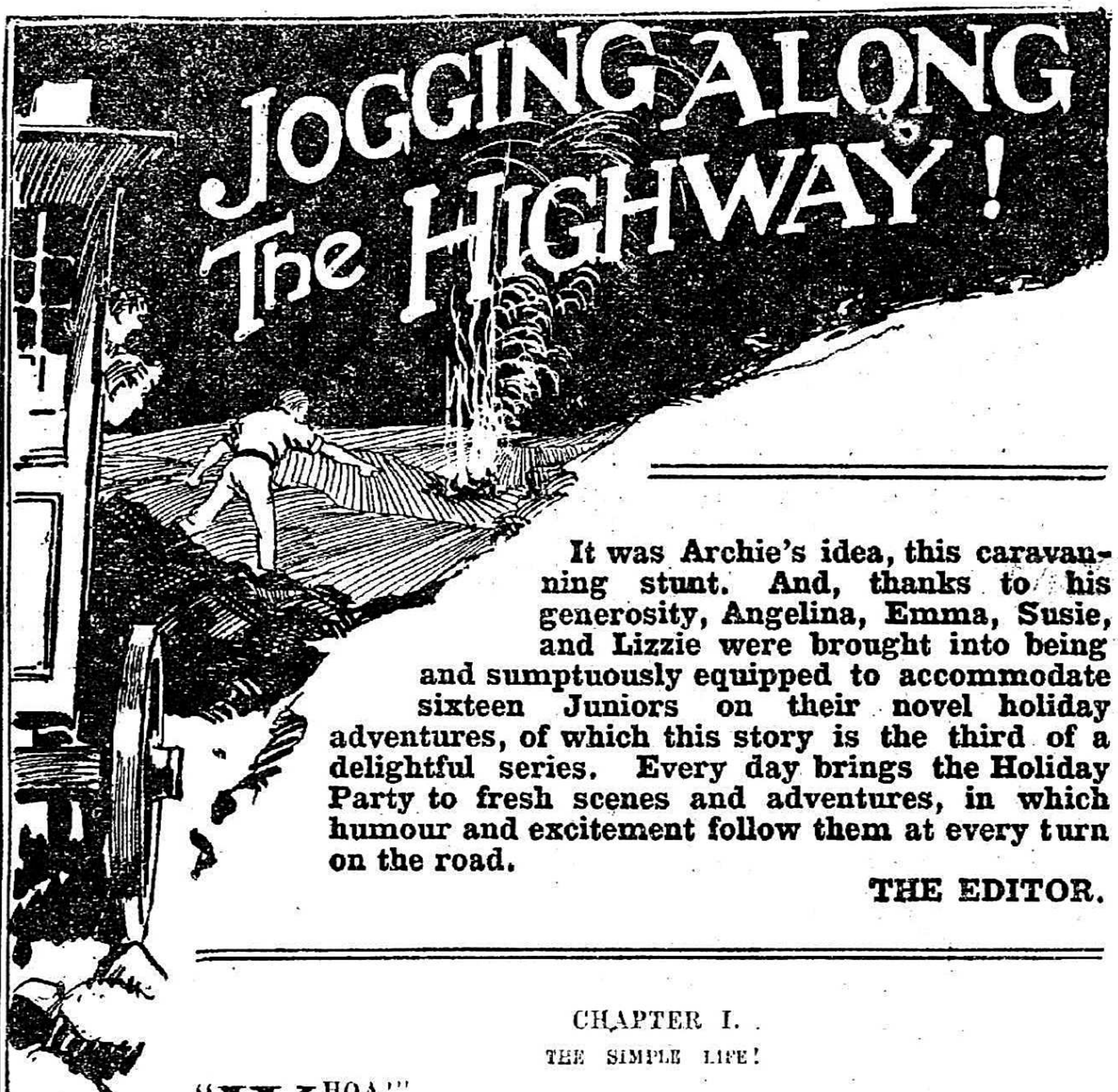
No. 417. EVERY WEDNESDAY JUNE 2, 1923.



Ratley came staggering out of the pond. "You young hooligans!" he snarled, gasping for breath. "You shall pay dearly for this outrage! It's a job for the police"

"Rats! Say much more and we'll chuck you back!"

Mr. Ratley received a perfect hail of scorn and contempt.



It was Archie's idea, this caravanning stunt. And, thanks to his generosity, Angelina, Emma, Susie, and Lizzie were brought into being and sumptuously equipped to accommodate sixteen Juniors on their novel holiday adventures, of which this story is the third of a delightful series. Every day brings the Holiday Party to fresh scenes and adventures, in which humour and excitement follow them at every turn on the road.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE SIMPLE LIFE!

"WHOA!"

I pulled my horses up, and the three other caravans in the line came to a halt in the rear. The glinting rays of the evening sun shone upon their artistically painted sides. And Edward Oswald Handforth, who was driving Caravan No. 2, jumped down from his seat.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "What have we stopped for?"

"Observe!" I replied, waving a hand. "Take a good look, and fill yourself with the beauty of the scene, old son. What about it?"

Handforth looked round without appreciation.

"Not so bad," he said. "Have we stopped to squint at this?"

"We've stopped because this is where we shall camp for the night," I replied. "It's the best piece of country we've seen for days—and we'll settle down here and live the simple life until the morning."

Other fellows came up from the following caravans, and had a look round. They stood there, drinking in the scene. And all those juniors who had an eye for beauty did not fail to appreciate the peace and glory of that wonderful stretch of Hampshire beauty.

We had descended into a valley. For an hour past we had been progressing slowly down winding lanes and hills, between green hedges, with meadows and fields on both sides. And now we were in the valley itself.

And a more perfect spot could scarcely be imagined.

The lane was narrow and dusty— a typical English country byeway. Just away to our left a fair sized river flowed serenely upon its course, with graceful willow trees adorning its banks—with waterlilies and rushes visible in profusion. The river wound like a silvery ribbon through that calm stretch of country.

Just beyond rose gently sloping hills, with big woods here and there—woods in their full majesty of early summer green. Giants of the forest, peaceful and majestic in the delightful air of the sunny evening.

In the opposite direction lay another sloping vista of fair meadows and fields, and straight ahead the country was like a national park—grassy, wooded and so delightful that we could only stand there and gaze. A turn in the lane had revealed all this to us—for hitherto the hedges had been high.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Reggie Pitt. "What a lovely spot!"

"Rather!" said Tommy Watson. "Not a house to be seen—not even a cottage or a barn. We're right in the heart of the country—rural Hampshire! When you come to think of it, there's no scenery in the world to compare with the English."

"Absolutely not!" declared Archie Glenthorne stoutly. "I mean to say, hedges and flowers and trees and grass, and all that sort of rot! It sort of makes a chappie feel that life is bally well worth living! Large supplies of ozone floating about in the atmosphere. Fleecy clouds and blue skies, and this, and that! I mean, dashed priceless!"

"In fact, this is just the time when Clarence ought to get more poetical than ever," I chuckled. "Well, what do you say? Is it settled? Do we camp here for the night?"

"H'm!" said Handforth. "Well, I don't know. It might be better to go on another few miles—plenty of daylight yet. Scenery's all very well, but we don't see any of it after dark! In my opinion it would be better to jog along until we get to the next village. It'll be handy, in case we want supplies."

"We took in plenty of supplies at lunch-time," I replied. "We haven't passed through a village since then—and we've only seen a cottage or two. This is about the loneliest stretch of country we've passed through. But, by jingo, it's the most beautiful!"

There was no question about the voting. Everybody except Handforth declared that this was positively the ideal spot to camp. The lane at this point widened out considerably—so that the road itself ran between two big stretches of delightful grass. It would be simplicity itself to pull the caravans on to this grassland, which was public property. And the horses could be sent out upon the marshes near the river.

And so, without any further talk, we set about making camp.

There were sixteen of us—all Remove juniors of St. Frank's, with the single exception of Willy Handforth. One of our number was Clarence Fellowe, the extraordinary youth we had met in Brightside-on-sea. He had never been to St. Frank's yet, but was booked there for the new term.

And as Clarence's people were in India, and he had no home here, we had decided to take him along with us—where he would remain until we finished the holidays. We had nearly a week yet, before our return to St. Frank's would be necessary.

It had been Archie's idea in the first place.

The genial ass of the Remove had purchased the caravans, and had made the whole tour possible. And we were enjoying it to the full. Jogging along the highways, camping just where the fit took us, and enjoying all the delights of the simple life—it was so wonderful that we were having a glorious time. Never before had we realised how joyous a caravan tour could be.

Fatty Little was in charge of the food department, and while most of the others set about the task of grooming the horses, Fatty made active preparations for tea.

This, really, was a kind of supper—a high tea, to be exact. We always went to bed between nine and ten, so that we should be able to get up, bright and early, at about six. In this way we enjoyed life to the full.

But this was certainly the loneliest spot where we had camped.

Hitherto we had always been in close proximity to a village, or a town. But now we felt that we were really and truly lost in the heart of the countryside. There was one cottage about half-a-mile back, but this was well out of sight. This cottage was the only one we had seen for three or four miles.

Two or three fellows went off into a nearby spinney with a hatchet, and soon returned with logs and "kindling." And only fifteen minutes later a cheerful camp fire was blazing—sending forth a pleasant, pungent odour of new wood. And something else was sending forth an appetising odour of frying eggs and sizzling sausages.

"My hat! This life gives a fellow an appetite!" remarked Pitt, as he prepared for a good wash. "I feel that I could eat a ton! I hope you're cooking enough for everybody, Fatty?"

"Don't you worry!" said Fatty Little. "I've got about six pounds of sausages here, and three dozen eggs, and twelve tins of sardines, and six tins of salmon, and fifteen loaves of bread, and three or four hams, and pounds of tea, and plenty of butter——"

"Whoa! Stop!" gasped Pitt. "I said I hoped we had enough for tea—not enough for a month! What's wrong? What are you looking like that for?"

An expression of dismay had overspread Fatty's features.

"Butter!" he said tragically.

"Well, what about it?"

"We—we forgot all about the butter!" said Fatty, in a hollow voice.

"Well, I daresay we shall survive," grinned Reggie.

"But we must have some butter!" roared the fat junior. "We can't do without it! I meant to get some at a farm, but we didn't pass one. Oh, great bloaters! This is a calamity!"

"Worse tragedies have happened at sea!" remarked Pitt philosphically. "Of course, it's appalling to think of—no butter! What can we do? We've got nothing to eat, except a few tons of sausages and eggs and sardines and——"

"Oh, don't start kidding!" growled Fatty. "That's not the point. We've got tons to eat—I'm not saying we haven't. But I like things to be done properly. Sardines ain't much good unless you have bread and butter with 'em."

"When you're hungry, my lad, butter is a needless luxury," put in Cecil De Valerie. "We'll get some butter to-morrow——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Fatty, a sudden gleam coming into his eye. "Hi, Willy!"

"What's the trouble?" asked Handforth minor, appearing from behind one of the caravans, with his face half buried in a towel, and with his muscular young body bared to the waist.

"I want you to get some butter!" said Fatty. "If you go——"

"Butter!" echoed Willy. "Now, if you'd said buttercups, I could understand. Plenty of 'em in the next meadow. But how the dickens do you suppose I can find cow-grease in this rural paradise? I don't remember having seen a Sainsbury's or a Home & Colonial or a Maypole about here!"

Fatty Little glared.

"Don't be a funny fathead!" he snapped. "About half-a mile back there's a cottage. It's the only house for miles and miles, in fact. Trot back there, and ask them to oblige you with some butter. They always keep plenty of butter in these cottages, and they'll let you have it if you'll pay a good price."

"Oh, what rot!" objected Willy. "We can do without butter for once."

But Fatty insisted. It appeared that he had some particular dish on the menu that he didn't want to abandon—and butter was an absolutely necessary ingredient. And Willy Handforth, being a mere fag, was obliged to do as he was told—to a certain extent.

"If Willy didn't want to do a thing, wild horses wouldn't make him do it. He was just as obstinate as his elder brother. But he was a willing little chap, with cheek enough for a dozen, and he always got what he went after. That's why he was so useful for errands of this kind.

Church and McClure decided to go with him, just for company.

There was something behind this—something that I suspected as soon a I saw the two Removites casually strolling off—which they did while Handforth happened to have his face smothered with soap.

By the time Handforth had rinsed himself his chums had vanished up the lane. The last time he had gazed upon the world—that is, before applying the soap—Church and McClure had been near by. They were, in fact, supposed to be engaged in conversation with him.

"So you'd better buck up!" said Handforth. "It's got to be done—and it might as well be done straight off. The whole caravan's got to be turned out. Goodness knows where the cuff link's got to, but it's there somewhere!"

Handforth made these observations with his face in the towel.

"I've searched and searched, but it's no good!" he proceeded. "And the only thing is to take every bit of stuff out of the caravan, and literally empty the place. You chaps had better start—— Why, what——"

Handforth had emerged, and he looked round him, bewildered.

"Where are they?" he hooted violently.

Pitt, who was just passing, jumped about a yard.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "What was that? Who threw that bomb?"

"You—you funny ass!" roared Handforth. "Where's Church?"

"We passed one about four miles back," replied Pitt thoughtfully.

"What?" Handforth stared. "Four miles back?"

"Yes, a quaint old pace, with a flint clock tower——"

"You—you blabbing lunatic!" howled Handforth. "I don't mean a church! Where's Church—and where's McClure?"

"How should I know?" said Pitt. "I haven't got them in my pocket! But if you particularly want to know. I saw them strolling down the lane a minute ago."

"My hat!" breathed Handforth thickly.

He cast the towel aside, and strode off down the lane. It was rather unfortunate that Pitt should have made such an error. As a matter of fact, Church and McClure had gone up the lane. Handforth marched on grimly. He was likely to go a very long way before he found his chums.

They had escaped at an opportune moment—they thought it a good idea to accompany Willy on his search for the succulent butter. It was far better than searching for a cuff link in the caravan which was probably not there.

"A dotty idea, of course!" remarked Church "But he's always like that. Fancy wanting to turn the whole caravan out to find a mouldy cuff link!"

"Who's that—my major?" asked Willy.

"Yes."

"Oh, you mustn't take any notice of him!" said Willy calmly. "Blessed if I can understand why you chaps let him walk on you! As far as I can see, you might just as well be a couple of door-mats! He's always wiping his boots on you. He's always squashing you like a couple of worms!"

"Look here, you young ass——"

"No offence!" said Willy hastily. "I mean, why don't you punch him in the eye when he gets like that? When it comes to the pinch, you'll find that he's as meek as anything. A good sort, but he was spoilt in his childhood!"

Church and McClure thought it better to make no comment. They knew another junior, also named Handforth, who had been spoilt in his childhood. And they hadn't come on this jaunt for the purpose of arguing. Their one object was to escape an argument.

So they changed the subject, and talked of cricket prospects for the coming term. And in a short time they came within sight of the little cottage. It was a tiny, picturesque little place standing just at a bend in the lane, and almost surrounded by chestnut trees.

Coming upon it suddenly, the three boys stood by the gate. A short path led up to the front door, almost concealed behind the rustic porch, with the rambling roses clinging to the old, weather-beaten wood.

"Not many signs of life," remarked Church.

"I suppose they're at the back," said Willy. "We'll soon see."

But they were not very optimistic. When they had passed the place earlier in the evening they had just regarded it with casual curiosity. But now they gave it a closer examination they could see that there were no curtains on the windows, and the cottage had a somewhat deserted appearance.

It was one of those low-built little places with tiny leaded windows, and a steeply sloping roof which came to within eight feet of the ground. The upper windows were set in the roof itself, projecting outwards. The roof was of red tile, with patches of moss here and there.

The juniors hammered on the door and waited. The sound was hollow, and there was no response. After a second hammering with no better result, they passed round a little path to the rear.

Here they found a water butt and another porch. There was a back door within, and they pounded upon this.

"What's the good?" asked Willy. "The place is empty."

He put his hand on the latch, and opened the door. Church and McClure were surprised that the door was unlocked. But there was really nothing astonishing in this fact.

In the heart of the country people do not trouble to put up bolts and bars—even when a house is occupied. The three juniors entered the small stone paved scullery and then passed directly through into the front room. Both apartments were scrupulously clean, very neat and tidy, but perfectly empty.

"I can't see any stairs!" said Church, looking round.

McClure grinned, and opened a door. The stairs led upwards steeply—and all was gloomy. In many country cottages the stairs are arranged in this way.

The three boys went up out of curiosity more than anything else, and their expectations were realised. There were two small rooms above, and these were just as empty and just as clean, as the kitchen and the parlour.

Willy Handforth grinned.

"It's a poor look-out for Fatty and his butter!" he remarked. "The tubby idiot! Fancy making us come back all this way—to an empty cottage! I'll jolly well tick him off when we get back."

"Better not!" warned McClure. "He'll give you short rations!"

They descended the stairs again, and walked out of the cottage, rather disappointed at the non-success of their mission. It was certainly hopeless to search for any butter elsewhere, for this was the only cottage for miles. There might be a dwelling or two further on down the valley, but the caravan party had seen no sign of anything.

By the time the trio arrived at the camp, tea was being served. But Handforth was still missing. Church and McClure were gratefully surprised, although they had an uneasy feeling that something lay in store for them.

"I don't know what the trouble is, but you fellows are in for something before long," remarked Pitt. "I told Handforth that you'd gone down the lane, and the fathead chased after you!"

"We didn't see any sign of him," said Church.

"No; he went the wrong way!" grinned Pitt. "Poor old Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure were not very delighted. They had an idea that matters would be uncomfortable for them as soon as Handforth returned. With rare cunning, they had placed themselves in the very centre of the party. In order to reach them, therefore, Handforth would have to fight his way through the whole crowd.

Fatty was disappointed about the butter, and sighed.

"Just our luck that cottage being empty," he grunted. "I was going to make something particularly nice, for a finish. Never mind; we'll have it to-morrow. Who wants more sausages?"

"I do!" said about a dozen voices.

"The grub, I must remark, is splendid,"

observed Clarence Fellowe. "My appetite will be satisfied when tea is ended!"

"Good old Longfellow!" grinned Pitt. "Always comes in with a rhyme!"

"I'm sure I can't the habit avoid. I hope you're not annoyed!"

"Not a bit. Carry on!"

"The tea is good, and my mouth is full," said Fellowe. "And—er——"

"And Archie's head is full of wool?" suggested Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dash it all!" protested Archie. "I mean to say, that's frightfully ridic.! A chappie's head can't be made of that kind of material. I mean, I'm not a dashed sheep!"

"Sorry, Archie; I just wanted to get the rhyme in!" explained Pitt blandly.

Clarence was an extraordinary junior in many ways. He couldn't speak without rhyming his words, and for that reason we had nicknamed him Longfellow. He was also as thin as a rake, and nearly six feet tall—a kind of walking lamp-post. But he was made of the right stuff, although his shape was queer.

He was just about to go into another verse of conversation when Edward Oswald appeared. He came suddenly upon the scene, and stood looking at the tea-party grimly. He was hot, dusty, and there was an expression of determination on his rugged features!

"Somebody," he said firmly, "is going to get slaughtered.

"Look here, Handy——" began Church.

"I'm going to start with Pitt!" interrupted Handforth darkly. "You'll come later on. Pitt, you beast, come here!"

"What for?"

"I'm going to punch your nose!"

"Thanks for the pressing invitation, old man, but I'm otherwise engaged!" said Pitt. "I can't possibly keep the appointment. You look as though you've been for a long walk. What's the country like further on?"

"I didn't see the country!" roared Handforth. "You told me that Church and McClure went down the lane——"

"Sorry!" said Reggie. "Just a slip. They went up the lane!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you spoofing maniac!" yelled Handforth, charging in. "I'm jolly well going to smash you until you look like one of those sausages! I'm going to pulverise you into marmalade!"

"It looks like being a jammy business!" said Pitt.

Handforth clutched at him, but about six fellows clutched at Handforth first. He was gently but firmly taken down to the stream, and held upside down, with his head about an inch off the water.

"Are you going to be peaceful and quiet?" demanded Bob Christine.

"No!"

