ANOTHER FINE ST. FRANK'S HOLIDAY STORY!

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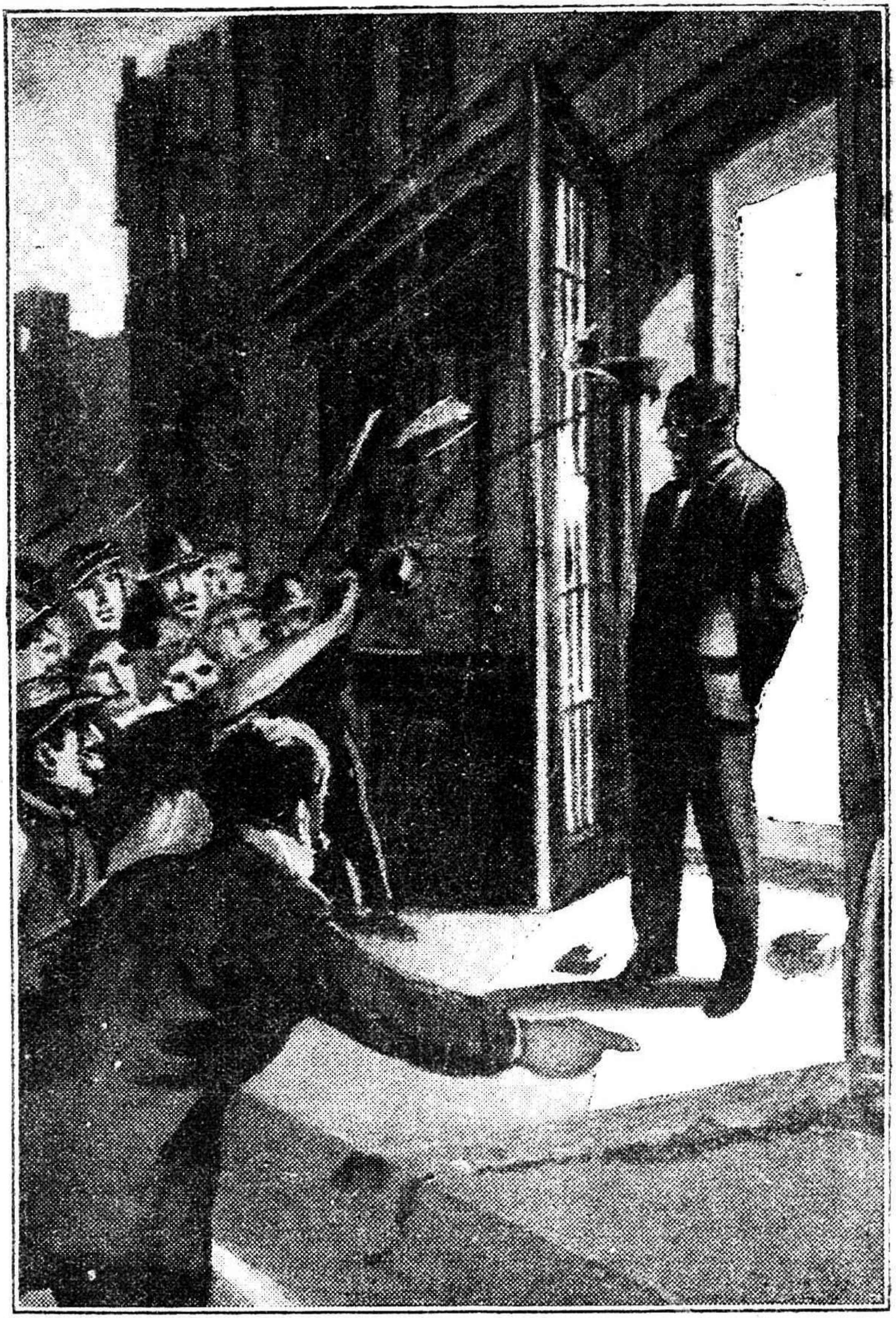
CHAMPIONS OF THE OPPRESSED!

This Week's Rousing Story of the Schoolboy Caravanners.