Handforth was lowered about a foot. His

Handforth descended once more. This proved to be ample. By the time he came out he was thoroughly cooled down, and promised that he wouldn't touch a soul.

remarks were now inaudible, owing to the fact that his head was submerged. Judging by the number of bubbles that came up he must have been saying quite a lot. He was raised.

"Had enough?" asked Grey. "Shall we duck you again?"

"No!" gurgled Handforth desperately.

"You'll promise not to punch anybody?"

"No, I won't!" roared Handforth wetly. "I—I'll—— Gug-gug-gugh!"

He descended once more. This proved to be ample. By the time he came out he was thoroughly cooled down, and promised that he wouldn't touch a soul. Thereafter tea proceeded peacefully.

Handforth soon recovered his spirits under the influence of hot sausage and sardines and hard-boiled eggs, which he insisted upon eating simultaneously. He regarded the dish as a kind of mixed grill.

But Church and McClure were somewhat uneasy as bedtime approached. They had half an idea that Handforth would burst out at the slightest provocation. At the lease excuse he would go for them.

We lingered round the camp fire until nine-thirty. Then, as two or three fellows commenced yawning, we prepared for bed. The night had settled down perfect. Overhead the stars were shining with twinkling

brilliance. There was no moon, and the darkness was rather intense.

A soft wind stirred the tree-tops, and the world seemed at peace. Scarcely a sound came to us in that quiet, picturesque valley. We seemed to have left civilisation far behind.

The camp fire died down low, and the lights in the caravan twinkled warmly. And at last we had all retired. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed before ominous thuds sounded from the second caravan.

Suddenly a door was flung open, and a form shot headfirst outside. It was the person of Walter Church. He alighted on his back, sat up, and gasped. Handforth had thrown him out because the missing cuff-link had not yet been found. And judging by the noise that was proceeding from the caravan, McClure and Willy would soon follow.

Church sat up, half dazed. Then, with a startled exclamation, he leapt to his feet. He forgot about the cuff-link; he forgot about Handforth—his whole attention was fixed upon a spot down the valley.

Where all had been inky darkness before there now appeared a flickering, lurid glare. It rose and fell ominously. And Church felt his heart thumping with sudden excitement.

"I say!" he shouted. "Quick! There's a fire!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHOOLBOY RESCUERS!

"FIRE?" said Pitt, putting his head out of a doorway. "Where?"

"Down the lane. Look!" exclaimed Church breathlessly.

Pitt, attired in his pyjamas, descended the caravan steps, and came to Church's side. He started as he saw that unmistakable flickering. And his face became serious.

"Yes, it's a fire all right," he said slowly. "Of course, there may be nothing in it; probably a bonfire, left by some farm-labourer. Still, I don't quite like the look of it."

"What's all the trouble out here?" I inquired, emerging.

"What's the excitement?" asked Christine, joining us.

Before another minute had elapsed all the members of the caravan party were standing in a group, gazing down the valley at that glare. Even Handforth had forgotten all his squabble with his long-suffering chums.

"What's the good of standing here like this?" he demanded. "There's a house on fire down there! Probably a whole village! Quick! We've got to whizz off to the rescue!"

He started whizzing at once, but I pulled him up.

"Don't be an ass!" I said. "You can't go with bare feet!"

"My hat!" gasped Handforth. "I forgot."

He dashed into his caravan, and flung himself into his clothes in about two minutes. The other juniors were just as quick. Thus, almost before it could be realised, the whole party of us set off down the lane in the direction of that significant glare.

The caravans were left to look after themselves—not that there was any chance of them coming to any harm. And we hurried along the lane at the double, feeling that our concern was probably needless.

For it is quite a common custom to make bonfires in meadows, and a puff of the breeze might have set this particular bonfire into a temporary blaze. At the same time, we couldn't sleep comfortably until we had convinced ourselves that the alarm was a false one.

"I think it must be a bonfire, after all," I said, as we ran along. "There aren't any houses down this way, as far as we know——"

"There's a cottage!" said Handforth.

"How do you know?"

"I saw it before tea, while I was looking for those two fat-heads!" replied Handy. "It was just down in the next hollow—a little thatched place, standing all by itself. I spotted it from the top of the hill."

"Cottage, eh?" said Pitt. "Then it looks a bit serious."

"There were a couple of kids playing about in the front garden, and smoke was coming from one of the chimneys," said Handforth. "I thought the place looked rather dinky down there. But I didn't go any further; I turned back."

There was still the possibility that the glare was caused by a bonfire in the back yard of a cottage. But we should soon make certain. In any ordinary stretch of country we might not have taken any notice of a flicker in the sky.

But here, in this peaceful valley, it was different. The darkness covered everything like a cloak. Not a point of light was to be seen in any direction, for there were no villages or main roads or passing traffic. It was just quiet and indescribably peaceful.

Consequently, that small, flickering light in the sky seemed to be quite a blaze. It is very easy to mistake the flicker of any insignificant bonfire for the glare of a burning house in such surroundings as these.

The lane had high hedges, and it was most difficult for us to see anything during the first half-mile of our run. Then, abruptly, we turned a corner and came upon the brow of a short hill. Down below, in clear view, a reddish light blazed luridly, with tongues of flame leaping upwards.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Pitt.

"It's—it's the cottage!"

"Absolutely!" said Archie, aghast.

There was no doubt about this at all. The cottage was just at the bottom of the slope—only a few hundred yards away. And the glare of light was coming from one of the front windows, and even as we looked the flames were licking up towards the low thatch of the roof.

We could see all this very indistinctly, for only the glare of the fire itself enabled us to see the outline of the little dwelling. We heard no sound, no screams for help, or childish cries of terror. Yet Handforth had seen children there! Our hearts leapt at the thought.

"Come on!" I ejaculated tensely.

The fellows needed no second bidding.

As fast as we could go we tore down the hill. Breathless, we arrived at the little wooden gate, and pushed it open. Some of the fellows leapt over the low fence.

"My only hat!" muttered Church, his voice sounding strained.

At close quarters the seriousness of the fire was obvious. The front room was a livid mass of flame. Fortunately, the little window had not yet burst completely out, and only a few of the flames were licking up the wall. We could hear a faint roaring and crackling from within.

Beneath the crack of the front door we saw a glaring reflection. And flickers were appearing in the opposite window of the little cottage. But, so far, the upper part of the dwelling was unaffected.

Racing round to the rear, Pitt found that this section also was quite free from the flames. Indeed, one would never have believed that the place was on fire, viewed from the back.

It was quite obvious that this one room was blazing. The fire was confined to the tiny parlour. But in my heart I knew well enough that only a miracle could save the cottage from complete destruction, for the flames had gained a firm hold.

"Hi!" I shouted. "Wake up! Anybody there? Yell, you fellows! Yell!"

They yelled with all their might.

"Some of you dash round and see if you can find a ladder!" I instructed quickly. "Anything will do! I'll bet the stairs are flaming already, and we must have a ladder of some kind."

"There's a pond over there!" said Longfellow. "Shall we find some pails and quell the flare?"

"Good idea! Some of you get busy!" I replied briskly.

At that moment one of the upper windows was flung open. A scream sounded—a wild scream of terrified horror. And we saw a woman at the window. She was quite young—not more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

"Help!" she shrieked.

"It's all right, ma'am!" roared Handforth. "The place is on fire, but we'll get you out all right!"

We saw the woman control herself by a mighty effort.

"My children—my children!" she shouted in a wail.

"How many? Where are they?" I demanded.

"They're here, with me!" she exclaimed frenziedly. "Oh, we shall never get down; flames are coming up the stairs! And there's smoke—we're choking with smoke! Save me—save my children!"

"Anybody else in the house?" shouted Pitt.

"No! Nobody——"

Her voice ended in a kind of choking sob, and she disappeared from the window. We heard faint cries in childish voices. And it seemed to us that the woman and her little ones had been suffocated by the smoke. Great masses of fumes were pouring out of the bedroom window.

We looked at one another, pale with horror.

The crisis had to be faced by us alone. Not another soul had come up; we apparently had the valley to ourselves. And it seemed to be by an act of sheer providence that we had camped so near-by.

But for that fact this woman and her children would assuredly have perished in the flames. For they had been fast asleep when we had come along. They would have become choked by the fumes in their very sleep, and would have known nothing.

But we were here and we had to act.

"Can't find any ladder!" panted Christine, dashing up. "But there's a kind of low shed at the back, and we can climb on to that and get into one of the upper windows. I tried to get in through the back door, but it's as hot as an oven there, and the smoke's awful!"

It was essentially a time for rapid action.

I kept my head, and told the fellows to soak their handkerchiefs in the pond, and then bind them round their faces. It was the work of a moment to do this. Then seven or eight of us climbed on to the roof of the little shed at the rear.

The others had found some pails, and were fighting the fire valiantly, and with grim determination.

I was the first to get in the rear window. I could see very little, for the room was in darkness, and it was choking with smoke. Handforth and Pitt and several others came after me.

But we were protected to a certain extent by that wet linen over our faces. Our eyes smarted terribly, but we groped our way forward. And soon I found the door I thrust it open, and then started back.

A blinding mass of smoke and sparks surged into my face. But there were no flames, and after a moment or two I pressed forward. I found myself in a tiny passage with another door close-by. The stairs were shut off round a corner, but I could hear the fierce crackle of burning wood. The heat was appalling.

I thrust open the other door, and found myself in the second bedroom. Here the mother and her two children lay on the bed. The woman had practically dressed herself before collapsing, but the children were in their night clothes. And at first I thought they were beyond recovery.

However, there was no time to make an examination. The only thing was to get them out. The heat was well nigh suffocating. Handforth and I took the woman—a frail, girlish figure—and we carried her to the rear bedroom without difficulty. Two of the other fellows brought the children.

Very carefully and gently we lowered the three out of the window, into the arms of other juniors who were waiting on the shed roof. And within five minutes the rescued ones were safely away from the house, and had been placed on a grassy bank, protected by bushes.

Handforth was about to climb out of the window, when I stopped him.

"Wait a minute!" I panted. "There's no danger for a minute. At the first sign of collapse we can jump for it—the distance is nothing to chaps like us. We'll salve some of this stuff!"

"Good wheeze!" mumbled Handforth. "Phew! Talk about heat!"

Pitt was there, too. In fact, he had made his way to the front room, and in spite of the suffocating fumes he was working like mad. He had been struck by the same idea as myself.

While we were in the bedroom, we might as well save everything we could. For this poor woman would probably lose everything, and there was no prospect of the furniture and effects being insured. Cottagers seldom insure their goods.

And now that the occupants were safely rescued, there was a chance for us to do a bit of salvage work. For being young and athletic, we could easily jump down the short distance, without any fear of injury.

Working like galley slaves, we proceeded to hurl everything out of the windows—pillows, sheets, blankets—everything we could lay our hands on. Handforth and Pitt wrenched the bed to pieces, and even flung this out. Chairs followed, and one or two other articles that we found, after groping about. Other juniors below dashed up, and dragged the things away from the danger zone.

In the meantime, two other fellows had cleared the back bedroom in the same way. Three more had thrown sacks over their heads, and had braved the dangers of the kitchen. They had brought out a table, chairs, and everything in the nature of pots and pans that they could lay hands on.

Considering the speed with which everything was done, the amount of stuff we salvaged was astonishing.

The little garden was littered with goods and chattels.

From first to last, it had taken us less than eight minutes. But we had worked like demons during this time. Only the front two rooms remained untouched—for these were blazing like a furnace.

Pitt and I were trying to drag a chest of drawers to the window—we had, indeed, succeeded—when the floor gave an ominous crack, and quivered shakily. Tongues of flame leapt up on the other side.

"Goodness!" gasped Pitt. "Quick!"

Our escape was cut off—the doorway was beyond reach. And the window itself was blocked by the chest of drawers. We gave one heave, and sent it flying out.

It crashed to the ground, splintering badly. But it was still fairly whole when Dick Goodwin and Clarence, shielding their faces from the intense heat, rushed up, and dragged it away.

Pitt and I leapt down, one after the other. We flung ourselves outwards as far as we could go, landing in the middle of a little flower-bed. The soft earth broke our fall—although we were rather badly shaken by the impact. We staggered drunkenly away.

But I was alert again in a moment. The fresh night air soon revived me. I yelled to the fellows, and was not satisfied until I had found that we were all safely on the ground. And, by now, the woman and her two children were reviving.

Archie Glenthorne was working like a Trojan. He had been getting water, and bathing the children's faces, and forcing some of the water down their throats. And he had applied similar restoratives to the mother.

"It's all right, dear chappies!" panted Archie triumphantly. "They're coming round! I mean to say, they're absolutely bucking up in chunks!"

"Good!" I said breathlessly. "You think they're unhurt?"

"Laddie, they'll be as right as rain in a few minutes!"

This was welcome news, indeed. And now that we knew there had been no tragedy, we sought to relieve our own parched throats. We drank water in enormous quantities. One or two fellows found that they were suffering from scorched hands, but there were practically no injuries. Our sufferings were superficial.

Indeed, we had acted so promptly, and so speedily, that nobody had time to get hurt. To have simply stood there, looking at the flames, would have done no good. But by acting on the spur of the moment, we had managed to save half the poor woman's property.

Even now we did not feel that it was secure. All the articles were pulled further and further away—for the heat near the cottage itself was appalling. Nobody else had come along to help, or to see what the trouble was—although the glare in the sky was now vivid and lurid—and must have been observable miles and miles away.

It was a clear proof of the isolation of this valley, for nobody came. In all probability, the cottagers in the surrounding valleys were fast asleep in bed, and knew nothing about the fire.

As for quelling the flames, those juniors who had started on this job had given it up almost at once.

For it was like a raging furnace. The pail-fuls of water that were flung through the front window had absolutely no effect, as far as the fire-fighters could see. And then, a few minutes later, the window had burst out with a roaring crash. And the flames had curled upwards, igniting the thatch.

At the rear the salvage workers had still been hard at their task—for the rear of the cottage was then untouched. In front, the flames leap upwards over the thatched roof with amazing rapidity.

And exactly ten minutes after that the whole cottage was blazing like a gigantic torch.

Even if a modern fire engine had come along, and had pumped thousands of gallons of water into the blaze, it is doubtful if the fire would have been put out. For it had gained such a hold now, that the flames were leaping up to a height of a hundred feet.

And the heat was intense—overpowering.

Further and further away we carried the furniture and the bedding and the other odds and ends. And we found it necessary to move the mother and her children, too. For the heat in the garden was too much to bear.

We stood there, awed and fascinated.

There is always something that grips one in a big blaze. And we stood in a crowd, the glare illuminating our drawn faces. And then the roof collapsed with a thunderous crashing and splintering. Billions of sparks leapt upwards to the sky.

And only a shell remained—a blazing, white-hot shell.

CHAPTER III.

A TEMPORARY HAVEN.

"I'M sure I don't know what to say—I don't know how to thank you, young gentlemen. You saved the lives of my little ones, and you saved me. I think Heaven must have sent you!"

The woman spoke in a sobbing voice, with tears of gratitude and thankfulness quivering in her eyes.

"That's all right, ma'am," I said uncomfortably. "We only did what anybody else would have done."

"That's all," said Pitt. "It's all right, ma'am—we'll look after you."

She gazed at us through her tears.

"I can't thank you enough—I—I can't think of any words," she faltered. "And there's so much I want to say, too! My little ones! I—I thought they were gone! I wanted to——"

"Please don't exert yourself, dear old thing!" put in Archie gently. "I mean to say, you've had a dashed poisonous experience! This is the time when we've got to rally round in large quantities, and so forth. All you must do is to remain quiet, and let us do all the dashing about."

"And—and the way you saved all the things, too!" went on the woman, heedless of Archie. "I never thought for a moment you'd do that! Why, you've got lots of things out—tables and chairs and even the bed!"

She looked about her wonderingly.

The fire was practically out by now—a big, smouldering heap of red-hot embers. The four walls had collapsed. Of the cottage nothing remained but that pile of red-hot rubbish.

The glow from it enabled us to see the garden distinctly. Trees which had grown near by were scorched and burned. Every leaf had been stripped off by the devouring flames. The branches stood out starkly and nakedly—a pitiful sight.

And in every direction lay articles of furniture—saucepans, kettles, frying-pans, and the like. Some of the fellows had thoughtfully fixed the bed up, and the two little children were lying fast asleep in the blankets.

They had recovered rapidly in the clear night air, and after sobbing with fright a bit, they had cried themselves to sleep, in no way harmed. One was a little boy of about four, and the other a girl of three.

The mother was lying back in a chair, a shawl covering her shoulders. She looked pale and wan—but was gradually recovering her strength. It was more shock than anything else that affected her now. The result of the choking fumes had worn off long since.

In the salvage work, piles of clothing had been flung down—all sorts of things. And it was not until now that we discovered that we had saved nearly all the woman's personal belongings. Her gratitude was unbounding, and she looked at us with moist eyes.

"It's rather queer nobody else has come along, ma'am," said Pitt.

"There are only two other cottages in the valley," said the woman. "I think one of them is empty, and the other is over the rise. They go to bed early, and I don't suppose they knew anything."

"What's your name, ma'am?" asked Handforth in his blunt way.

"Mrs. Grant," she replied. "Oh, if George had only been here! It wouldn't have mattered so much then—although nobody could have done more than you boys, I'm sure. In fact, George couldn't have saved the furniture as you did."

"Your husband, Mrs. Grant?" asked Pitt.

"Yes—he's away in the town," she replied sadly. "Oh, I shall have to let him know. I don't know what he'll think—I don't know what he'll say! He lost his job down here, and had to go into the town for work. He comes home every Saturday, and stays over Sunday. It's too far for him to come every night."

"So that explains why you were alone with the youngsters?" asked Handforth. "How did the fire start?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mrs. Grant, shaking her head. "I went into the front room just before going to bed. I put

a book away in the cupboard. I struck a match, too, so that I should avoid knocking against the table."

"You must have dropped the head of the match, or something," said Pitt. "It's easy enough for a thing like that to smoulder and do nothing for even an hour. Then it'll suddenly burst into flame, and the damage is done. I don't suppose the fire really started until you and the children were sound asleep."

"Oh, it's terrible—terrible!" said Mrs. Grant, wringing her hands. "Whatever shall I do? I've got no home now, and—and the children——"

"Don't you worry yourself, Mrs. Grant!" I interrupted. "We'll see that everything's all right. As a start, we're going to take you along to our caravans, and make you comfortable for the night. You mustn't worry yourself in the least. We'll see that you get another cottage, and that you're made comfortable."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I mean to say, that's a dashed bet!"

She simply couldn't speak—she was almost overcome with emotion. She regarded our concern for her and the children in the light of a Heaven-sent kindness. She seemed to regard us as a bunch of angels in human form.

This, of course, was nonsense. We were merely doing our best for her—and we should have been a poor set of cads if we had acted in any other way. Mrs. Grant and her children were in an almost pitiful plight. At least, they would have been but for us. Indeed, if we hadn't been in the valley that night, all three would have perished in the flames.

And, having rescued them, the least we could do was to make them comfortable. Mrs. Grant struck me as being a superior kind of girl—for she was hardly more than that. Under any ordinary circumstances, she would have been neat, dainty and attractive. Even under these trying conditions she managed to look pretty. And the children were little darlings.

They were not ordinary cottagers, by any means. Mrs. Grant had no country dialect, and it struck me that she was a London-bred girl. However, it was not our business to inquire into these matters.

Now that the fire was over, and all danger passed, we got busy again.

I went round with Reggie Pitt and Bob Christine, and made a note of all the articles that we had salved. They were strewn about, but not in a state of utter disorder. The articles of furniture were placed in little dumps, the blankets and linen and clothing lay in a pile. The pots and pans and the rest of the utensils were neatly arranged on one of the garden paths.

"Looks as though we're in the middle of a moonlight flit!" said Pitt.

"Well, we shall soon be flitting all right," I replied. "We can't leave these things here, out in the open. The house has gone—vanished as completely as though it had been spirited away."

"But what are we going to do?"

"We'll think of something," I replied. "The very first thing is to make Mrs. Grant and the kiddies comfortable. And some of you fellows have got to go back to camp."

"What for?"

"Get four of the horses, and harness them to two of the caravans, and bring them straight along," I replied. "We'll put Mrs. Grant and the children in one, and use the other as a kind of furniture van."

"To cart the stuff away?" asked Handforth.

"Yes."

"And where are we going to cart it to?"

"I'm not exactly sure yet—but we're not going to leave it here," I replied. "I think you'd better hurry away, Reggie. Take four or five fellows with you, and get back as soon as possible."

Reggie Pitt agreed on the spot, and he went off at once. And while he was absent, the rest of us collected the goods and chattels into handy piles, so that our labour would be lessened later on.

Fatty Little had gone off with Pitt—declaring that Mrs. Grant required something stimulating, and he was going to make some hot tea, and have it all ready by the time the caravan arrived.

Fatty also made some vague reference to sandwiches, and I gathered that he intended making a few hundred. And it was certainly true that the majority of us had developed keen appetites. The hard work, and the lateness of the hour had made us feel fit for a second supper.

Under ordinary conditions, we should have been asleep long before this. But, as far as I could see, we should be lucky if we went to bed at all. We didn't rescue helpless people from devastating fires every night, and a little shortage of sleep wouldn't do any of us any harm.

Besides, our time was our own, and we could sleep all next day, if we wanted to. That was the one beauty of caravanning. There were no rules and regulations to adhere to. We were on the open road, under the dome of the sky and we could do exactly as we pleased.

"Blessed if I can understand why nobody else has come," remarked Tommy Watson. "That blaze must have been seen ten or fifteen miles away on a night like this. Queer that nobody came along to investigate."

"Not at all," I replied. "You don't catch people walking four or five miles in the dead of night to find out the reason for a glare. Why, they would probably assume that it was a haystack, or perhaps a patch of dried up heath. And I don't suppose anybody saw the glare at all. In these parts the whole population is fast asleep by nine o'clock."

In the meantime, Mrs. Grant was chatting with Archie.

"Pray cease these perfectly ridic. expressions of the good old grat.!" Archie

was saying. "I mean to say, we happened to see the old blaze, dashed up like anything, and there you are! We simply had to buzz about and do things!"

"You saved all our lives——"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "But, dash it, that's nothing to rave about. I mean, any set of coves would have done the same. As for the furniture and the jolly old effects, I think it was priceless of the chappies to rally round in the way they did. I'm dashed sorry we couldn't save more."

"Oh, but it was wonderful!" declared Mrs. Grant. "There are ever such a lot of things rescued. But—but I don't quite know where we shall live after this. And I want somebody to tell my husband. Would it be possible for one of you dear boys to take a message——"

"My dear old carrot—— That is, I mean to say, my dear lady!" said Archie hastily. "My dear lady, have no concerns regarding the future. Nipper is in charge of this scheme. And that, if I might say so, is suffish. When Nipper starts whizzing about on a job, he whizzes to some effect—and, by gad, he makes everybody else whizz with him! You grasp the trend? In other words, all you've got to do is to sit tight and allow us to rally round. Ask no questions, but do just exactly as you're told. And we'll jolly well see that everything is O.K."

"It's too good of you—really it is!" said Mrs. Grant softly. "And I don't even know who you are—or—or anything!"

Archie started.

"What!" he ejaculated. "I mean to say, haven't the chappies introduced themselves? You see, we're all from St. Frank's College, don't you know. We're on a rather priceless sort of holiday—trickling over the old countryside in a bevy of caravans."

"Oh, now I understand!" said Mrs. Grant. "I couldn't think why so many college boys could be in this quiet part of the country."

"A ridic. simple explanation," smiled Archie. "You see, we buzzed into the old landscape during the evening, and proceeded to camp. Our caravans are about a mile away. And we were just going to bed when we saw the good old illumination, flickering up into the sky like—well, like anything. So, of course, we proceeded to dash into the scene.

In a short time Mrs. Grant knew everything, for one or two other fellows came up, and joined in the conversation, telling her all the facts. And then, while she was still endeavouring to express her gratitude, some lights appeared along the road.

And the two caravans rolled up, brilliant with illumination, and looking extremely cheerful and inviting.

"All serene!" said Reggie, as he pulled the first caravan to a standstill. "We've prepared everything for the visitors, and they can enter into occupation at once.

"Oh, we shall never get down!" she exclaimed frenziedly. "Flames are coming up the stairs! And there's smoke—we're choking with smoke! Save me—save my children!"

Fatty's bustling about with jugs of tea, I believe."

"Good old Fatty!" said several voices, with hearty approval.

"Come along, Mrs. Grant," I said. "You'll be nice and comfortable for the night in this caravan. Try to get some sleep if you can—but rest anyway. In the morning we'll have a plan ready."

Mrs. Grant began to protest.

"Oh, but really—I—I couldn't!" she exclaimed. "It isn't right of me to take your caravan like this! Where will you sleep?"

"Never mind where we shall sleep!" said Handforth gruffly. "We can doss anywhere—and if we don't sleep at all, it doesn't matter. Come on—get a move on! And think of the kids, too!"

Handforth wasted no time in politeness. He never did.

"Dash it all!" protested Archie, greatly shocked. "Kindly remember, old lad, that you're talking to a lady. Mrs. Grant, allow me to apologise for this breach of

good breeding! The chappie doesn't mean it—he doesn't know any dashed better!"

"Why, you—you——" began Handforth.

But he was not allowed to start any argument. Mrs. Grant was escorted to the caravan. And her two children were carried, still sleeping, by Pitt and Grey. They were carefully laid in one of the caravan bunks, and were not disturbed in the slightest.

The interior of that little home on wheels was singularly attractive. Brightly illuminated by electricity, with the white enamel walls, the polished mahogany, and glittering nickelwork—it all looked wonderfully fine. And the little beds were all freshly made with clean linen. Pitt had thought of everything. And Mrs. Grant stood in the middle of the caravan rather dazed by all the splendour.

"And you really want me to stay in here for the night?" she asked wonderingly.

"We won't think of anything else, ma'am," I replied. "Don't worry about us—we shall be as right as rain. You won't mind the van moving a bit, will you? We want to take it back to our camp,"

Mrs. Grant declared that she wouldn't mind in the slightest degree. She was rather overwhelmed by all our attentions, and by our concern for her comfort and safety. Then Fatty Little came along with steaming hot tea, sandwiches, cakes, and other things in the eatable line.

He had very gallantly made some especially delicate sandwiches for the lady, and he had even been thoughtful enough to bring hot milk for the children. Mrs. Grant simply couldn't express herself—and we didn't want her to.

At last we managed to get her door closed. We felt more comfortable now that we were by ourselves—for it was a little embarrassing to be constantly thanked. And we fell upon the food and drink with hearty appetites.

"And now to work!" I said, after the welcome snack.

"What's got to be done?" asked Pitt.

"I want you to drive Mrs. Grant's caravan back to camp, and make it all snug and comfortable," I replied. "Take a couple of chaps with you to help with the horses. The rest of us will stay here, and load all this furniture and stuff on the second van."

"Good enough," said Pitt.

And in less than three minutes he was off, taking Jack Grey and De Valerie with him as assistants. Handforth stood gazing at the furniture, and scratching his head.

"What are we going to do with this stuff?" he asked. "My hat! I never thought we'd salved such a lot! It was touch and go, you know. Some of us nearly got copped in that fire!"

"Nearly—but not quite," I replied. "All's well that ends well—although this affair isn't ended yet. By the way, anybody suffering from burns or anything? There's plenty of ointment and stuff in this caravan."

One or two of the fellows were scratched about a bit, and one or two were scorched—but they scorned to accept any treatment. Their injuries were only trivial, and they didn't bother.

By the time we had loaded up the caravan it looked a true gipsy outfit, fairly smothered with all sorts of articles—and filled up inside to the last inch. By careful packing we managed to get everything on board. The roof was filled so much that it seemed to be in danger of bending under the strain.

"Well, we've shoved everything on," said Handforth. "But I'm blessed if I can see the sense of it. Where are we going to?"

"That empty cottage, half-a-mile past our camp," I replied calmly.

The fellows stared.

"The empty cottage?" repeated Church. "Do you mean where we went for the butter?"

"Yes."

"But—but we don't know who it belongs to!"

"What does that matter in an emergency like this?" I said. "You told me that the cottage is absolutely deserted, in perfectly good condition, and open to anybody who likes to walk in."

"By jingo! that's right?" said McClure, taking a deep breath.

"Well, there's a haven of refuge all ready for Mrs. Grant to walk into," I explained. "We should be dotty if we didn't take advantage of it. I want to give her a surprise. We'll fix these things up in the cottage, and make it look homelike—as far as possible, anyway—and then take her there in the morning."

"What a ripping wheeze!" said Willy Handforth approvingly. "I must say, Nipper, that you do have some brain waves! My major couldn't have thought of an idea like that in a thousand years!"

"Why, you—you young fathead, I was just going to suggest it!" roared Handforth.

"I admit it's a good idea," said Bob Christine. "The cottage is handy, and it's about the only spot in the whole neighbourhood. But—but do you think we shall be justified?"

"Justified?"

"I mean, it's a bit thick taking possession of that cottage without permission, or without telling anybody——"

"My dear, hopeless ass!" I interrupted patiently. "From whom can we get permission at midnight? And how the dickens do you suppose we can tell anybody? Do you think we ought to go scouring the countryside to find the landlord?"

"Well, no," said Bob. "Only I thought there might be a bit of a dust up after-

wards—when the owner of the cottage gets to know."

"If the owner of the cottage makes any fuss, he ought to be boiled in oil!" I replied grimly. "As soon as he knows all the facts—as soon as we tell him that Mrs. Grant's place was burnt down, and she was left stranded with a couple of children—he'll be only too pleased that the cottage was there. Any decent man would be the first to approve."

And the other juniors agreed that my contention was quite correct. Under the very exceptional circumstances, there was nothing whatever wrong in setting Mrs. Grant up in that empty cottage.

It would have been different if a village lay near by. Then, of course, the homeless ones could have been taken in by neighbours, and the furniture stored in some shed, or barn. But here it was so lonely—so absolutely quiet and devoid of life. One of the prettiest valleys imaginable, but extremely lonely.

We felt that we were doing the right thing, and that nobody could possibly condemn us. The very fact that the cottage was open and unbarred gave us the right. And on the morrow, of course, we should make other arrangements.

Archie was already talking about new furniture, and all sorts of things like that. But I told him not to worry his head now—time for that later on. But Archie's generous heart was already making plans for the comfort of Mrs. Grant and her children.

Exactly as we had planned, we took all the furniture to that quiet, secluded cottage, which stood so peacefully amid the chestnut trees. We had candles alight in all the rooms, and when dawn came, it found the cottage furnished.

We had put everything in the little kitchen—all the pots and pans in order—and the table in the centre, with chairs all round. We had furnished the bedroom, and had done everything else possible with the limited goods at our disposal. And although the parlour was bare, the cottage had, nevertheless, a homely, comfortable appearance.

We were all thoroughly tired out, and extremely satisfied with ourselves. The caravan had already been taken back to camp, and the horses unharnessed. A few of us had been left behind to make the final touches.

And now, in the dawn, with the valley looking as peaceful as any spot on earth, we walked down the dusty lane to camp. Birds were singing everywhere, and the beauty of the scene was unfolding itself in the grey dawn light.

"Now for some sleep!" said Handforth, yawning. "It's only about four o'clock, or just after, so we can have about five hours. It'll do if we get up at nine."

"Even a bit later," I agreed. "We'll get plenty of sleep—don't worry."

And we turned in, thoroughly glad of the rest and slumber.

It was just before nine o'clock when the camp awoke to activity. The sun was shining with summer warmth, and the whole countryside was looking perfect. A gentle breeze came down the valley, and all the bushes and trees near by hummed with insect life. Butterflies fluttered in all directions.

"My hat! What a lovely morning!" said Watson, turning out and yawning. "I don't feel particularly grand but—— Hallo! Look who's here! Those youngsters are walking about the camp as though they owned it."

I glanced out of the caravan window, and smiled. Mrs. Grant's two little children were toddling about, thoroughly enjoying themselves. They were neatly dressed, and looked clean and chubby. As I mentioned before, we had managed to rescue a great many articles of clothing from the flames.

Then I caught sight of Mrs. Grant—neat and trim in a blue cotton frock—something light and summery that was just suitable for the weather. It was quite fashionable, too, and I saw that she wore silk stockings and neat shoes. There was nothing of the country bumpkin about her.

We all dressed quickly, and sallied out—but not with our usual noise and carelessness. As a rule, half the fellows were only attired in white trousers when they indulged in the morning wash—being bare to the waist. But they felt that it was hardly the thing under present conditions.

Mrs. Grant greeted us with fresh expressions of thanks. We politely but firmly told her that everything was quite all serene, and she needn't thank us any more. Handforth bluntly requested her to put on another record.

And then came breakfast.

It was a fine meal, with plenty of eggs and bacon, with plenty of hot coffee, and plenty of other things, too. Mrs. Grant enjoyed the meal, and the children had their fill with little cackles of delight accompanying the food. But their mother seemed worried.

"You boys have done so much, that it seems a shame to ask another favour of you," she said, at length. "But, you see, my husband is at work in Great Winstead—it's a fairly big town, about four miles away. I—I was wondering if one of you could go to him, and let him know. I'll tell you where he works. He might get permission to come over, and make some arrangements where we can go——"

"Please leave all that to us, Mrs. Grant," I said. "There's no immediate hurry about your husband. Ignorance is bliss—and there's no need for you to be worried about the fire. You and the children are safe and unhurt, and before evening you'll be fixed up. We'd like your

husband to find everything nice and comfortable when he comes."

Mrs. Grant's eyes opened wide.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly. "But—but I don't understand."

"For the time being, we've made a temporary home for you," I smiled. "And we shall devote to-day to making other plans. You needn't think we're putting ourselves out, Mrs. Grant—it's a real pleasure to us, and we've got nothing else to do, anyway. Our time's our own, and it's all in the day's work."

And then we took Mrs. Grant along to the little cottage among the chestnuts. We carried the children with us. The young mother was fairly amazed as soon as she stepped into the place.

"It's—it's wonderful!" she said, looking at us with shining eyes. "It's too wonderful to be true! How did you get permission to use this cottage, and what shall I do about the rent? I'm afraid it'll be higher than the other little place——"

"As a matter of fact, we haven't got permission at all," I pointed out. "We simply took possession of the place—and possession, after all, is nine points of the law. It was open to the world, and so we walked in. But we'll find out who the owner is, and make everything all serene."

Mrs. Grant was rather nervous about it, but we soon made her perfectly comfortable. At least, she assured us that she wouldn't worry. And in the next breath she proved that she was worrying.

"Oh," she exclaimed suddenly. "Perhaps—perhaps——"

"Perhaps what?" I asked, looking at her startled face.

"Perhaps Mr. Ratley has control of this cottage," she said nervously. "It might be on the Bushwick estate. I—I believe it is! I couldn't stop here, boys—I couldn't! If Mr. Ratley came——"

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Grant," I interrupted. "By the way you're talking, Mr. Ratley doesn't seem to be a very amiable person. Who is he, anyway?"

She gave a bitter little laugh.

"Simon Ratley is the man who caused my husband to lose the best employment he ever had," she replied, her voice growing rather husky. "Mr. Ratley is a cad—a beast of a man! And if this cottage is under his control, he'll take a particularly horrid delight in turning me out! I couldn't risk it."

We looked at one another in surprise at this fresh development.

"We shall have to find out where Mr. Ratley lives, and have a word with him," said Pitt grimly. "And if he dares to make any fuss about you staying here—considering that your own house has been burnt down—why, we'll talk to him straight!"

"From the bally shoulder, as it were," said Archie stoutly.

"And we'll jolly well biff him if he starts any rot!" declared Handforth.

"I say!" exclaimed Church from the doorway. "There's a man coming down the lane—a big chap in breeches and gaiters, clean-shaven, with a stern-looking face, and a pipe in his mouth."

Mrs. Grant grasped at my arm.

"Oh!" she breathed. "It's—it's him!"

"Mr. Ratley?"

"Yes!" she said, her voice almost a whisper. "It's Mr. Ratley!"

CHAPTER IV.

GETTING THEIR BACKS UP!

MR. SIMON RATLEY glanced at the cottage as he passed by the gate.

It was a casual kind of glance, for he evidently expected the place to be in its usual condition of emptiness. He had been unable to see until it was practically opposite, owing to the chestnut-trees.

He paused, his pipe nearly falling out of his mouth.

For he saw that the front door was wide open, and the place seemed to be fairly teeming with humanity. Mr. Ratley came to an abrupt halt, and a frown came upon his face.

It was not a pleasant face. Large, somewhat flabby, with bags under the eyes, it was a face that indicated long years of drinking. Mr. Ratley's eyes were small and set beneath bushy eyebrows. He was of a gentlemanly stamp, however; he carried himself well, he was faultlessly attired after the fashion of a country squire, and he carried a big blackthorn stick in his hand.

He pushed the gate open, and strode up towards the front door.

As he did so I emerged, with Handforth and Pitt and some of the other chaps behind me. Mrs. Grant came out, too, with her children held tightly against her. She had no intention of hiding away from this man.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Ratley, looking at us. "What are you doing in this cottage?"

"Does this property belong to you, sir?" I asked politely.

"Never mind who it belongs to. What are you doing here?" retorted the man. "You're trespassing, and you'd better get out while you're safe. Why, what's this? Oh! So you're here, too, Mrs. Grant?"

"I—I didn't know——" began Mrs. Grant.

"All right, ma'am, I'll talk to him!" I put in quietly.

"Oh, you will, eh?" said the man. "I'll

(Continued on page 15.)

READ THE STORY OF NELSON LEE'S GREATEST TRIUMPH!

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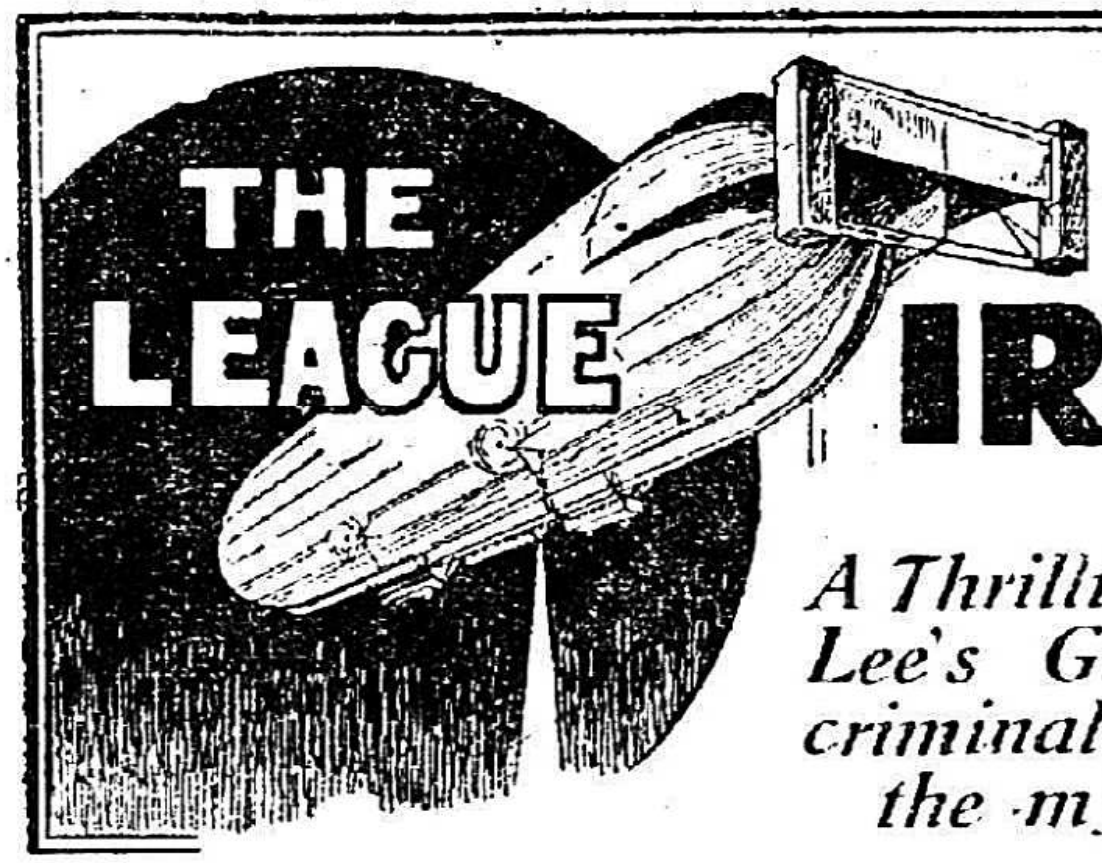


OF THE IRON HAND

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.