No. 418. EVERY WEDNESDAY. JUNE 9, 1923.



"Oh, so that's the way, is it?" snapped Ned Buckett. "All right! Mebbe you don't know that there's a bomb lyin' against the castle wall, and it'll go off unless you agree to listen to us."

Champions of the Oppressed!

or,

The Battle of Spinney Cottage.

The famous juniors of St. Frank's are enjoying a caravan holiday in the country. Their many and varied experiences off the beaten track have been the main feature of these fascinating series of stories. Adventures, at times amusing, at other times breathlessly exciting, come their way unexpectedly as they roam from place to place, camping here one day and somewhere else the next. In the present story, they find themselves encamped on land belonging to the Earl of Bushwick, an amusing new character whose pet hobby is gardening, of which, however, in spite of his enthusiasm, he knows very little. The earl himself is not really a bad sort. It is Mr. Ratley, the noble lord's estate manager, who has earned for himself the bitter hate of the tenants on the estate. A particularly hard case of one of the cottagers is discovered by the juniors. A cottage is burnt down, and the inmates—a poor man, and his wife and children—seek shelter in an empty cottage near by. Simon Ratley tries to turn them out, and would have succeeded but for the intervention of the juniors. War is then declared on the heartless and inhuman estate manager. How the juniors fight for the oppressed tenants of Bushwick estate is admirably told in the moving story below.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

AT BUSHWICK CASTLE.

THE EARL OF BUSHWICK snorted.

"Gibbons," he observed fiercely, "is an absolute idiot!"

And, having made this serious allegation concerning the absent Mr. Gibbons, the Earl of Bushwick proceeded to murder a particularly portly slug with a kind of fiendish relish.

Slugs and Lord Bushwick were deadly enemies.

During the past half-hour his lordship had executed no less than fifteen slugs of various colour and size. And he was feeling slightly victorious. This warfare was a daily habit.

The first thing in the morning, it was the earl's custom to sally forth, eager and grimly prepared for the fray, with patent sprays, syringes, and various other death-dealing implements. And slugs were not the only victims of Lord Bushwick's vendetta.

Caterpillars had a fairly ghastly time of it when his lordship got on their trail. As for green fly, these helpless creatures fairly

shivered with terror as soon as the enemy appeared. Vainly they attempted to hide themselves on the underside of the rose-leaves. Lord Bushwick was merciless; he gave no quarter. Green flies fell in regiments when he sounded the bugle for battle.

"It amazes me," said Lord Bushwick, addressing his remarks to a friendly hollyhock which nodded in the afternoon breeze. "It amazes me that a man can be such an infernal dolt! Gibbons is supposed to be my head gardener, by gad! He knows nothing! He's a born fool!"

The unfortunate Mr. Gibbons, in the meantime, was busily pruning some bushes on the other side of the lawn—quite unconscious of the acid remarks which Lord Bushwick was making to the hollyhock.

The flower-gardens of Bushwick Castle were looking particularly gay and fresh in the brilliant sunlight of the early June day. Velvety lawns stretched out in stately beauty. Rose trees adorned the borders, bearing exquisite blossoms. Flowers of every description made a picture of surpassing glory.

The only blot on the landscape, so to speak, was Lord Bushwick himself.

He was an elderly man, short-sighted, wearing big spectacles. He was attired in a dilapidated pair of trousers, a ragged alpaca coat, and a straw hat that looked in immediate peril of falling to pieces.

Lady Bushwick had long since given up all hope of getting her husband into respectable habits—habits that were befitting to a man who owned a somewhat large slab of the county of Hampshire. It was a constant source of worry to her ladyship that the earl insisted upon going about his lovely gardens, looking for all the world like a stray tramp.

The owner of this fair domain was quite unconscious of his own incongruous appearance. His interest lay entirely with the gardens. He lived for them. He and his flowers were all that mattered in the world.

On the various occasions when he had been questioned on the subject of attire, Lord Bushwick had irritably declared that if he couldn't go about as he liked in his own garden, what could he do? What did it matter? Everybody knew him. And no sane person could possibly perform gardening with any measure of success attired in a frock coat and top hat, or some such preposterous get up.

So Lord Bushwick pottered along in his own way, serenely content on sunny days, and morose and petulant on rainy days. If it ever happened that a spell of really wet weather settled over the county, the earl roved aimlessly about the big castle, like a child without its toys.

On these terrible occasions, his lordship's only consolation was to pay dashing visits through the rain to his beloved greenhouses—where he would spend hours interfering with the grape-vines, with the melons, and the tomatoes. Gibbons was always in a constant state of fear lest his noble master should do irreparable damage to the precious plants.

For if such a disaster as this did happen, it was Gibbons who always got the blame. The position of head gardener to the Earl of Bushwick was not an ideal one. His lordship was an enthusiastic amateur horticulturist, but his knowledge of grapes and melons was precarious.

Just at present Lord Bushwick was living to the full. The weather had lasted for over a week now, and seemed likely to be prolonged. And the castle gardens were a serene picture.

To the earl's intense satisfaction, his time was practically his own. Lady Bushwick had no house-party bothering about—although the earl looked forward with fear and trepidation to the future. Before long there would be house-parties galore, with all sorts of ridiculous people wanting to go on ridiculous motor-drives, or some such absurdity.

This, of course, meant that his lordship would have to tear himself away from his beloved garden. For the word of the countess was law. She allowed her husband to do pretty much as he liked when there were no guests. But at other times he was in much the same position as an unwilling child. He had to do as he was told, whether he liked it or not.

The estates were vast.

They stretched out for miles in every direction—fair, wooded parkland, flourishing farms, and many whole villages. The yearly income from the Bushwick estates amounted to a formidable sum. His lordship was not one of those unfortunate land-owners whose income had dwindled to a mere pittance.

But when it came to managing the property Lord Bushwick was like an infant.

Everything was in the hands of Mr. Simon Ratley, the steward of the estate. Mr. Ratley was the real head of affairs—in a way of speaking, he was the king of the castle.

His word was law. Tenants who wished to communicate with their landlord always approached Mr. Simon Ratley. Gamekeepers who required instructions and so forth always went to Mr. Simon Ratley. He was IT—he was the Big Noise of the Bushwick estates.

The earl was, to all intents and purposes, a mere nonentity. He never interfered with the management of his property. He trusted Ratley implicitly, and never made any inquiries. As for looking up the accounts at the end of each quarter or half-year, his lordship never thought of doing anything so preposterous as this! It was a task which was quite beyond his powers.

Not that the Earl of Bushwick was a fool. On the contrary, he was exceedingly keen, intelligent, and sharp-witted. But he had utterly no business ability; and for this reason he placed all his affairs regarding the estate in the hands of a capable manager.

Mr. Ratley was capable—exceedingly so. Nobody could deny that. He ruled the Bush-

wick domain with absolute success and business acumen. In his able hands there was never any hitch of any kind. He was amazingly efficient.

As for Lady Bushwick, she was too wrapped up in her own affairs to pay any attention whatever to business. She only knew that the Bushwick income was as large as ever—and probably larger. This in itself proved that everything was going well, and Mr. Simon Ratley was allowed to have his own sweet way.

The castle itself and the surrounding villages and isolated farms were as apart as the Poles. The lord and lady of the manor knew absolutely nothing of what went on around them—even in the village of Market Bushwick, which nestled in the hollow, only a mile away.

Echoes of certain happenings in Market Bushwick and other parts of the neighbourhood sometimes penetrated to the servants' hall. But never did they reach the ears of Lord and Lady Bushwick themselves. They lived in a world apart. So they heard none of the murmurings of discontent which were growing ever louder and louder throughout the whole district.

Mr. Ratley heard them—and dealt with them.

For he was the autocrat of the estate; his word was final. He was a kind of feudal chieftain, who saw that all his commands were carried out to the letter, irrespective of their injustice or harshness.

Such was the condition of affairs on this sunny June afternoon.

And his lordship, pottering among his flowers, lived on peacefully, unaware of the gathering storm. For, without a doubt, a storm was gathering. It had taken years to rise from the horizon, but now it was looming nearer and nearer to the zenith—liable to break at the slightest provocation.