A wonderful new airship is stolen by the league. Unable to effect a repair to its mechanism, Herman kidnaps the inventor, Donald Stuart, and later, Jack Stuart, Donald's younger brother. By threatening to ill-treat the latter, Herman forces Donald to make the repairs. Nipper, the ward of Nelson Lee, who is Jack's school chum, had also been decoyed by Herman, but succeeds in escaping. From information supplied by Nipper, Rycroft Hall, where Donald and Jack are kept prisoners, is raided by the police headed by Nelson Lee.

(Now read on).

THE RAID ON RYCROFT HALL.

AT that moment, not counting Barker, there were nine men in the shed—Donald, Herman, Fairfax, Cundle, and five of Fairfax's servants, named Armstrong, Wilkinson, Spencer, Youle, and Inglis.

Herman, Fairfax, and Cundle were on board the airship, to which they had just ascended by means of a short wooden ladder. Donald who was in the act of embarking, was halfway up the ladder. Youle and Inglis, who had been told off to keep watch on Donald, were standing at the foot of the ladder, each man with a revolver in his hand.

Armstrong and Wilkinson were kneeling on the ground on one side of the shed, folding up the tarpaulin sheet, which served as a roof, and which they had just removed in order to allow the airship to ascend.

Spencer, who had assisted Cundle to cast off the ropes by which the vessel had been moored, was standing on the other side of the shed coiling up the ropes.

Of these nine men, only one retained his presence of mind when Barker staggered into the shed with his news that Nelson Lee and the police were coming. The other eight seemed paralysed for the moment with dismay.

The exception was Donald Stuart. As

stated above, he was halfway up the ladder when Barker arrived, but almost before the words "Nelson Lee and the police are here!" had crossed Barker's lips, he had leaped down from the ladder, sprang at Inglis, snatched the revolver from his hand, and with one blow of his fist sent Inglis sprawling on his back. Then he spun round on his heel, and levelled the revolver at the switch-board on the airship's deck.

His intention was to shatter the wires which connected the switch-board with the airship's machinery, and so, by rendering the vessel unmanageable, prevent Paul Herman and his two companions making off with her before the police arrived.

In the meantime, however, Youle had recovered from his stupefaction, and ere Donald's finger could press the trigger Youle clubbed his revolver, and struck him a terrific blow between the eyes.

As Donald reeled back, stunned by the blow and fell on the top of Inglis, the sound of running footsteps was heard outside the open door, and the next instant Nelson Lee dashed into the shed, with Nipper at his heels.

Up till then the three men on the airship's deck—Herman, Fairfax, and Cundle—had stood motionless and inactive. The appearance of Nelson Lee, however, galvanised them into instant life, and in less time than it takes to tell, Herman sprang to the starting-lever, whilst Fairfax whipped out his revolver.

Crack!

As Fairfax fired, aiming at Nelson Lee, the detective flung himself face downwards on the ground, with the result that the bullet flew harmlessly over his head. At the same instant Nipper leaped over the prostrate forms of Donald and Inglis, and sprang up the wooden ladder.

But he was not destined to reach the deck, for the moment he reached the top of the ladder Cundle's fist crashed into his face, and sent him rolling down again.

Before either Nipper or Nelson Lee could scramble to their feet, Herman flung the starting-lever forward. No sooner had he done so than the suspensory screws began to revolve, and when, a moment later, O'Brien and half a dozen constables rushed into the shed, the airship was clear of the ground, and was soaring upwards with the swiftness of an ascending rocket.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times in quick succession the Irish detective fired, but his bullets merely flattened themselves against the steel plates of the airship's hull, and ere he could fire again the vessel shot through the open roof and disappeared from view.

What happened next need not be described in detail. After a brief but desperate struggle the five servants were overpowered and handcuffed. Barker, who had merely fainted from loss of blood, came round whilst the struggle was in progress, and, after his wound had been temporarily bound up by O'Brien, he was formally arrested and handcuffed like the rest.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee busied himself in trying to restore Donald to consciousness. As the latter had only been partially stunned by Youle's blow, the detective's task was short and easy, and, almost at the same moment as the handcuffs clicked on Barker's wrists, the young Scotsman opened his eyes and sat up.

One glance showed him that the airship was no longer in the shed, and a look of bitter disappointment crossed his face.

"So they have escaped?" he said, as he struggled to his feet.

"They have, worse luck!" said Nelson Lee.

"In the airship?"

"Yes."

Donald heaved a regretful sigh.

"If only you had arrived five minutes earlier!" he said. "Do you know what you have lost? You have not only lost the airship, but you have lost the notorious Number One."

"Ah! So the third man on the airship was Number One, was he?" said Nelson Lee. "I guessed as much." Then he added eagerly, "What is his real name?"

Donald shook his head.

"I don't know," he said; "but I can tell you who the other two were."

"There's no need," said Nelson Lee. "I know who the other two were. One was Fairfax and the other was Cundle."

At that moment the Chief Commissioner arrived on the scene, accompanied by a couple of constables. Like Donald, the chief was bitterly chagrined when he learned that Number One, Fairfax, and Cundle had made their escape in the airship.

"However, we haven't done so badly," he said. "Four prisoners up at the house, six here, and Mr. Stuart safe—that's not a bad night's work after all. Come along! We'll take these fellows up to the house."

A moment or two later a little procession was wending its way across that portion of the grounds which intervened between the shed and Rycroft Hall.

At the head of the procession marched the chief and O'Brien. Behind them came the six prisoners, escorted by Nipper and eight constables, whilst the rear was brought up by Donald and Nelson Lee.

On the way Nelson Lee explained to Donald how Nipper had been kidnapped, how he had escaped, and how he had arrived at Gray's Inn Road and told his story.

"It was about half-past seven when he arrived," continued Nelson Lee. "As soon as he had spun his yarn, he and I and O'Brien drove down to Scotland Yard, and after we had interviewed the Chief Commissioner the four of us motored over to

Chelmsford. The Chief Constable there fell in readily with our plans, and when he had mustered a sufficient force of police we set out for Rycroft Hall.

"On reaching the gates we divided ourselves into two parties. One party, headed by the Chief Commissioner and the Chief Constable, proceeded up to the house. The other, headed by O'Brien and myself, and accompanied by Nipper as our guide, made a bee-line for the airship shed.

"Before our party had gone very far, we stumbled across one of the sentries whom Nipper had warned us were posted at various points around the house. It was the butler, Barker. We came upon him quite suddenly, and before he had time to utter a sound one of the constables, with more zeal than discretion, rushed at him, and dealt him a violent blow on the head with his truncheon.

"Barker reeled and fell, with blood streaming down his face from a nasty wound in the forehead. Nothing daunted, however, he leaped to his feet and dashed away in the direction of the shed. Needless to say, we lost no time in giving chase. Nipper and I outstripped the others, and reached the shed, and what happened after that you already know."

"Then you don't know what happened up at the house?" asked Donald.

"I only know what you know," said Nelson Lee "You heard the chief say that they had captured four prisoners, from which it is fairly evident that the house is now in the hands of the police."

The Chief Constable met them at the front door with the eager question: "What about the airship?"

"Gone!" was Nelson Lee's laconic reply; and he briefly described how Cundle, Fairfax, and Number One had made their escape.

"I'm sorry they escaped," said the Chief Constable. "At the same time, I'm glad to see you haven't returned empty-handed!"

He glanced approvingly at the six prisoners, who were handcuffed together in pairs, and who were then being marched up the steps which led to the front door.

"We have four more of 'em inside!" he continued. "Three footmen and a groom."

"Were those four the only persons you found in the house?" asked Donald anxiously.

"They're all we've found up to the present," said the Chief Constable. "Have you any reason to suppose there are others in the house?"

"My young brother is imprisoned somewhere in the house," said Donald. "At least, he was this morning. Have you found no trace of him?"

"Not yet," said the Chief Constable; "but my men are now engaged in searching the various rooms upstairs, and if your brother is here you may be sure it won't be long before——"

The rest of the sentence was drowned by a rapturous cry of delight from Donald. For at that moment a boyish figure appeared in the open doorway through which the prisoners had just passed.

"Jack!"

"Donald!"

Jack sprang down the steps, with a whoop of triumph, and the next instant the two brothers were locked in each other's arms.

Leaving Donald and Jack to mingle happy tears, Nelson Lee and the Chief Constable entered the house, where they found the ten prisoners drawn up in a double row in the entrance-hall, with half a dozen stalwart constables mounting guard over them. Nipper, O'Brien, and the Chief Commissioner had gone upstairs, to assist the rest of the police in their search, and Nelson Lee and his companion followed their example.

The search, however, yielded no result, for Fairfax had been too cautious to keep any books or papers at the Hall which would afford any clue to the secrets of the league. The net result of the raid on Rycroft Hall, therefore, was the capture of ten prisoners, the liberation of Donald and Jack, and the confirmation of the two detectives' suspicions that Fairfax was a member of the league.

. . . . . .

Nelson Lee, O'Brien, Nipper, and Donald and Jack Stuart were requested to attend and give evidence at the magisterial examination at Chelmsford, on Monday morning, of the ten prisoners captured at Rycroft Hall.

At the conclusion of the inquiry, which resulted in the prisoners being remanded for a week, they returned to Gray's Inn Road.

On Tuesday morning, immediately after breakfast, Nelson Lee and O'Brien, having disguised themselves, set out for Curzon Street, in order to carry out their plan of shadowing Paul Herman and keeping watch on his house. At the same time Donald departed for Moscar Grange, with the object of calling on Vera Langford, whom he had not seen since that memorable night when he had been arrested on the false charge of stealing the Marquis of Humminersea's jewels.

So far as Nelson Lee and O'Brien were concerned, the day was wasted; for although they watched Herman's house the whole day, they saw nothing of the millionaire, and nobody called at the house except a few tradesmen.

In the meantime, the accounts in Monday's papers of the raid on Rycroft Hall had provided the public with a new sensation, and from John o' Groat's to Land's End the principal topics of conversation were the liberation of Donald and Jack, the escape of Cundle, Fairfax, and Number One on board the stolen airship, and the astounding discovery that

Willoughby Fairfax was a member of the League of the Iron Hand.

Where had the airship gone after leaving Rycroft Hall? Where was it now? Where were Cundle, Fairfax, and Number One? How long would they remain inactive? How long would it be before the world was startled by the news of some fresh crime committed by this desperate trio? Such were a few of the questions which people asked each other, and which for the present had to remain unanswered.

Nine days after the raid on Rycroft Hall, the magisterial inquiry was resumed, and all ten prisoners were committed for trial at the next assizes.

On this same day—Monday—Jack Stuart returned to St. Frank's; whilst Donald went down to Devonport in order to supervise the construction of an airship which the Admiralty had commissioned him to build at the dockyard there.

When Fairfax's ten servants had been committed for trial, public interest in the case evaporated, and the newspapers dropped the doings of the League of the Iron Hand in favour of a newer sensation.

But Nelson Lee and Derrick O'Brien still continued to keep unwearied watch on Paul Herman's house. They had no intention of relinquishing that task until they had found out whether the Curzon Street millionaire was or was not the notorious "Number One."

THE KIDNAPPED PRINCE

AS the reader may remember, Paul Herman was a twofold member of the Centurion Club, in Piccadilly. That is to say, he was a member under the name and in the character of Paul Herman, the famous millionaire of Curzon Street, and he was also a member under the name and in the character of Julian Mandeville, the handsome young squire of Hartop Manor.

As the reader may also remember, "Mr. Herman" and "Squire Mandeville" had each a private suite of rooms at the club. The two suites, which had originally formed part of one large suite, adjoined each other and communicated with each other by means of a pair of folding doors. The key of these folding doors was kept by the steward, who, if he had been asked, would have said without a moment's hesitation that the doors were never unlocked.

As a matter of fact, Paul Herman possessed a duplicate key, which enabled him to pass from one suite of rooms to the other whenever he wished. If, therefore, he desired to transform himself from Paul Herman to Squire Mandeville, he had only to go to the club, enter Herman's rooms, lock himself in, pass into the adjoining suite, disguise himelf, and reappear as Mandeville. Contrariwise, if he wished to change from Mandeville to Herman, he had only to reverse the process by going into Mandeville's rooms, doffing his disguise, and coming out of Herman's rooms.

It was the latter course which he adopted on the day with which we are now about to deal.

Leaving Hartop, disguised as Squire Mandeville, at half-past ten in the morning, he arrived at Waterloo a little before noon. From the station he drove to the Centurion, where he sauntered upstairs and let himself into Squire Mandeville's private room. Twenty minutes later the door of Paul Herman's private room opened, and the Curzon Street millionaire went downstairs to lunch.

His repast finished, he left the club, and was driven in a taxi to his house. As he alighted from the cab, two seedy-looking men, who were loafing on the other side of the road, exchanged significant glances.

Little dreaming that the two seedy individuals were Nelson Lee and Derrick O'Brien, Herman paid the cabman and entered his house.

"Cut after that taxi," said Lee, "and find out from the driver where Herman has come from."

For ten days the two detectives had seen nothing of Herman; nor had they been able to obtain any news of him, except that he was "out of town."

O'Brien went after the departing taxi, leaving Nelson Lee to keep watch on the house.

In a few minutes the Irishman returned.

"'Twas at the Centurion Club the taximan picked Herman up!" he said.

"The Centurion!" returned Nelson Lee in surprise. "It is possible, then, that Herman has been living at his club ever since that affair at Rycroft?"

"It looks like it," admitted O'Brien. "It's rather a pity I gave up my post as waiter at the club so soon, isn't it?"

"Perhaps it is," said Nelson Lee, and then both detectives relapsed into silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

Meanwhile, Paul Herman, after entering his great mansion, had called his servants together and briefly told them that the League of the Iron Hand was about to bring off a profitable coup which had been planned by the executive council barely twelve hours before.

It was nothing less than the kidnapping and holding to ransom of the Prince of Ilirya, who was then on a visit to England, and who during the brief time he had favoured London with his presence had shown himself to be a somewhat harum-scarum person with a pronounced taste for expensive night-clubs, where gambling for very high stakes was indulged in by gilded young asses who had more money than brains.

"The prince will be doped and brought here to-night," exclaimed Herman; "and here he will remain until the ransom we demand is remitted by his grateful

country! The details as to how he will be restored to freedom without it being discovered where he has been imprisoned, do not concern you. What does concern you is how he is to be smuggled in to-night. Now follow me, and listen carefully to my instructions."

So saying, Paul Herman led the way to a small underground vault, whose principal contents consisted of three large fireproof safes. Two of these contained counterfeit money and forged banknotes, which were waiting to be put into circulation. The third contained the membership roll of the League of the Iron Hand and a collection of books and papers relating to the proceedings of the league.

After Herman had given the servants instructions as to how this vault was to be converted into a temporary residence for their illustrious prisoner, he requested them to accompany him to the yard at the back of the house—a large, square, stone-flagged yard, surrounded by high walls. On one side of the yard were a pair of big wooden gates, pierced by a little wicket. These gates led into a narrow street known as Albany Terrace.

"Now, I want you to pay particular attention to what I'm now going to say," said Herman to the servants, when they reached this yard. "Mr. Fairfax and I will probably arrive here with our prisoner about half-past eleven. At quarter-past eleven, therefore, not a minute later, you must lock those gates and extinguish all the lights at the back of the house. Then four of you must be waiting here in readiness to receive the prisoner and convey him below. Is that clear?"

The air was rent by a deafening crash, whilst at the same instant the big wooden gates burst open and Nelson Lee dashed into the yard, his revolver in his hand, and half a score of constables at his heels.

"Quite, sir," said the principal servant.

After giving a few further instructions, Herman went indoors, smoked a cigarette and drank a whisky-and-soda. Then he left the house again, still unsuspicious of the two seedy men who were lounging on the opposite side of the street.

"One of us must shadow him whilst the other remains here to watch the house," whispered Lee

"I'll follow him," replied O'Brien, and at once glided off after Herman.

He followed him to the Centurion Club, and saw him enter. During the next half-hour he saw several members of the club come out. And one of these was "Squire Maudeville."

O'Brien, however, had no suspicion that Maudeville was Paul Herman in disguise. So for hours he continued to wait vainly for Herman to emerge.

In the meantime, Nelson Lee was keeping unwearied watch on the mansion in Curzon Street, making careful note of everyone who called at the house. For nine hours after O'Brien left to shadow Herman, nothing happened that calls for description; then, about five or ten minutes past eleven, a constable strode up to Nelson Lee and flashed the light of his bullseye into the detective's face.

"Now, look here, my fine fellow," said the constable, "I've had my eye on you for the last half-hour, and you haven't moved twenty yards away from the front of this house all the time. If you don't clear off, and pretty quick, too, I'll take you into custody for loafing with intent!"

Mumbling something about not knowing he was "doin' any 'arm," the detective shuffled across the road and turned into Albany Terrace intending to remain there until the constable took his departure, and then to return to his former position in front of the house.

As he shuffled down the narrow side-street, however, he heard the constable following him; and, in order to escape his unwelcome attentions, the detective, acting on the impulse of the moment, opened the wicket-gate which led into the yard at the back of Herman's house, and slipped inside, closing the gate behind him.

"I'll wait here until he has gone past," he muttered to himself, "and then I'll go back to my post."

Crouching just inside the gate, he heard the constable's heavy footsteps approach the gate pass it, and gradually die away in the distance. But just as Nelson Lee was about to open the wicket-gate and slip out into the street again, the back door of the house was suddenly flung open and four male servants trooped out.

Owing to the intense darkness of the night, and to the fact that all the lights at the back of the house had been extinguished, the detective's presence escaped the notice of the servants, who were only visible to Nelson Lee by the light which streamed through the open back door. When this door was closed, as it quickly was, the yard was once more plunged in inky darkness, and the presence of the servants was only revealed by their footsteps and their voices.

"Now then, away to your corners!" he heard one of the servants say. "I'll lock the gates."

All this took place so quickly that Nelson Lee had barely time to fling himself face downwards on he ground ere a man strode past him in the darkness, jingling a bunch of keys, and locked the gates.

"I'm fairly trapped now!" groaned Lee, as he pressed himself a little closer to the inside of the yard-wall, in order to minimise the risk of discovery. "If these fellows find me, I shall have a pretty rough time, no doubt. However, I don't know that I'm sorry I came in here, for it's evident that something's going to happen. Why have these servants come into the yard at this hour of night? Why have they locked the gates? Why—— Hallo! What's the meaning of that?"

Four points of light had suddenly cleft the darkness, one in each corner of the yard.

The lights were extinguished as suddenly as they had been switched on.

Ten minutes passed—ten minutes of intense silence. Then suddenly the silence was broken as the gates leading into the yard swung open and an electric brougham glided noiselessly in.

Out flashed the lights of the torches again, and the four servants closed round the brougham.

As they did so two men alighted, and, despite their disguises, Nelson Lee recognised them as Paul Herman and Willoughby Fairfax.

"Have you got him, sir?" Lee heard one of the servants ask.

"Of course we have!" replied Herman. "He's in the brougham. Lift him out and take him below."

Scarcely daring to breathe, Nelson Lee crawled a few feet nearer, and saw the servants lift out a man who appeared to be bound and gagged.

The detective could with difficulty restrain the exclamation of astonishment which sprang to his lips as he recognised him.

"The Prince of Ilirya!" he muttered to himself "What game is this?"

With Herman and Fairfax at their head, the servants carried their illustrious prisoner into the house, and a moment later the detective was the only occupant of the yard.

Never for an instant did Nelson Lee hesitate now to act.

"I must go to Scotland Yard at once," he decided. "When I've told my story to the Chief Commissioner, we'll return with

a large body of police, surround the house, arrest all the inmates, and liberate the prisoner.

He rose to his feet and glided towards the gate It had been re-locked, but in little more time than it takes to tell he swarmed over the gate and ran swiftly down the deserted street.

At the bottom of Curzon Street he fell in with an empty taxi.

"Scotland Yard, quick as you can!" he cried, as he sprang into the cab.

THE CURZON STREET RAID.

WHEN Herman and Fairfax led the way into the house, closely followed by the servants, two of whom carried the bound and helpless form of the Prince of Ilirya, they passed into a stone-flagged corridor, at the end of which was a flight of steps, leading down to the basement.

In the centre of the floor of one of the rooms in the basement was a square trap-door, lined on the under side with a sheet of steel, and furnished on the upper side with a couple of ponderous bolts.

As a rule this trap-door was covered over and hidden from view by the matting which carpeted the floor of the room. In readiness for the Prince's arrival, however, the matting had been rolled aside, and the trap-door had been opened, revealing an iron ladder leading down into an underground vault, the floor, and roof, and walls of which were lined with slabs of concrete.

In this vault were three large fireproof safes. One of these contained the membership roll of the League of the Iron Hand, and a collection of books and papers relating to the proceedings of the league. The other two were used for the purpose of storing the counterfeit coins and bogus bank-notes.

Having closed the trap-door—without bolting it, of course—Herman called to one of the servants and instructed him to remain beside the door so as to be within call if Fairfax wanted anything.

Then he went upstairs to his library with the intention of drafting a document to which the Prince of Ilirya was to affix his signature.

He was in the middle of this task when the library door was suddenly thrown open, and in rushed an excited footman.

"The police, sir!" he gasped. "They're on our track! We're in danger, sir! I was looking out of one of the side window's just now, when I saw two motor brakes pull up at the corner of Albany Terrace. Both of them were crowded with policemen As soon as they pulled up, the policemen sprang out and appeared to hold a hurried consultation. Then half of them advanced at a run, whilst the other half turned down Albany——"

Ere he could complete the sentence, a ringing shout was heard outside the big wooden gates that led from the yard to Albany Terrace.

"Hurrau! We'll soon be inside, my lads! Down with the gates!"

It was the voice of Nelson Lee! Herman recognised it instantly, and in far less time than it takes to tell he leaped to the further wall of the library, slid back a secret panel, disappeared through the aperture and re-closed the panel from the other side.

No sooner had he done so than the air was rent by a deafening crash, whilst at the same instant the big wooden gates burst open and Nelson Lee dashed into the yard, his revolver in his hand, and half a score constables at his heels.

A mob of desperate servants sought to bar their way, but after a fierce struggle they were overpowered by the police, and taken into custody. By the time this was effected, the rest of the police, under the Chief Commissioner, had arrested all the servants in the house, and had discovered the trap-door leading down to the vault in which the Prince of Ilirya was confined. As a matter of fact, the Chief Commissioner was just about to descend into the vault when Nelson Lee, flushed with victory, rejoined him.

In the meantime, the vault had been the scene of an unexpected tragedy

As the reader will remember, Herman had ordered Fairfax to remain with the Prince until he (Herman) returned. He had also instructed one of the servants to station himself beside the closed trap-door, so as to be at hand in case of emergency.

When this servant heard the shouts of alarm which greeted the appearance of the police, he ran upstairs to ascertain what was happening. Finding that the house was in possession of the police, he rushed back to the trap-door, flung it open, and shouted the news to Fairfax. Then he dashed upstairs again, with the intention of making his escape, but was subequently captured and handcuffed like the rest.

At the moment when the servant opened the trap-door and shouted out his startling news, the Prince was reclining on the couch and Fairfax was sitting in one of the easy-chairs, with his revolver still in his hand. Both men instantly sprang to their feet, the Prince with a shout of triumph, and Fairfax with a cry of dismay.

"So your cunning scheme has failed, after all!" said the Prince with a happy laugh.

Fairfax made no reply. For a moment he stood listening to the sounds of the conflict overhead; then, with a swift and sudden movement, he darted to the foot of the ladder, intent on making his escape.

Quick as thought the Prince sprang forward and threw himself on Fairfax from behind. With a strength that was born of despair, Fairfax hurled him off and levelled his revolver.

"Stand back!" he roared, brandishing his

weapon "If you attempt to lay a hand on me, I'll shoot you down like a dog!"

But whatever his faults might be, the frivolous young Prince was no coward. He rushed at Fairfax a second time, and the next instant the two men were locked together in a desperate hand to hand encounter.

For several minutes they reeled and staggered across the vault, neither claiming much advantage. Then—how it happened can only be conjectured—in the midst of the struggle the revolver suddenly went off. And when Nelson Lee and the Chief Commissioner arrived on the scene, they were just in time to see Fairfax slide out of the Prince's arms and sink in a lifeless, huddled heap on the floor of the vault.

"Thank Heaven your Royal Highness is safe!" cried Nelson Lee, as he and the Chief Commissioner sprang down the iron ladder. "Are you injured?"

"Not in the least," said the Prince. "But never mind about me. Attend to this fellow."

The detective dropped on his knees and hurriedly examined Fairfax.

"He needs no attention," he said gravely. "The bullet apparently pierced his heart, and death must have been instantaneous. How did it happen?"

"I can only suppose," said the Prince, "that he must have accidentally pressed the trigger of his revolver whilst we were struggling. At any rate, I call upon you gentlemen to witness that I was in no way responsible for his death. And now tell me how you discovered I was here?"

(Another Splendid Instalment Next Week.)

Editorial Announcement.

My dear Readers.

The harsh treatment meted out to the unfortunate cottager on the Bushwick estate by Mr. Ratley, and the strong action taken by the Juniors in preventing the tyrannical estate manager from carrying out his threat against the cottager, must inevitably lead to a serious conflict between the boys and the powers that be in that pleasant corner of Hampshire where the holiday party are now encamped.

MR. RATLEY'S BAD NAME.

The Earl of Bushwick would seem to be utterly incapable of asserting himself over any ruling made by his steward, Mr. Ratley, while the Countess of Bushwick will not be bothered by the affairs of the estate. Thus, Mr. Ratley enjoys a free hand to do as he thinks fit, and, as we have seen, he wields this power in a manner that has brought his name and that of the his master into disrepute among the poor tenants of the estate.

ST. FRANK'S TO THE RESCUE!

This unfortunate state of affairs would go on indefinitely unless someone takes the matter up. The Juniors are determined therefore to do something to help the tenants before they leave the neighbourhood of Bushwick. As to how far they succeed, this will be told in next week's rollicking story, "CHAMPIONS OF THE OPPRESSED; or, The Battle of Spinney Cottage!"

"WIRELESS REVIEW AND SCIENCE WEEKLY."

I would like to draw your attention to a new wireless paper which every enthusiast in this fascinating new science should make a point of getting. This new weekly, called "THE WIRELESS REVIEW," will keep you in touch with all the latest scientific developments in wireless. It will be well illustrated with photographs and diagrams, and only the highest experts of wireless to-day will contribute to its pages.

No. 1 of the "WIRELESS REVIEW" is now on sale at the low price of 3d.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN!

You have all heard of the phantom ship of Vanderdecken that is said to haunt the high seas until the crack of doom! A new version of this famous story begins this week in "YOUNG BRITAIN," from the magic pen of that prince of modern adventure writers, Mr. Draycott M. Dell, author of "Drake's Drum" and "Carrion Island." In this new story of "The Flying Dutchman" Mr. Dell discovers a descendant of Vanderdecken, who sets out to solve the mystery of the phantom ship of his famous ancestor.

No. 3 of "OUR STUDIO PORTRAIT STUDIES," representing a special character study of Clarence Fellowe, familiarly known as "LONGFELLOW," will be one of next week's attractions.

THE EDITOR.

The Case of the Baronet's Son!

The Adventures of Gordon Fox, Detective.

CHAPTER I.

AN EARLY SUMMONS—SIR BELTRAN'S NEPHEW—WHAT THE FOOTPRINTS TOLD.

THE Easter holiday's came late that year—it is the time of our story—and the warm April sun, scarcely an hour up, was kissing the pale-green foliage and the gorgeous flowers, and gilding leafy avenue and sparkling water, as Sir Beltran Belfort and his companion drove along Birdcage Walk in the early morning. Gordon Fox breathed in the cool, sweet air with keen delight; but the baronet, haggard and dull-eyed and unshaven, stared straight and vacantly before him, his features now and then twitching with suppressed emotion.

The detective had been called from his bed, hurried into the waiting cab after a mouthful of breakfast, but as yet he had not the slightest knowledge as to what his client required of him.

"If this matter is urgent, it is a pity to waste time," he said finally. "I would suggest, sir, that you give me some idea of——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Sir Beltran Belfort. "I should have told you all at first, but I am so distressed that I hardly know what I am doing. I will briefly explain the situation before we reach my house, where a difficult task awaits you.

"I must start back in the past. I had a brother, slightly younger than myself, who married early and died young. He left a son, Oliver, who grew up to be an unprincipled and dissolute scamp, a gambler and loafer. He spent all the money that he got from his father, and then looked forward to inheriting mine, for at that time I was fifty years of age and unmarried, and the estate was unfortunately entailed.

"I last met my nephew in Paris, under degrading circumstances. He asked me for money, and I gave him fifty pounds. 'It is the last you will get, unless you mend your ways,' I told him. 'You shall never touch my property, for I intend to be married very soon.' That threw him into a rage. 'If you marry and have a son,' he swore, 'I'll take jolly good care that he don't inherit.' I left him then, and subsequently I lost track of him completely."

The baronet paused.

"This happened fifteen years ago," he went on. "Two months afterwards I married, and in due course my son Rufus was born. The years rolled on, and I began to believe that my nephew was dead. Last week Rufus—he is now a lad of fifteen—came up from school for the holidays, and he has been stopping in town with me. In a day or two we meant to go down to my country seat in Hampshire, where my wife is now staying.

"At seven o'clock last evening I visited a retired family servant, who is ill. He lives in Filton Street, a mean little thoroughfare off the Cromwell Road, and in that street, as I was returning from the visit, I saw the face of Oliver Belfort at a first-floor window of a house numbered forty-seven. I cannot be mistaken; though fifteen years have passed I recognised him positively. At once I remembered his threat, and it caused me great uneasiness. I would have gone home immediately, but I had an important engagement to keep in the West End.

"In Piccadilly I was knocked down and stunned by a taxicab in front of my club. I was carried inside, and while half unconscious I was given a sleeping draught, and put to bed. When I woke it was four o'clock in the morning. I dressed and hurried home, to find that my son had been kidnapped in the night.

"In the shrubbery under his window I found a coil of rope with a hook attached, and on the soft earth were the footprints of a boy and a man. The latter were made by Oliver Belfort. He must have climbed up to the room by the ivy, drugged Rufus, and lowered him by means of the rope, which he then switched free My first thought was of you, and I hurried off to Queen Street.

"Find my son, Mr. Fox, and I will reward you well. The scoundrel is probably holding him for a ransom; but on the other hand he may——"

Sir Beltran's voice choked with emotion. The cab had just then stopped before a large mansion in Stanhope Gardens, South Kensington. The two men got out, and the next instant Gordon Fox was examining the keyhole of the front door, where he discovered faint traces of wax.

"I presume this door was left so that you could open it with your latch-key?" he asked.

"Yes; it was never bolted until after my return at night," replied the baronet.

Simmers, the butler, admitted his master,

and the detective, and accompanied them to the walled garden at the rear of the house. Gordon Fox looked up at the thick crop of ivy that reached to the lad's window on the first floor, glanced at the coil of rope, and then gave his attention to the footprints, which had not been disturbed. He noticed that those left by the boy were faded and half-washed out, while the impressions of the man's boots were minutely distinct. He knew at once that they had been made at different times, and a puzzled expression crossed his face.

"There was a heavy rainstorm last night," he said to the butler. "I don't suppose you can tell me when it began, or how long it lasted?"

"I can, sir," replied Simmers. "Master Rufus came in at ten o'clock, and shortly afterwards I retired. I hadn't got to sleep when the storm burst at eleven o'clock. I lighted a candle to close the window—that's how I saw the time—and I lay awake listening to the thunder and rain, which kept up for an hour."

"Thank you," said the detective. "And now let us go upstairs, Sir Beltran," he added.

The back room on the first floor was a regular boy's den, littered with books and fishing-tackle, dumb-bells and exercise clubs. Gordon Fox made an exhaustive search, and finally, reaching into an oak chest that he had drawn from under the bed, he brought up a pile of penny dreadfuls, the covers printed in red, blue and yellow.

"What's this?" he exclaimed. "'Gory Grimgall, the Pirate of the Four Seas.' And more like it. Filthy trash!"

"I never knew that my son was in the habit of reading such pernicious stuff," declared the baronet.

The detective did not answer. Delving deeper, he found a strip of flannel with pieces cut out of it. He slipped it into his pocket with a smile, but not until he had observed that the empty spaces corresponded with a skull and crossbones.

"Who were your son's particular chums?" he asked abruptly.

"Two lads by the name of Ferrars, Jack and Noel," replied Sir Beltran. "Their father, Mr. Austen Ferrars, lives at Hill House, Hoveton St. John, near Wroxham, in Norfolk."

"Has your boy been corresponding with them lately?"

"A Norfolk letter came for him this evening, sir, and I forgot to tell him," put in the butler. "This letter was on the hall table when Master Rufus went up to bed, but it was gone this morning."

"I saw nothing of it," said the baronet. "This is very strange! Why, my son's portmanteau is missing!" he added. "That scoundrel Oliver could hardly have——"

"Sir Beltran, I have partly solved the mystery," interrupted Gordon Fox. "There has been no abduction. Between ten and eleven o'clock last night, before the storm, Master Rufus left his room by climbing down the rope, which he jerked off the ledge and hid in the shrubbery. Some time after twelve o'clock, when the rain had ceased, Oliver Belfort entered the house by the front door, with a key that he had made with a wax impression. He took the letter from the hall table, passed upstairs to your son's room, found him missing, and lowered himself to the garden by means of the ivy. The footprints clearly prove the difference in time. Since he has been lodging in the neighbourhood, your nephew had no doubt managed to ascertain where the boy slept."

"But—but I don't understand," gasped the baronet. "Can my son have run away through reading this pernicious literature?"

"That is my belief."

"And do you think that Oliver will follow him?"

"I fear that he will. The stolen letter has probably given him a clue. But do not worry, Sir Beltran. I intend to get on the track of the scoundrel as speedily as possible, to find him and your son. Have patience, and don't break the news to Lady Belfort just yet. I will wire to you as soon as there is any news to send. And now, can you give me a photograph of the boy?"

A recent one was soon found, and the detective hastened away.

CHAPTER II.

THE LODGER WHO LEFT—GORDON FOX GOES TO NORFOLK—ON THE TRACK.

FROM Stanhope Gardens Gordon Fox went to Filton Street, to the number mentioned by the baronet, where a voluble landlady confirmed his suspicions. A man by the name of Brockley had been lodging there for a fortnight on the first floor front. He had come in about one o'clock on the previous night, and early that morning he had paid his bill and left, not saying where he was going.

"The man was Oliver Belfort," the detective told himself, as he drove to Queen Street. "If my theory is right—and I am sure it is—the stolen letter has taken him down to Norfolk. He must have caught the 9.30 train; but that won't make much difference, for he will be slow and wary in carrying out any evil plans he may have formed. But suppose it should be a long and difficult task to find the lads? It looks as if Sir Beltran Belfort's son was in deadly peril."

Gordon Fox changed his attire at his rooms, packed a small bag, and left Liverpool Street by the 1.30 express, which landed him at Wroxham at half-past four in the afternoon. The yachting season proper did not open until July, and the pretty Norfolk village was quiet and sleepy. Close to the bridge were large boat-building and storing sheds, and the owner of these proved to be the man the detective wanted.

"Yes, sir; Mr. Austen Ferrars' two sons keep their yacht here," he said. "They started down the river in the Primrose about noon, and they had a third lad with them. That's the one," he added, as the photo-

graph of Rufus Belfort was shown to him. "It's the image of him."

"Has any other boat left since noon?" inquired Gordon Fox.

"Not one, sir. Not a craft of any kind has put out from Wroxham. It's the wrong season."

The detective hesitated for a moment, then concluded that Oliver Belfort had shrewdly gone to some other river station—perhaps Acle, or Potter Heigham.

"I shall want a small yacht myself, and at once," he said.

"And a lad to help you?"

"Yes, I think so."

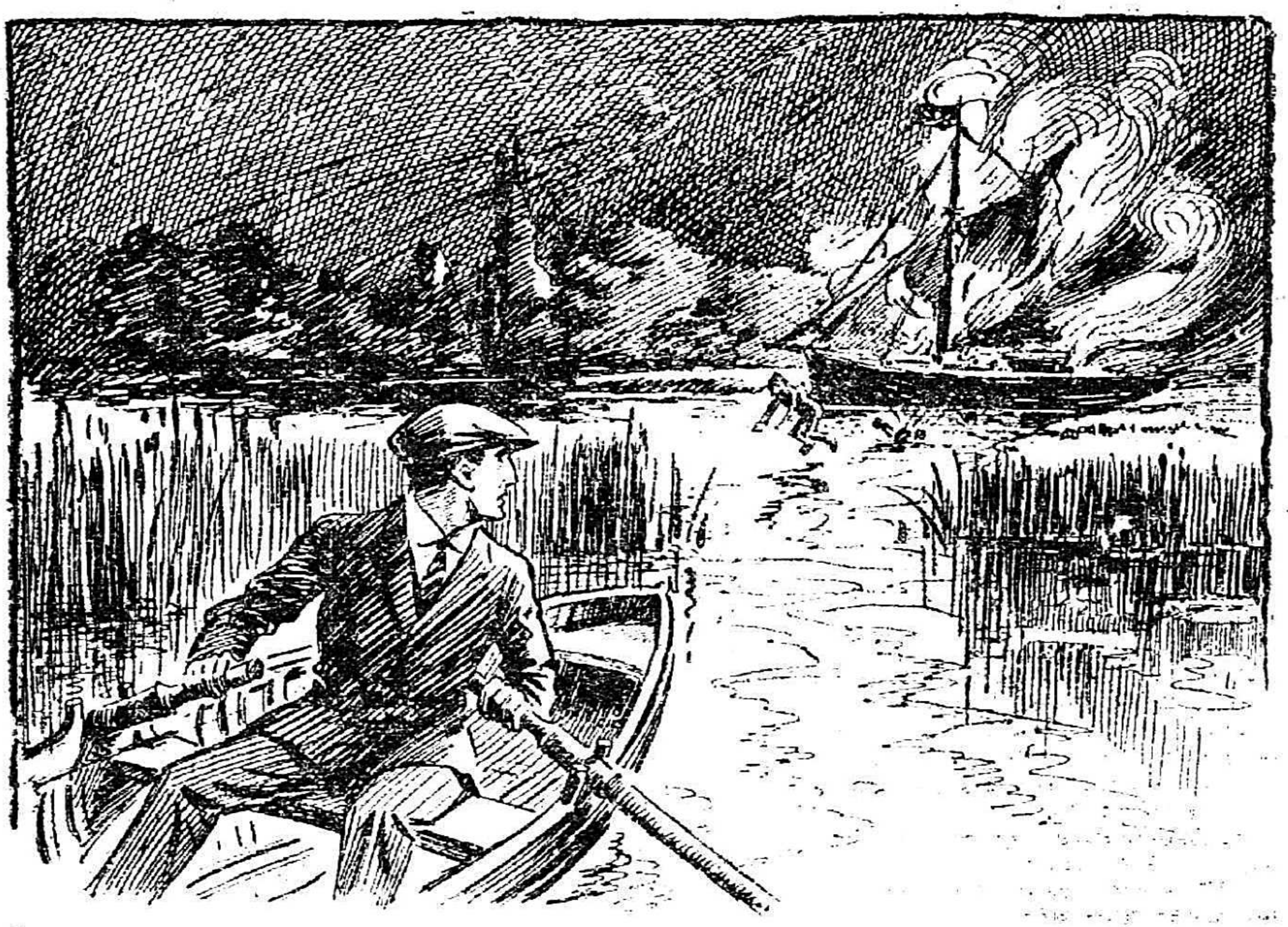
"Well, sir, you can have both," replied the man. "They'll be ready in half an hour. I'll attend to the provisioning."