Some will say that Lord Bushwick himself was to blame for all the unjust things that went on in his fair possessions. But this was not so. A more harmless man than Lord Bushwick did not exist. The blame rested entirely upon the shoulders of Mr. Simon Ratley, who, in addition to being amazingly efficient, was amazingly unscrupulous.

"I regret having to trouble you, your lordship, but I should welcome a few words. The matter is important."

Lord Bushwick was aware of the fact that somebody was speaking in his rear. Mr. Simon Ratley had come up, unheard, across the carpet-like lawn. And Mr. Ratley had addressed his remarks to the seat of his lordship's trousers; for, at the moment, the earl was bending low over the flower-bed, searching diligently for further victims.

"Eh? What's that? What's that?"

His lordship assumed an upright position, bearing a few unfortunate ants between his fingers. Insects of all descriptions were fair game. And his lordship was also looking impatient. He peered at the newcomer through his spectacles, and then waved his hand.

"Go away!" he said severely.

"I am sorry to disturb you, your lordship——"

"Go away!" repeated the earl. "Bless my soul! Can't you see that I'm busy? I refuse to discuss business affairs while I am in my garden! Business and gardening cannot possibly combine. Like oil and water they—— Upon my soul! That reminds me—that idiot of a Gibbons hasn't watered the cucumbers!"

His lordship looked quite startled at this ghastly thought.

"I shall only detain you for a few moments, your lordship," said Ratley. "I would defer the matter until a more suitable opportunity, but I regret that it is not possible."

The earl looked at his steward almost pleadingly.

"Why do you bother me, Ratley?" he asked. "Why do you act in this absurd way? Good gracious! Can't I have a little peace among my flowers? Must you come here, talking about your ridiculous business affairs? I must be firm. I will not have—— Bless my soul!"

Lord Bushwick broke off abruptly, and fixed a forty horse-power gaze upon the leaves of a neighbouring rose tree. About six unfortunate green flies crouched back in terror. They attempted to flee, but death overtook them—swift, sudden death in the shape of his lordship's thumb.

"Infernal things!" said Lord Bushwick, gazing at the remains. "Green flies, Ratley, are nothing more nor less than a pest! Do you hear me, sir? A pestilence! And Gibbons is not much better!"

Mr. Ratley didn't move. He was quite accustomed to this sort of thing. He never approached Lord Bushwick at such inopportune times as these unless the matter was of the utmost importance; for he knew very well that it was a well-nigh hopeless task to gain the earl's undivided attention.

Simon Ratley was a big man, attired in breeches and gaiters, and his face was powerful and forbidding. His eyes were rather small, peering out from beneath bushy brows. His clothing was of the most expensive kind, and he was obviously a gentleman by education. He was a blackguard by nature.

"I only wish to say a few words," he began again.

"This—this is intolerable!" exclaimed the earl bitterly. "Even at such a time as this I cannot escape your infernal impudence! Well, Ratley—well? Go on! What is it? What is it?"

"The Spinney Cottage, just down the lane——"

"Never heard of it!" snapped his lordship.

"It is quite a small, isolated cottage, your lordship, and at the moment it happens to be empty," said Mr. Ratley. "At least, it was empty until this morning."

"Then why on earth do you come bothering me?" demanded his lordship. "If there is a tenant for the place, all well and good?

You can go away, Ratley. And in future kindly remember that I only discuss business with you at appropriate times! Kindly find Gibbons, and send him here at once!"

Mr. Ratley didn't move.

"I'm afraid you have not grasped my meaning, your lordship," he said patiently. "These people have taken possession of the Spinney Cottage without my authority. They have literally forced their way in, and refuse to leave."

His lordship's gaze was wandering dreamily to another rose tree.

"Bees," he observed, "are harmless creatures, I have been told. But I don't like them bothering about with my roses! Shoo, shoo! Go away, you little pest! Go away!"

"I desire to know, your lordship, if these people are to be allowed to maintain their unauthorised possession," said Mr. Ratley. "You may remember that some schoolboys saw you this morning? It was they who started this outrageous affair."