Gordon Fox ate a leisurely meal at the King's Head, and at a quarter-past five he started down the Bure in a small sailing-vessel called the Bream, to which a dinghy was attached. He was accompanied by Peter Rudd—a simple-minded, stupid youth of eighteen, who, however, was thoroughly at home on a boat. The two went as far as St. Benet's Abbey, and there tied up for the night. The detective was familiar with Norfolk waters. There were two separate rivers and broads near at hand, and he decided to search these in turn before trying the flat and uninteresting waterways towards Acle Bridge.

A start was made at dawn the next morning. The Bream cruised up the River Ant to Barton Broad, returned to the Bure, and ascended the Thurne to Horsey Mere. The day was now drawing to a close, and the search had been fruitless. A number of yachts were about, but none of them was the Primrose, and none had seen that missing craft.

"I was afraid of this," thought Gordon Fox. "I only hope that scoundrel Belfort has been no more successful than I have been. I hardly know where to look next."

A little later, as the Bream was beating down the Thurne, the mast snapped off during a sharp tack. The yacht was run ashore—the wind was too strong to permit of easy towing by the dinghy—and the detective went off to Potter Heigham, a distance of more than a mile, to repair the damage. He was returning with a new mast, and had gone about half way when he heard shouts of alarm ahead of him. He quickened his pace to a run, but all was silent long before he reached the spot where he had left



At a glance he saw that he had come just in time. The yacht Primrose was wrapped in hissing flames that had caught the black flag with the white flannel skull and cross-bones. The crew of three had leapt into the water and were splashing about wildly.

his companion. Peter Rudd rose from the bank, dripping wet and blubbering with rage.

CHAPTER III.

THE PIRATES—PETER RUDD WALKS THE PLANK—THE FIRE IN THE REEDS.

"WHAT'S the matter?" cried Gordon Fox. "What has happened to you?"

"Pirates!" gasped the lad. "River pirates, sir—three of them! They had a yacht, with a black flag with a skull on it floating from the topmast—boo, hoo!—and they wore masks on their faces. They ran alongside the Bream, and jumped on board. They asked me if I had any gold or jewels, and when I said no—boo, hoo!—they made me walk out on a plank and tipped me into the water."

The detective could not help smiling.

"You saw the name of the boat?" he inquired.

"I couldn't, sir. There was canvas tacked over her bows."

"Which way did it go?"

"Up the river. I watched as far as I could see it—boo, hoo!—and then I think the sail turned into Heigham Sounds."

"Heigham Sounds, eh?" said Gordon Fox. "That leads to Hickling Broad, which is a lonesome sort of a place. Dry your tears, Peter, and untie the dinghy. That pirate craft was the Primrose, and we're going to overhaul the audacious young pirates if it takes us all night."

It was now dusk, and the April night was falling rapidly. The Bream was left to take care of itself, and the detective and the lad put off in the dinghy. They crossed the river, and for nearly a mile rowed up the shore, when they swerved abruptly into Heigham Sounds.

With a rippling noise the boat trailed on close to the left side, casting a dim reflection, until it had gone two or three hundred yards. Suddenly Gordon Fox stopped rowing.

"What's that?" he murmured.

"Oars, sir!" whispered Peter. "And coming this way from the left!"

They waited in silence, peering alertly, while for a few seconds the creaking and splashing approached. Then a blaze of light shot up somewhere back in the reeds, and the next instant, from one of the tiny channels, appeared a man pulling hard at a small boat. At once the terrible truth flashed upon the detective.

"I've got you, Oliver Belfort!" he exclaimed, levelling a revolver. "Up with your hands!"

The man sprang to his feet with an oath, fumbling for a weapon, and as quickly overbalancing himself, he pitched backward into the water. He rose to the surface and swam away, heading across the Sound with long, desperate strokes. Three tugs, and Gordon Fox had run the dinghy alongside the abandoned boat.

"In with you, Peter!" he shouted. "After that scoundrel! I don't want him to be drowned. Stun him, and haul him aboard. Jump in!"

The lad tumbled into the boat. The lurid glare had flamed higher, making the scene as light as day, and as the detective grabbed the oars he heard fearful shrieks and cries. With all his might, working as he had never worked before, he drove the dinghy into the narrow, winding waterway, from which Oliver Belfort had emerged. On and on he pulled, hard and fast, until he shot out from the reedy cover upon the blood-red surface of a little lake.

At a glance he saw that he had come just in time. The yacht Primrose, moored at the farther side of the pool, was wrapped in hissing flames that had caught the black flag with the white flannel skull and cross-bones. The crew of three had leapt into the water and were splashing about wildly.

"Help, help!" they cried.

"Here you are!" shouted Gordon Fox. "This way!"

All struck out for the dinghy, and the three lads were helped to scramble over the gunwhale. Then, bending to his oars, Gordon Fox pulled into the shelter of the reeds, away from the scorching breath of the flames. The half-dazed lads knew nothing of the fiendish deed. Roused from sleep to find the yacht ablaze, they had escaped from the cabin by a dash.

"You're a precious lot of young rascals," the detective told them sternly.

"I've had enough of playing pirate," said Rufus Belfort.

"And so have I," Jack and Noel Ferrars vowed together.

The dinghy had glided out upon the open water, and in the dim light Peter Rudd was seen standing erect in the boat.

"No use, sir," he cried to the detective. "I couldn't get the man. He sank in the middle of the channel, and didn't come up again."

"Serve him right!" muttered Gordon Fox. "It was an easier death than he deserved."

. . . . . .

A wire was sent from Potter Heigham to Sir Beltran Belfort that night, and the next morning the three lads separated, the Ferrars boys going home to Wroxham, while Rufus Belfort went up to town to his father. The same day the body of Oliver Belfort was recovered from Heigham Sounds by dragging, and he was subsequently buried in Norfolk.

Jack and Noel Ferrars, having lost their yacht, were not further punished. A handsome cheque was presented to Gordon Fox, and Rufus Belfort, having received a severe lecture from his father promised to give up "penny dreadfuls" and in future read only wholesome juvenile literature.

THE END.

(*Continued from page 14.*)

have you know at once, Mrs. Grant, that you've got to get out of here!" he went on, addressing the girl direct. "I should like to know by what infernal impudence you came here?"

"That's not the tone to use to a lady!" said Handforth warmly. "Look here, unless you can talk differently, I'll——"

"Steady, old man—steady!" I interrupted. "We don't want to get into any quarrelling if we can help it. And we've got to remember that we took possession of this cottage without permission."

"Impudent young puppies!" snapped Mr. Ratley curtly.

"At least, Mr. Ratley, I think you might wait until we have given you our explanation," I went on. "We are boys from St. Frank's College, travelling about the country in caravans——"

"That's no interest to me!" interrupted the newcomer.

"Possibly not, but it's necessary that you should hear it," I continued. "It so happened that we camped in this valley last night. We were just going to bed, when he saw a glare in the sky——"

And I proceeded to go into all the details; described how we had appeared just in time to rescue Mrs. Grant and the children, how we had saved some of the furniture, and how we had vainly attempted to quell the flames. I told the man that we had housed Mrs. Grant in one of the caravans for the night, and that we had prepared this cottage for her reception.

"Of course, we're quite willing to come to any arrangement that's reasonable," I concluded. "If it's a question of rent, we'll settle that without any trouble. Until Mrs. Grant can fix up something else——"

"It's all very interesting, but it doesn't alter the fact that you have no right in this place!" interrupted Mr. Ratley, who had been fuming with impatience for some minutes. "I won't allow Mrs. Grant to remain here for another minute. She and her confounded brats must get out!"

I went very red.

"You'd better be careful, Mr. Ratley," I said curtly. "There are a good few of us here, and if you refer to Mrs. Grant's children in that way again, I won't be answerable for what the fellows do!"

"Are you threatening me?" shouted the man.

"No; I'm warning you!" I replied quietly.

For a moment he stood glaring, his face expressing his evil passion. Handforth was already pushing up his coat-sleeves, and several of the other juniors were looking warlike. There was something about this man's attitude which incensed them greatly.

"You're warning me, are you?" snapped Ratley. "Oh! That's very kind of you! But you'll allow me to tell you that I'm the master here, and I won't be dictated to by a pack of infernal schoolboys! Mrs. Grant, will you clear out now, or shall I turn you out?"

"I—I think I'd better go!" said Mrs. Grant, looking at us, her face pale.

"Go!" snorted Handforth. "Great Scott! Look here, Mrs. Grant, you buzz indoors, and stay there! As for this bullying beast, we'll soon settle his hash! I've never heard such abominable——"

"You young blackguard!" shouted Mr. Ratley. "Am I supposed to ask permission to use my own property? I say, that this woman shall not remain, and if you dare to oppose me, I'll have the law on you!"

"There's no need to get hot, Mr. Ratley!" I said. "Let's discuss this quietly. I've explained to you that Mrs. Grant has been burnt out of house and home. She's stranded, with two little children, and with her husband miles away. Are you going to be so heartless as to turn her out into the open road, when this cottage is waiting here, empty?"

"I'm not going into any explanations and details!" snapped Ratley. "My word is final! Neither the woman nor her children can remain. I can't help their troubles; they've got nothing to do with me!"

"In other words, you label yourself a heartless cad?" I asked.

"You'd better not goad me, boy!" replied Ratley harshly.

"If Mrs. Grant can't stop here, where is she going, until her husband can find her new quarters?" I demanded.

"I don't know, and I don't care!"

"You're willing to let her be out in the open?"

"The whole thing is not my business!" retorted Ratley. "If this woman lets her house burn down, it's not my concern! I'm not a philanthropist; I can't supply cottages to everybody who happens to be stranded!"

"But this is exceptional——"

"That's not the point!" interrupted Mr. Ratley curtly. "Good heavens! Am I to stand here arguing all the morning? That woman is not staying here, and neither are you boys! I'll give you just five minutes to clear out!"

We looked at the man with grim fury.

"Wait a minute, you fellows!" I said, as I saw that they were restive. "There's one thing I want to ask you, Mr. Ratley. Is this cottage yours—your own absolute property?"

"No! I mean——"

"No?" I shouted. "It's not yours? Why, what right have you to turn——"

"This cottage is on the Bushwick estate, and I'm the steward of that estate!" replied Mr. Ratley angrily. "My word is law, and I won't be opposed. To all intents and purposes, this cottage is absolutely mine."

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted, feeling more comfortable. "We're learning things! So you're only the steward? In other words, you're the estate manager? There's somebody higher than you?"

"There's nobody higher than I!" snarled Mr. Ratley. "This estate is entirely under my control, and there is nobody to appeal to over my head! Now, will you get out?"

"I'd like to know who your employer is?" I said doggedly.

The man swore.

"If you think I'm going to be questioned like this, you've made a mistake!" he shouted, red with fury.

"And if you think we're going to listen to your foul language, you've made a mistake!" roared Handforth. "My hat! In front of a lady, too! In front of children! Grab him, you chaps!"

"Wait!" I broke in. "Mr. Ratley, I think you ought to apologise to Mrs. Grant for swearing!"

"You—you—you——"

Mr. Ratley was quite unable to give a lucid answer.

"We've come to a firm decision!" I went on, knowing that the other fellows heartily agreed. "We're going to stay in this cottage, and we're going to see that Mrs. Grant is not interfered with. And we'll approach your employer, and put the whole facts before him, and there's no doubt that he'll understand."

The estate steward was beside himself with fury.

"Will you go?" he snarled. "Will you go, or shall I kick you out?"

"We won't go!" I replied. "As for kicking us out—try it!"

"Yes, try it!" roared Handforth defiantly.

Mr. Ratley lost every ounce of his self-control. He was one of those bullying, men who generally get their own way—the kind of man who makes himself a terror of simple, ignorant people. He found that we showed absolutely no fear of him.

And it was a bit of a shock for Mr. Ratley. Instead of acting like a reasonable man, he simply flew into a violent rage.

"If you start any trouble, Mr. Ratley, don't blame us for the consequences," I said curtly. "Nobody but a blackguard and a cur would act in this way to Mrs. Grant and her children after their disaster."

Ratley took no notice of me, but suddenly pushed his way through into the cottage and made a grab at one of the children. He was in such a rage that he was capable of any violence. And it was a certain indication of his character that he should attack one of those tiny mites.

Reggie Pitt planted himself in the way just in time.

"No; I don't think so!" said Pitt quietly.

"Out of my way, you young cub!" snarled Ratley.

He brought his stick round, and it struck Pitt across the shoulders—not a heavy blow, for Ratley could get no swing to it. But Pitt staggered a trifle, and his eyes blazed.

He drew himself back, and his fist clenched itself. The next second he would have lunged out at Ratley with all his strength. But he was not permitted to do so. About ten fellows fell upon Ratley like a scrum in a rugger match.

The man went down, howling, cursing. Somehow or other he was dragged out through the doorway, kicking, panting, and swearing. He was hauled out by his legs, and carried down the garden-path.

Mrs. Grant stood looking on, horrified.

But the juniors were thoroughly aroused, and they were fully justified in their action. The man had acted like an utter blackguard, and deserved everything he got. He had asked for it.

If he had apologised then—if he had regretted his rage—he would have been released. But his foul language, and his wild ravings, only drove the fellows to further anger.

"There's a pond over there!" shouted Handforth. "Come on!"

"Good! We'll duck him!"

"Rather!"

"You—you young whelps!" snarled Ratley helplessly. "I'll have the law on you for this! I'll have you—— Gug—gug—gugh!"

His tirade came to an end as Handforth plunged a cap over the man's mouth. And then, carried in spread-eagled fashion, Ratley arrived at the pond. It was only a small thing—one of those little ponds, stagnant and peaceful enough. Upon the surface there was a kind of greenish slime.

"One—two—three!" exclaimed Handforth.

Mr. Ratley was swung backwards and forwards, and at the word "three" all the fellows released their grip. The man went through the air, kicking and screaming with rage.

Splash!

He descended beneath the green surface of the pond, and disappeared. And the juniors gazed with real satisfaction at the disturbed waters. Mr. Ratley came to the surface.

He was smothered with mud, slime, and stood there a sorry picture. The water was only about four feet deep, and he had stirred it up into such a condition of mud that it was almost like pudding.

"And serve you jolly well right!" said Handforth minor.

"Absolutely," declared Archie, with hearty approval. "I mean to say, this foul blighter has been let off dashed lightly. I regard him as a bally chunk of fungus! He's what a chappie might describe as a nasty growth!"

"I'm rather sorry we had to do it, but after the way he behaved there was no other course," I said, taking a deep breath. "I've never known a more brutal rotter. We told him all the facts, and yet he persisted in treating Mrs. Grant in that way! I mean to go to his employer!"

Ratley came staggering out of the pond.

"You—you young hooligans!" he snarled, gasping for breath. "You shall pay dearly for this outrage! It's a job for the police ——"

"Rats!"

"Say much more, and we'll chuck you back!"

"Cad!"

"Beast!"

Mr. Ratley received a perfect hail of scorn and contempt.

"And you can be jolly sure that we'll see that you suffer!" roared Handforth, as though Mr. Ratley had had a perfectly beautiful time. "We'll go to your boss, and get you hoofed out of your job! A brute like you oughtn't to be in the position of steward to a big estate!"

Mr. Ratley did not attempt to argue.

The temper of the boys was such that at the slightest provocation they would push the man back into the pond. And one taste of that spot was quite enough for Mr. Simon Ratley.

He was not interfered with as he emerged.

In fact, we all gave him a wide berth. Mr. Ratley was not a pleasant object to come in close contact with. He stood there, dripping with water, mud encasing his boots and leggings, and with patches of greenish slime adhering to all parts of his person.

"Possibly you think this is the end of this affair!" he snarled hoarsely. "It isn't! I'll have you boys thrown out of the district——"

"Save your breath, Mr. Ratley," I interrupted. "When we explain all the facts of the affair, the sympathy of the police and the public will be entirely with us."

"Hear, hear," said Pitt. "Any decent-minded man would say that we've been lenient with you. And don't forget that Mrs. Grant stays in that cottage!"

Ratley clenched his fists convulsively.

"That woman and her brats go out!" he shouted. "I'll pitch them——"

Handforth started forward in the most warlike manner, and Mr. Ratley ceased speaking abruptly. In his present state he was in no condition to fight, and Handforth looked really formidable.

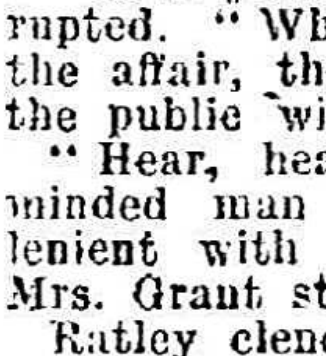
He slunk off.

Once, when he reached the bend in the lane, he turned and shook his fist. Then he vanished. And we turned and looked at one another. Well, the incident was over. But what was to follow?

It seemed to me that we had started something.

CHAPTER V.

VISITORS AT BUSHWICK CASTLE.



HANDFORTH placed his hands to his mouth, and yelled.

"And if you come back, old rats' tails, we'll give you another dose!" he bellowed, like a foghorn. "We'll show you something! Take my advice, and keep away from this cottage; it isn't healthy for bullies!"

"There's no need to let the next county know!" remarked Pitt. "My hat! I'll bet they heard that shout over in Russia!"

Handforth glared.

"You leave my voice alone!" he retorted. "I'll guarantee that Ratley heard what I said, anyway! Huh! The giddy nerve. Trying to turn Mrs. Grant out! It wouldn't have been so bad if he had been nice about it."

"And it would have been a different matter if the property was his own," I said. "As soon as I found out that he was only an agent—well, that made all the difference."

"Besides, it would have been quite another matter if Mrs. Grant had taken possession of the place without any justification," said Bob Christine warmly. "I've never known such a beast! We told him that it was our doing, and yet he raves at that poor woman! And he knows, all the time, that she was burnt out of house and home during the night, and hasn't got even a shed for shelter. Why, you'd think a miser would thaw under those conditions!"

Further exclamations of indignation broke out. Most of the fellows began to declare that we hadn't treated Ratley half severely enough. And then Mrs. Grant came out of the cottage, looking scared and pale.

"Has—has he gone?" she asked nervously.

I regarded her curiously.

"You seem to be afraid of this man?" I said. "What's the matter, Mrs. Grant? He's nobody—he's only a cheap bully. We weren't afraid of him—and you saw how he acted. The fellow's nothing more nor less than a blackguard."

"A dashed blister on the community!" added Archie stoutly.

Mrs. Grant nodded.

"Oh, I know he's an awful man!" she agreed. "But you shouldn't have treated him like that, boys. You don't know what power he has here!"

"Power?"

"Yes—yes! He's just like a king!" said Mrs. Grant. "He rules this district for miles and miles round—his word is law. Everywhere he goes the country people cringe before him, and obey his every command!"

Handforth snorted.

"Then it's about time somebody butted in!" he declared. "It's about time somebody kicked the fellow into the middle of next week! Great pip! You might think we were living in the old feudal days again."

Mrs. Grant nodded.

"I've had the same thought myself, at times," she said sadly. "This valley looks so peaceful—so beautiful. The whole Bushwick estate is one of the most glorious parts of England. And yet the simple labouring people are crushed unmercifully by Simon Ratley. They're little better than slaves."

"But who's responsible, ma'am?" I asked. "Ratley's only a servant, after all."

"He's the steward of the estate," said Mrs. Grant. "And he's employed by the Earl of Bushwick——"

"By Jove, yes!" I interrupted. "I ought to have remembered. I've heard about him. It's the Earl of Bushwick who takes all the prizes at the big flower shows. Who would

have thought that he was such a brutal landlord?"

"For two pins we'll chuck the giddy Earl into a pond, too!" said Handforth darkly.

"The first thing is to see him," I said. "It's just possible that he doesn't know what Ratley is doing. Plenty of these big landowners leave their affairs entirely in the hands of their agents, and they haven't got the faintest idea of what goes on."

"And then they're hated and vilified by their tenants," said Reggie Pitt. "Yes, we certainly ought to see Lord Bushwick. If he upholds Ratley, we'll make the whole giddy county ring with the story."

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's go now!" said Handforth. "Come on!"

"Oh, boys—please, please don't!" pleaded Mrs. Grant. "It was wrong of you to put my things into this cottage without permission. The only thing I can do is to get out, and I want you to carry everything into the road. I daresay I shall manage somehow until my husband comes. I don't want to cause any trouble—I don't want to——"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Grant, but we're not going to withdraw from the position," I interrupted. "We've taken up this stand, and we'll maintain it. If Lord Bushwick himself supports Ratley, it'll be different. But until we have put the matter before him, you'll stay here."

"Rather!" said Pitt.

"And we'll protect you, too," I added.

"Well, let's be off," said Handforth impatiently. "Where's Bushwick House, or whatever the place is called? How far? And which way do we get to it? We mustn't lose any time."

"The castle is about two miles away, and you can get to it by the little lane which branches off just down by the bend," said Mrs. Grant. "The lane leads into a fairly big road further on, and you can't mistake the lodge gates. Oh, but, boys! I don't want you to go to all this trouble for me!"

"You're wrong, Mrs. Grant," I said. "It's not for you at all. This affair has become a personal one now. Why, we wouldn't dream of clearing out, leaving things in this unsatisfactory position. Of course, it's no good promising anything. It's quite likely that Lord Bushwick himself is in London, or abroad. We'll soon find out, anyway."

I had an idea that the Earl would be at home, for it was just early summer, and the gardens at Bushwick Castle would be in their full glory. Since his lordship was so successful with his exhibits at flower shows, it stood to reason that he was an enthusiastic horticulturist.

At last Mrs. Grant consented. She couldn't do anything else. We were all determined to see this thing through to a finish, and her protests made no difference. Before continuing our travels, we meant to see that everything was right for Mrs. Grant and her children.

Handforth, of course, wanted to dash off without a moment's delay. He seemed to have an idea that we were a kind of Ku Klux Klan party, bent upon lynching the Earl of Bushwick on the spot.

But I quelled these enthusiastic designs.

"Look here, my sons," I said. "It's all very well to be full of dash and go—but we've got to act carefully. For one thing, we can't desert our own camp. We can't leave Mrs. Grant alone in this cottage. And there's no earthly reason why sixteen of us should go up to the castle."

"I'm going!" said Handforth firmly.

"Yes, you can come," I agreed, to save all argument. "And I shall want two others. A deputation of four will be quite sufficient. The other twelve will stay here—six as a kind of bodyguard for Mrs. Grant round this cottage, and the other six will look after the camp—and be within hail in case the enemy comes back with reinforcements."

Bob Christine nodded.

"Nipper's right," he said. "We've got to think of all these things. It's quite likely that Ratley will come back with a gang of roughs—to turn Mrs. Grant out by force. I'll stay here, in command if you like, Nipper."

"Good man!" I declared. "That's the style! And I'd like you, De valerie, to stay in charge of the camp. You can each keep five fellows with you."

It was arranged after a few minutes. My companions for the trip to Bushwick Castle were Handforth, Reggie Pitt and Archie. The latter vainly protested about being compelled to walk such a frightful distance, but I was firm. I felt that his inclusion in the deputation would give it a kind of tone. Archie's elegance was wonderful. And we were visiting an earl.

"We'll step it out lively!" I said, as we started along the lane. "It's no good you saying you can't do it, Archie—you've got to!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "The fact is, laddie, I'm resigned. And I mustn't forget that we are working in the service of a lady. I mean to say, a chappie has got to shove out the old muscles, and leg it pretty smartly on such an occasion. Nothing, as it were, is too much trouble for the fair sex!"

"Dry up, Archie—you worry me!" said Handforth. "We've got to decide what we shall do to this feudal earl. It wouldn't be a bad idea to drown him in his own moat! Or we might take him down into one of the dungeons and shove him on a rack! It seems to me the chap deserves to be tortured! He's nothing better than a despot!"

"I'm blessed if I can make it out," I said slowly. "You wouldn't think a man who was so fond of flowers could be such a brute to his tenants. Mrs. Grant says that everybody on the estate is scared to death of old Ratley. And Ratley, after all, is only employed by the Earl of Bushwick."

"It's about time somebody investigated," said Pitt. "It'll be rather good if we can bring about an alteration for the better. We shall feel that our caravan tour has not been without success."

"I trust, dear old primroses, that we find his lordship at home," said Archie.

"Being a keen horticulturist, I think the chances are that we shall find him on the spot," I said.

"What's a culturist?" demanded Handforth.

"A which?"

"A culturist!"

"I don't know what you mean, you ass!"

"Didn't you say that Lord Bushwick is a haughty culturist?" asked Handforth warmly.

"Yes."

"Then what is a culturist?" asked Handforth impatiently. "And why should he be haughty?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Pitt and I roared, and Archie dropped his monocle.

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" snapped Handforth tartly.

"My dear, fatheaded chump!" I said gently. I didn't say haughty culturist—I said horticulturist!"

"You didn't say it and yet you did say it!" exclaimed Handforth. "What kind of rot is that? You're off your rocker!"

"Not at all," I grinned. "Just a little misunderstanding, Handy. I don't know whether Lord Bushwick is haughty or not—being an earl he probably is. But he's certainly a h-o-r-t-i-c-u-l-t-u-r-i-s-t," I concluded, spelling the last word. "Now do you understand"

Handforth uttered a sniff of contempt.

"You—you funny lunatic!" he said, slightly red. "Why didn't you say so before? And fancy using a fatheaded word like that! I suppose it means he's a chap who collects moths and butterflies and things?"

"You're thinking of a naturalist," I replied. "I'm afraid your ignorance is rather shocking, Handy. If you look in any dictionary, you'll find that horticulture means the cultivating of gardens. In other words, Lord Bushwick is a chap who grows flowers and things of that sort."

"Then why couldn't you use plain English at first?" said Handforth tartly.

I didn't continue the argument. And it was quite useless to discuss Lord Bushwick, because we didn't know him, and it was a mere waste of breath. Our only hope was that his lordship would prove to be at home.

We had firmly made up our minds that Mrs. Grant was to be dealt with fairly—and we would not leave the district until we had made certain that everything was all right.

Besides, we now had a personal interest in the affair.

That encounter with Mr. Simon Ratley had got our backs up, and we meant to sift the matter to the bottom. The estate manager was a kind of despot in the neighbourhood, and if there was any chance of us improving matters in general, we would do so.

We took the lane that Mrs. Grant had indicated. And, before long, we came to a wide road which seemed more like a main highway. At the time, however, there was no traffic of any sort.

"Out of the way, you young cub!" snarled Ratley. He brought his stick round, and it struck Pitt across the shoulders. Pitt staggered a trifle and his eyes blazed.

And, in due course, we came upon some wide, magnificently wrought gates—great iron affairs with imposing granite pillars. And just within there was an artistically designed lodge. One gate stood wide open.

"This is the drive all right," I said. "Come on. There's nothing like boldness. We won't stop to inquire at the lodge—we'll go straight on to the castle. There's a chance that we'll be turned back if we stop here."

We walked on up the drive. It was a superb place, with rolling grass stretching away on either side—hills, valleys, and little clumps of woodland. And the golden sunshine of the early summer day bathed the whole scene.

The drive itself was lined with stately chestnut trees—and, here and there, in the distance, we caught sight of deer. And once, fairly close at hand, we saw a couple of stately peacocks. There was no doubt about it that Bushwick Park was a glorious spot—one of the fairest of the English countryside.

And then we came within sight of the castle itself.

Involuntarily, we paused, and looked in

silent admiration. The castle was old—gloriously old. Towers and turrets rose to the clear blue sky, and the walls were ivy-covered and gabled. It was one of those old English mansions, dating back for centuries. Indeed, Bushwick Castle is considered to be one of the most magnificent and picturesque ancestral homes in the land. And it is in an almost perfect state of preservation.

"I say, what a lovely place!" remarked Pitt admiringly.

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I mean to say, it's a dashed beauty spot on the old landscape. I thought Somerton's place was somewhat priceless, but this is absolutely the real thing."

"Oh, don't waste time here!" said Handforth, who had no eye for beauty. "While we're messing about, Lord Bushwick may be buzzing off somewhere. We've got to catch him—and put this thing straight in front of him. If he jibs, we'll jolly well tell him what we think!"

Walking on down the drive, we now came upon beautifully laid out flower-beds. Beyond, we could see glasshouses in profusion, and men were working in various places.

As we were passing one of these flowerbeds, which was a perfect blaze of colour, we saw one of the gardeners bending down, and groping among the green leaves. He was uttering peculiar grunting noises at the same time.

He was an elderly old fellow, attired in much worn trousers, a dilapidated alpaca jacket, and a kind of rush hat that was fraying perilously at the edges. He also wore a kind of green baize apron.

"Confounded nuisance!" he exclaimed audibly. "Upon my soul! What on earth am I to do now? What on earth am I to do? Gibbons—Gibbons! Where are you, Gibbons? Ah! Who's this—who's this?"

The old gardener pulled himself upright, and regarded us in a curious, peering way as we came up. His face was wrinkled, with a smudge or two of dirt here and there, and he was frowning with impatience.

"Is that you, Gibbons?" he asked irritably.

We grinned. Evidently the old chap was exceedingly short-sighted. Because he was looking directly at us, and if his sight had been normal he could under no circumstances have mistaken one of our number for the unseen Gibbons.

"No—we're visitors," I said. "Is there anything we can do?"

The gardener still looked at us, screwing up his eyes as though gazing into the far distance.

"Visitors?" he snapped. "Visitors? I can't help that—don't bother me! I've lost my glasses! The infernal things dropped off as I was bending over those geraniums. You know well enough that I'm as blind as a bat without my glasses! At least, Gibbons knows! Where's Gibbons? Go and find Gibbons for me!"

"I think it will be better if we find the glasses," I pointed out. "All right, old chap—don't you worry. Whereabouts did they drop off?"

Handforth was full of impatience, and saw no reason why we should waste time with this ancient gardener. But I had two reasons for stopping. One, I wanted to do the old fellow a good turn—and, second, it was almost certain that he would be able to tell us what we wanted to know about Lord Bushwick.

We went over a short strip of grass, and then commenced searching among the geraniums. The glasses were there, in full sight. This clearly indicated the helplessness of their owner without them.

"Here you are, grandfather!" I said genially.

He took the glasses from me, and adjusted them on his nose with a sigh of satisfaction. Then he turned his attention fully upon us. Instead of being mere blurs, we now shot into instant relief, and he could see us as we really were.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Boys, eh? Boys! I detest boys! Ahem! Thank you—thank you for the little service you have rendered! I shall have to have these glasses seen to! The confounded things will persistently drop off!"

"I suppose you're the head gardener here?" I asked.

The old man regarded us with interest.

"The head gardener, eh?" he repeated. "Yes, yes! Haven't you got eyes? What do I look like—an engine driver? Don't be so absurd—and don't bother me! These confounded grubs are eating into everything!" He glared at us. "Do you hear me? They're eating into everything! Gibbons ought to be ashamed of himself for allowing such a state of affairs. Pah! The man's a fool!"

"We're not particularly interested in Gibbons," I said. "I suppose he's one of your under gardeners? Well, look here. Do you know if Lord Bushwick is at home? We'd like to see him"

The old chap was bending over his flowers again.

"Grubs are detestable things! he said firmly. "I shan't rest content while these flowers are being eaten away in such a disgraceful fashion. Eaten! Look at them! It's—it's disgusting!"

He picked up a grub, and flourished it in our faces.

"Dash it all! protested Archie. "Kindly take the poisonous thing away, dear old lad! I mean to say, it doesn't interest me at all! A grub, broadly speaking, is a dashed unpleasant thing!"

"Oh, come on!" growled Handforth. "This old chap's dotty!"

"Eh?" said the old chap. "What's that? What's that? Good gracious me! What are you boys bothering about for? Go away!" He glared at us again. "Go away! I can't be pestered by a parcel of noisy schoolboys! I shall have to speak to Gibbons——"

"Do you know if Lord Bushwick is at home?" I persisted gently.

"At home?" said the gardener. "Bless my soul! This is appalling! Two caterpillars on one leaf! At home?" he added absently. "Yes, yes, of course Lord Bushwick is at home! He's always at home! Don't ask such ridiculous questions, young man! Two caterpillars——"

"Oh, it's hopeless," murmured Reggie Pitt, grinning.

"Geraniums," said the old gardener, "are hardy plants, but they need a great deal of attention. I shall have to have a serious talk with Gibbons. This sort of thing can't go on. Eh? What did you say—— Good gracious! Are you boys still bothering about. Go away! Shoo! Shoo!"

He seemed to think we were a flock of sparrows, about to peck at his precious seeds, or something.

It was obviously out of the question to get much out of him. He was one of those old-fashioned gardeners who live solely for their work. No doubt he was one of the old retainers at the Castle.

"Come on," I said. "We'll go straight up to the Castle itself."

This seemed to be the only thing to do. Handforth snorted with one of his most deliberate snorts. Archie gazed at him in surprise, and not without a little alarm.

"I trust, dear old geranium, that you're feeling well?" he asked anxiously. "I mean to say, that walrus effect, don't you know! That rhinoceros sound! I hope you are feeling fit?"

"Don't be a blithering idiot!" retorted Handforth politely. "That was a sound of disgust!"

"Oh, sorry!" said Archie. "I thought you were in dire ag., old dear!"

"A sound of disgust!" repeated Handforth. "I'm fed up with you fellows! Wasting time talking to that blind old josser! Him and his fatheaded flowers! Talk about Rome fiddling while Nero was burning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right—cackle!" went on Handforth sourly. "Well, didn't Nero burn?"

"He deserved to, but I always thought it was Nero who did the fiddling!" grinned Pitt.

Handforth started.

"Oh, well, I knew it was something like that!" he growled. "There's Mrs. Grant in danger of being chucked out on her giddy neck, and the kids slung into the road, and all you can do is to waste time talking with a flower maniac! It's my belief that chap in the green apron is wanted by some lunatic asylum or other! Perhaps we've come to the wrong place by mistake!"

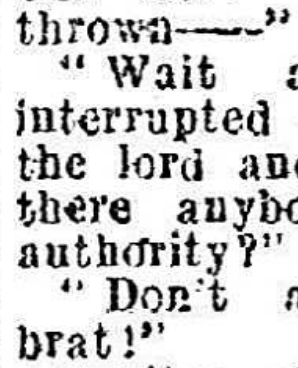
"I don't think so," I said grimly, coming to a halt.

I stared straight ahead of me, and the others found something in my tone which caused them to look up. We had now reached the wide paved terrace which flanked the entire front of the great castle. And, just turning one of the corners, was a familiar figure.

To be exact, it was the figure of Mr. Simon Ratley.

CHAPTER VI.

NOTHING DOING!



HE stood there, on the terrace, waiting.

Mr. Ratley had seen us at the same moment as we had seen him, and a black cloud had descended over his face. The estate steward had been pretty quick in changing into dry things—but, although he was presentable once more, it was quite clear that he was still in a shocking temper.

"Simon Ratley, eh?" murmured Pitt. "I think it ought to be Simon Legree! He reminds me of the villain of the piece in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' Legree was an overseer too, wasn't he?"

We didn't answer, for Mr. Ratley had strode up.

"You impudent puppies!" he exclaimed furiously. "Who told you to come here? Get out! Clear off before I have you thrown——"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Ratley," I interrupted quietly. "Do you happen to be the lord and master of this domain? Isn't there anybody else who has a scrap of authority?"

"Don't argue with me, you infernal brat!"

"After what happened this morning, Mr. Ratley, we don't accept your authority in the slightest degree!" I declared. "You proved yourself to be a bully and a cad—and we've got nothing but contempt for people of that sort. We came here to see the Earl of Bushwick."

"Oh, indeed!" snarled Ratley, almost beside himself.

"Yes, indeed!" I mimicked.

"If you imagine that you can come here, demanding to see his lordship, you have made a mistake!" said Ratley, controlling himself with difficulty. "Who do you think you are? A pack of cheeky schoolboys who seem to imagine that you can do exactly as you like, without any query! I do not intend to be driven into a scene here—you understand?"

"It wouldn't look well, would it, Mr. Ratley?" I said. "The castle windows all overlook this terrace. It wouldn't appear very dignified for you to start a fight, would it?"

"Just say the word, and I'll soon begin," said Handforth grimly.

The estate manager looked as though he could murder us on the spot.

"Are you going?" he asked in a suffocating voice.

"Not yet, old dear," replied Archie. "That is, I should say—old blighter!

Before we fade off into the offing, we intend to have a few choice and well assorted words with the dear old Earl! ..I mean to say, we've got a dashed lot to chat about. So kindly cease this stuff, and whizz off!"

"I've told you once—I shall not tell you again!" exclaimed Ratley. "There is no possibility of your seeing Lord Bushwick. The castle is practically empty. Lord and Lady Bushwick are in London."

"Oh!" said Pitt. "One of the gardeners told us that Lord Bushwick was here."

Mr. Ratley bit his lip.

"I don't care what the gardeners say!" he snarled, trying to hide his momentary confusion. "I won't allow you to remain——"

"What's this—what's this?" demanded an impatient voice. "Bless my soul! These boys again! What are you doing, Ratley? Where's Gibbons? I can't find that fool of a Gibbons! The man's always disappearing! These geraniums——"

"I would like to——" began Ratley.

"Not only geraniums, but other things as well!" continued the old gardener severely "The achilleas and the delphiniums are in an appalling condition! Never in my life have I seen so much blight! Heaven only knows what things are coming to nowadays! Where's Gibbons? Good gracious me, Ratley! Can't you tell me where Gibbons is? And these boys! Everywhere I go I see these boys! They're absolutely haunting me! Worried as I am, they're haunting me!"

"I should be glad of a few words with you regarding these boys, your lordship," said Ratley venomously.

"What!" breathed Pitt faintly.

"Your—your lordship?" repeated Handforth in a dazed voice.

"I mean to say, we've somewhat shoved the old foot in it!" murmured Archie.

I said nothing. But one thing was perfectly clear We had taken the old fellow in the dilapidated hat and the green apron for a head gardener—but he was, in reality, the Earl of Bushwick himself!

Remembering the way we had spoken to him, it was only natural that we should be somewhat confused. At the same time, the fault was not ours. There was nothing whatever in the old gentleman's appearance to indicate that he was the lord and master of this fair stretch of England's beauty. He looked no more like an earl than Handforth looked like a detective. Moreover, he had deluded us by answering our questions regarding Lord Bushwick.

I could not help feeling astonished—and with this astonishment there was a sensation of pleasure. For Lord Bushwick was totally different to what I had expected. Having heard the stories about the harsh way in which his tenants were treated, I had pictured the Earl to be one of those hard, unbending aristocrats of the lordly autocratic type.

But nobody less harmful than this old chap could be imagined. He was apparently alive for the sole purpose of tending to his beloved flowers. He was a genial looking, pottering old chap with no more ideas of autocracy than a stable boy.

I looked at him again—with his soil smeared hands, his somewhat grubby face, and his dilapidated clothing. I've heard of titled landowners who go about their own estates looking like tramps but this was the first time I had met one of the species.

"What's that? What's that?' asked his lordship testily. "You want to speak to me about these boys?"

"Yes, your lordship."

"Good gracious me!" said the Earl. "I can't waste my time in that way, Ratley! Don't I keep telling you that I want Gibbons? The man appears to be missing! I haven't seen him for hours—do you hear? Hours! And these delphiniums need immediate attention. Look!" said Lord Bushwick thrusting a caterpillar under Mr. Ratley's nose. "Look at that! Am I to have my flowers eaten up by these infernal things?"

Mr. Ratley backed away.

"I regret being compelled to bother you, but it is most essential, your lordship," he insisted. "These boys have taken possession of the little Spinney Cottage, and they've had the audacity to——"

"Of course," said his lordship thoughtfully. "Of course, caterpillars doubtless have certain purposes in life. I don't deny that caterpillars might be useful under given circumstances. But I won't have them on my flowers! As for Gibbons, I shall discharge the man at once if he doesn't improve!"

"Perhaps we can have a word with you, Lord Bushwick?" I asked firmly. "There was a fire down in the valley last night——"

"A fire?" said Lord Bushwick, starting. "Possibly that accounts for the blacks I found on the lobelias this morning! Blacks!" he added fiercely. "What do I grow flowers for? To have them smothered with soot and grime? How dare you light a fire in the valley!"

He glared at us angrily.

"But this fire——"

"It doesn't matter to me what fire it was—I won't have it," said his lordship explosively. "Ratley, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! What do you think you are? Don't I pay you to look after the estates? And yet you allow fire to be lit all over the valley!"

"My hat!" I groaned "If you'll just allow me——"

"Gibbons!" said Lord Bushwick triumphantly. "Splendid—splendid!"

He had just caught sight of a figure

rounding a clump of rose bushes, and he trotted away like a hound on the scent. He completely forgot all about us and Mr. Ratley, and the fire.

It was becoming quite clear to me that the Earl of Bushwick knew as much about his estates as a fruit hawker in the New Cross Road. He lived entirely for his gardens. And light was beginning to dawn on me. His lordship was not the harsh man I had believed. The simple explanation was that he left everything entirely in the hands of Simon Ratley, and the latter misused the trust which was placed in him.

I couldn't help feeling a bit out of my depth. Certainly, Lord Bushwick was amusing— but it was disconcerting to discover that he paid absolutely no attention to matters of importance.

"Well, are you satisfied?" demanded Ratley curtly. "Do you think it will be possible to talk with his lordship? Take my advice, boys, and get away from here! If you leave this neighbourhood at once, I may be inclined to overlook your disgraceful behaviour of this morning——"

"Thanks all the same—we're staying!" I interrupted. "And we'll stay here until we can get a proper hearing—unless, of course, you give us your word that Mrs. Grant will be allowed to remain——"

"Confound your impudence," snapped Ratley. "Within an hour from now Mrs. Grant will be turned out of that cottage —bag and baggage! And if you dare to thwart me again I shall not hesitate to invoke the aid of the law!"

Before we could find any suitable reply to this remark, a smoothly gliding limousine rolled up from the drive, and came to a halt just against the big main marble steps—only a few yards away from us. It was a magnificent equipage, and the chauffeur was dazzlingly smart in blue uniform with silver buttons.

He opened the rear door, and we noticed the whole car sag somewhat in that direction. A moment later the Countess of Bushwick appeared. She emerged from the limousine sideways.

In spite of the car's ample proportions, and the wide nature of the door, it was not quite wide enough to allow her ladyship to descend with absolute grace and daintiness.

As Pitt afterwards remarked, as soon as Lady Bushwick was out of the limousine, the springs of the latter gave a kind of chirrup of relief. This was not very surprising.

For the Countess of Bushwick was not exactly a chicken. She was an extremely grand person—vast, voluminous, with considerable portions of her face overflowing into her neck. She was attired in the height of fashion, she made liberal use of paint and powder, and there was an expression of supreme hauteur upon her aristocratic but generous features.

"Thank you, Ratley!" she exclaimed graciously, as the steward assisted her to alight. "A perfect morning, Ratley! Have you, by any chance, seen his lordship about?"

Lady Bushwick then became aware of our presence. She raised her lorgnette, and inspected us minutely through the glasses. Apparently, she was not exceedingly impressed, for her manner became frigid.

"Who," she inquired, "are these youths?"

"Please let me introduce my friends and myself, Lady Bushwick," I said, stepping forward. "We are boys from St. Frank's College, and we're on a caravan holiday. We've got our camp just down in the valley."

"Indeed!" said Lady Bushwick, with cold indifference. "That is very interesting, I am sure. If you wish to see over the park, I have no doubt that Mr. Ratley will give you a permit."

"No, it's not that, ma'am!" put in Handforth. "We'd like to talk to you about Mrs. Grant. Her place was burnt down last night, so we shoved her into a place called the Spinning Cottage——"

"The Spinney Cottage, your ladyship," translated Mr. Ratley.

Her ladyship fixed Handforth with an icy stare. Until now she had been disposed to look upon us with a kind of tolerant kindliness. But now her manner was completely cold. I had noticed that she had given a distinct start when Handforth had thoughtlessly addressed her as "ma'am." Such an appalling thing, no doubt, had never before occurred.

"I am not interested!" she said briefly.

With a tilt of her various chins, she turned away, and proceeded to mount the wide steps something after the fashion of a well dressed hippopotamus. But we were not going to be defeated a second time.

"Just a minute, Lady Bushwick, please," I said, walking up the steps beside her. "Don't take any notice of Handforth—he didn't mean to be rude. We want to know if you will give shelter to a woman and her children who were burnt out of their house last night? Can they stay in the Spinney Cottage until another place can be fixed. The cottage is quite empty, and they won't do any harm——"

"All matters connected with the estate are dealt with by Mr. Ratley," said her ladyship frigidly. "I cannot bother over these trifles. No doubt Mr. Ratley will do as you require."

"But Ratley tried to turn the woman out——" began Handforth.

"Oh, indeed!" said her ladyship. "Then I have not the slightest doubt that Mr. Ratley acted with complete justification. In any case, the entire control of the estate is in Mr. Ratley's hands, and I cannot interfere."

She walked on, and left us standing on the steps, feeling rather stranded. Ratley was regarding us with ill-concealed triumph. We

didn't say a word until her ladyship had vanished into the great doorway.

"The—the old cat!" said Handforth indignantly.

"We shall have to have another go at Lord Bushwick," I said with a grim note in my voice.

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" broke in Ratley. "This farce has gone far enough! Possibly you understand that I have absolute authority? And I warn you that if you dare to——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ratley, but we don't take any notice of you," I interrupted. "I'm quite certain that Lord and Lady Bushwick don't know your true nature. If they were aware of the fact that you are a cad and a bully, they wouldn't place their trust in you!"

The man went livid with rage.

"By Heaven!" he muttered. "I will make you suffer for this! And you may as well know at once that Mrs. Grant is going to be thrown out of that cottage—and her brats are going to be thrown out, too! I have my men in readiness—and they're going to act—now!"

He strode off, his eyes alight with evil pleasure.

He knew, well enough, that it was a hopeless task for us to approach Lady Bushwick—and just as hopeless to approach Lord Bushwick. For years this man had held full sway. It was not possible for us to gain the ears of his lordship.

And the position seemed pretty well hopeless.

CHAPTER VII.

FORCING HIS LORDSHIP'S HAND!

THE man walked along the dusty road with dragging, tired footsteps.

It was hot in the morning sunshine, and scarcely a cloud covered the sky to shield the wayfarer from the glaring rays. He trudged along with a purpose, however—limping slightly with his left foot.

George Grant was going home.

Upon his face there was an expression of haggard worry. And he had every reason to be filled with concern. For on the previous day he had lost his job. Through no fault of his own, he had been thrown out of work. The firm that had employed him had been doing bad business recently, and had been compelled to cut down expenses.

A certain number of men had gone—and George was one of their number.

So he took the opportunity to come home. It was a pretty long walk, but it cost him nothing—except a little shoe leather. For some time, during this morning walk, he had been wondering whether he should tell her the truth.

He had decided that it would be better not to do so. He could simply explain that there was no work that day, and on the morrow he would go back to the town, and seek fresh employment. But, finding himself with time on his hands, an irresistible longing to go home for a short spell had come over him.

George Grant was a well set up man—not more than thirty-three. There was a refined look about him, in spite of his shabby clothing. He walked with an upright back, and with a steady stride. He was clever, too—a man who could command other men, and do his work perfectly. But things were not any too good in England, and jobs were not to be had for the asking. For every vacancy there were a dozen applicants—sometimes hundreds. George Grant had been unlucky.

He gave a little sigh of satisfaction as he came within sight of a familiar bend. Just round that bend he would come within view of the thatched cottage. Perhaps he would see his little children playing about near the gate.

The tiredness went out of his gait, and he went forward with renewed energy. It was worth the walk—it was worth coming home. Perhaps it had been weak of him to succumb to the inclination, but he had felt depressed and miserable.

He turned the bend, and gazed eagerly at the scene. The cottage was poor enough in all conscience—but on his meagre salary, he could afford nothing better. For the same rent he could only have obtained a mere workman's slum dwelling in the town. And he couldn't think of letting his wife live in a place like that.

But, suddenly, George came to a halt.

Something seemed to rise in his throat, and he stood there, transfixed. Everything was the same—the trees—the meadows—the little wooded hill over to the left. But—but the cottage! It had gone—it was no longer to be seen!

Unbelieving, staggered beyond all measure, George gave a gasping cry of consternation. His amazement was more than he could understand. His brain was in a whirl. How could that cottage have been spirited away?

Two minutes later he knew the truth.

Bursting through the open gateway he came to a halt, his face suddenly turning to a sickly, deathly pallor. A choking cry came into his throat. The cottage itself was completely gutted to the last wall. Nothing but an empty shell remained.

For perhaps a full minute George Grant stood there, unable to think. He was like a stone statue. But then, in a moment, he changed. He seemed turned into a demented thing. Rushing forward, he ran wildly about, here and there. He shouted hoarsely, calling the names of his wife and children.

At last, after five minutes, he came to a pause, breathless and hot, and perspiring freely—but the pallor still remained. He could guess what had happened—he could picture it all. That dry, thatched old cottage was combustible as tinder. The place had caught on fire—it had burnt up like a torch, and—and—— The man covered his

face with his hands. He didn't dare to picture what had happened.

But the desolation of that scene was too significant. There was nothing—no sign whatever that a living soul had been saved. And there were no neighbours here. There wasn't a human being in sight.

George suddenly remembered that other cottage further along—not far from the little spinney. It had been empty—but perhaps there were tenants now. Perhaps they would know something——

Almost before the thought had formed itself, George Grant was running madly along the lane—running as he had never run before. Turning a bend, he came within sight of some peaceful looking caravans which were pulled up on the side of the road. Horses were grazing just beyond, on the marshes.

And there were boys—several of them, moving lazily about the camp.

Perhaps they would know something—perhaps they would be able to tell him what had happened at the cottage. He ran up, a wild figure—an extraordinary person to meet on such a sunny, peaceful morning.

De Valerie was having a little chat with Fatty Little outside one of the caravans—a chat concerning whether tinned salmon or tongue would be preferable for lunch. Fatty was rather inclined to think that both delicacies would be required.

But they paused in the midst of their discussion as George Grant appeared, rushing headlong down the lane. His sudden, unexpected appearance in that quiet little spot was something of a shock.

"What on earth——" began De Valerie.

"Perhaps he's hungry!" suggested Fatty, who had sometimes felt desperate himself.

"This man looks as if he's running for his life!" said De Valerie. "Great Scott! He must be mad, or something! I say! Hi! Wait a minute!"

De Valerie ran out into the road, and came face to face with George Grant. The latter, coming to a halt, was breathing heavily. Perspiration poured down his face, and in his eyes there was a wild light of anxiety and horror.

"Steady!" said the junior. "What's wrong with you?"

"The—the cottage!" panted Grant hoarsely. "My wife and children! Do—do you know anything——"

He came to a halt, unable to say the words that wanted to be said.

De Valerie understood in a moment. His expression changed—he knew why the man was so overwrought. He was Mrs. Grant's husband—and, having seen the ashes of the cottage, had come to the conclusion that a terrible tragedy had occurred. De Valerie hastened to explain.

"You're Mr. Grant, I suppose——" he began.

"Yes—yes! That's my name. But can you tell me——"

"It's all right—you needn't worry," said De Valerie quickly. "Your wife and children are quite safe. The cottage burnt down last night, but nobody was hurt, and quite a few things were saved, too."

He came to a halt, his face turning to a sickly, deathly pallor. A choking cry came into his throat. The cottage itself was completely gutted. Nothing but an empty shell remained.

Grant staggered slightly as he stood. The suspense had been terrible, and now that his awful anxiety was relieved, he felt suddenly weak. But a light of joy leapt into his eyes, and he clutched at the junior's arm.

"Thank God!" he muttered huskily.

"It's all right—don't upset yourself," said De Valerie, feeling rather uncomfortable. "You see, we happened to be camping here, and we saw the glare in the sky. It was a pretty close shave, I can tell you——"

"Did—did you help to save them?" asked George eagerly.

"Well, in a way," admitted De Valerie. "We buzzed along, of course, and found the place alight downstairs, so we got in through one of the back windows. Nothing much, you know—nothing to make a fuss of."

"But where are they?" asked the man intently.

"A bit further along the lane—in the little cottage at the bend," put in Fatty Little. "We put them there, and some of our chaps are guarding the place."

"Guarding it!"

"Yes," said De Valerie. "There's a pretty beastly kind of a reptile named Ratley—he seems to be an overseer, or something about here. He tried to pitch Mrs. Grant out, but we stopped him."

A frown crossed over George Grant's face.

"Ratley!" he muttered. "Ratley again! Well, I don't suppose I can expect anything else from him. I—I think I'll go straight along——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Fatty. "What about a snack? I've got some sandwiches here, and you look pretty used up."

Grant took a deep breath. Food was about the last thing he required just then—although, as a matter of fact, he was famished. His one desire was to get to that cottage as quickly as his feet would carry him.

"Thanks all the same—but I want to see the kiddies!" he replied quietly.

He walked on rapidly, and De Valerie accompanied him. And very soon they came within sight of the cottage, and Grant could no longer curb his impatience. He broke into a run, and gave a cry of joy as he saw his two little children playing about in the small front garden.

In a moment they were both in his arms.

"Why, George!" exclaimed Mrs. Grant, appearing at the door. "Oh! How did you know?"

"I didn't know anything—I just came by chance," said Grant, at length. "And when I saw that cottage in ashes I nearly went mad. I thought—I thought——"

"It must have been a terrible shock, dear," said Mrs. Grant softly. "And if it hadn't been for these wonderful boys, we should all have been burnt to death. Oh, George, I can't tell you how splendid they have been! They looked after us in the most wonderful way!"

Her eyes were shining as she went into full details of the fire.

She described everything that had happened—and was rather inclined to exaggerate the activities of the St. Frank's fellows. And by the time she had done, her husband was glowing with admiration.

He turned to the juniors who were standing fairly near by.

"I'm not much of a hand at talking," he exclaimed quietly. "But I think you youngsters will understand how I feel. Thanks for all you've done. I'd like to say a million times more than that——"

"There's no need to say anything at all!" said Bob Christine uncomfortably. "The only thing we did was to help a bit. Anybody else would have done just the same if they had been on the spot. No need to make a fuss about it, anyhow. Let's talk about something else."

But George Grant didn't want to talk about anything else.

He went all through the cottage, looking at the things that had been salved from the fire, and his wife described, again and again, how we had risked our own lives in order to rescue these goods. The juniors, of course, stoutly denied this, declaring that there had been no danger whatever.

And while they were still inside the cottage, Willy Handforth dashed in, rather breathless.

"Look out, you fellows," he said briskly. "Enemy's coming!"

"Eh?" said Christine.

"Old Ratley!" replied Willy briefly.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Oh, then there's nothing to worry about," said Bob. "If Ratley starts any more of his nonsense, we'll give him another dose of the duckpond. Wasn't one ducking enough for him?"

"Oh, boys!" said Mrs. Grant hurriedly. "You mustn't do anything to Mr. Ratley again—you'll only get yourselves into trouble——"

"Sorry, ma'am, but please leave this to us," said Christine firmly.

He went outside, with several of the other juniors, and they were just in time to meet Mr. Simon Ratley at the gate. The man didn't attempt to come in—in fact, he stood well away, half fearing that the boys might attack him.

"If you touch me, I'll——"

"We won't touch you, Mr. Ratley, if you stay outside," interrupted Bob.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Grant," snapped Ratley.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not allowing my wife to speak to you, Mr. Ratley," said George Grant, coming outside. "I'm rather particular about who she talks to. What do you want?"

Ratley looked at him, and his eyes glittered.

"Oh!" he said harshly. "So you have had the audacity to come, eh? And do you intend to remain in this cottage in spite of my strict instructions that you should clear out."

George Grant looked at the man squarely.

"There is not much love lost between you and I, Mr. Ratley," he said quietly. "It was owing to your influence that I lost my position at Bushwick Castle. I'm not a vindictive man—it's not my habit to bear grudges. Can't you allow us to remain here for a few days? Can't you unbend to that extent? Don't misunderstand me—I'm not asking for any favours. I wouldn't accept a favour from you. I'll pay the rent of this cottage, and——"

"You'll get out of this cottage!" shouted Ratley.

"You know about the fire—you know how we're stranded——"

"I don't care a hang about the fire!" raved the estate manager. "That is not my business! But I am not going to be thwarted and ignored by these schoolboys, or by you! I give you fair warning—get out of this cottage at once, or I'll take strong action!

"You brute!" shouted De Valerie hotly. "I just came here to tell you that you've

got one hour!" went on Ratley. "I am making preparations to have you thrown out—but I'll save you that indignity if you prefer. Leave this cottage at once, and I'll say no more. But it's got to be at once—while I look on!"

Cecil De Valerie answered before Grant could find his voice.

"Whatever Mr. and Mrs. Grant say, it makes no difference!" he shouted tensely. "They didn't seize this cottage—we did! It was our idea, and we don't intend to take orders from a blackguardly bully of your type! We'll stay here—and you can do your worst!"

"Hear, hear!" said Bob Christine heartily.

"You can put that in your pipe and smoke it!" said Willy.

Mr. Ratley shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of indifference. But his face was flushed, and his eyes were snapping with fury.

"Very well," he snarled. "We shall see!"

Without another word, he turned and strode off down the lane. Grant turned to us, his own eyes gleaming.

"I was a fool!" he said tensely. "I was a fool to ask that man a thing! I might have known what sort of an answer I should get! I'm not a coward, but I can't allow my wife and children to be exposed to any violence. I'm afraid we shall have to leave this cottage——"

"Not on your life!" interrupted De Valerie. "Look here—there are sixteen of us altogether, and we'll guarantee complete protection for Mrs. Grant and the children, and we'll be answerable for anything that happens. We're not going to let that beast gain the victory!"

"Never!" said the others grimly.

And then, a few minutes later, Handforth and Archie and Pitt and I appeared, having just returned from the castle. We heard all that had passed, and I expressed my full approval.

"Good!" I declared. "That was the right stuff to give him, De Valerie. Ratley has thrown down the gauntlet, and we'll accept it! It's going to be a fight! It doesn't matter about the law—in a case like this we've got right on our side!"

"But, boys, I can't allow you to incur any risk——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Grant, but this is our affair—even more than yours," I interrupted. "We've started on the job, and we'll finish it. We know that Lord Bushwick is a decent old sort. He simply doesn't know what's going on. But we'll let him know—we'll bring about a big alteration on this estate before we're done."

"Why, what do you intend doing?" asked Grant, with interest.

"We're going to fight Ratley to the finish!" I remarked. "We're going to show Lord Bushwick what kind of a brute he's got for an estate manager. And it won't take us long to get things straight. I'm jolly glad we came to this part of the country. I think we shall be able to help the community in general."

The other juniors were enthusiastic.

As for Ratley, we should be ready for him if he attempted any violence. I had come to the conclusion that it was quite useless doing anything in a hurry. The whole matter needed careful planning and arranging.

The Bushwick estates were in the control of Simon Ratley—and by all that I could hear he was a harsh tyrant—and he had proved this by his very actions. It was time that Mr. Ratley's despotic rule came to an end.

We had taken up Mrs. Grant's cause from the first, and we were not going to relinquish it now. The affair, in a way, was over. If we had chosen, we could have gone on our way, seeking fresh fields of adventure.

But we preferred to stay.

We would see things right on the Bushwick estates before we left our present camping ground.

And, by all appearances, excitement was looming. Little did we realise what startling, dramatic events were destined to take place in that quiet, peaceful corner of rural Hampshire!

THE END.

OUR STUDIO PORTRAIT STUDIES

OF FAMOUS ST. FRANK'S CHARACTERS.

No. 2. Edward Oswald Handforth.

Yours Truly,
E. O. Handforth.

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