"Of course," said Lord Bushwick absently, "I've no doubt that bees do a great deal of good They are, in fact, a matter of sheer necessity when it comes to cultivating a perfect garden. At the same time, it is most disconcerting when smelling a rose to suddenly find a bee buzzing round one's head. Decidedly unpleasant!"

"About the Spinney Cottage——"

"Oh, yes—oh, yes!" said his lordship, coming to earth. "The Spinney Cottage? Ah, a quaint little place, Ratley! So it appears that you have secured a tenant at last? Splendid—splendid!"

"These people have taken unauthorised possession——"

"Indeed!" said Lord Bushwick. "That's bad! But why on earth do you come to me? Good gracious! Must I manage the estate for you? Why do I pay you a salary? If you don't like these people, turn them out! Don't bother me, Ratley!"

"I thought it just as well, in these special circumstances, to approach you in the matter, your lordship," said the steward. "These boys have taken possession of the cottage in order to shelter a pauper family who were foolish enough to allow their own cottage to be burnt down."

"Absurd!" said the earl. "Quite absurd! If people choose to burn their houses down, they surely can't expect me to provide them with substitutes? I don't know anything about this matter, Ratley—I don't want to know! Deal with it yourself! And as for Gibbons, I cannot possibly understand what the man does! He spends half of his time away from these gardens! He neglects his work shockingly!"

This was rather unfair upon Gibbons, who had been working hard on the other side of the lawn ever since early morning, with only a brief interval for dinner. His lordship was always losing Gibbons.

"Then I have your full authority to act——"

"Good gracious me!" said Lord Bushwick. "Are you still there? Will you leave me in peace, man? Will you go away? I absolutely insist—— You want my authority, eh? Oh, certainly—certainly! Do as you like! Do just as you like; but don't bother me! Now, earwigs——"

His lordship paused for a moment to decapitate an unwary snail which had very foolishly emerged from its shell, and had appeared glidingly, in the leisurely fashion of all snails, from beneath a clump of flowers. Mr. Ratley took the opportunity to walk away across the lawn.

"Earwigs are the bane of a man's existence," continued Lord Bushwick. "The infernal things get into every conceivable spot! It is decidedly annoying to find an earwig—— Eh? You were talking about the Spinney Cottage, I believe? Confound you, Ratley, why don't you—— Oh! The idiot's gone!" he went on, gazing at the steward's retreating form. "Splendid! Now perhaps I shall get some peace!"

But if the Earl got some peace, the long-suffering Mr. Gibbons didn't. For the head gardener was unwise enough to appear in full view at the moment. Lord Bushwick pounced upon him in very much the same manner as he was accustomed to pounce upon a slug. And Gibbons listened unmoved throughout a long tirade concerning insects in general.

From his lordship's tone, one might have supposed that Gibbons deliberately imported armies and armies of insects into the castle gardens. But Gibbons was well accustomed to this sort of thing, and he listened with perfect indifference, proceeding with his work all the time.

And Lord Bushwick, having let off sufficient steam for the time being, wandered off to fresh battlefields, his eye agleam for new victims.

CHAPTER II.

CHAMPIONS OF THE OPPRESSED!

"STRICTLY speaking, we ought to be on the road—making tracks for St. Frank's," I remarked thoughtfully. "Still, if we get a move on within a day or two we shall just manage to drop in for the beginning of the new term."

"I wouldn't leave this valley for worlds," declared Edward Oswald Handforth.

Archie Glenthorne nodded.

"I must remark, laddie, that I agree," he said. "I mean to say, this Ratley chappie is nothing more nor less than an excrescence—a kind of poisonous growth upon the fair face of the good old land! Broadly speaking, I don't generally approve of slaughter, but in this case it seems to be the only dashed thing!"

"We won't go so far as that, Archie," I smiled. "All we want to do is to show up Mr. Simon Ratley in his true colours. As soon as Lord Bushwick knows what kind of

a man he is, he'll get the bird. Ratley won't last five minutes after his lordship knows the truth."

Handforth grunted.

"Do you mean to say the earl doesn't know now?" he asked.

"Of course he doesn't."

"And yet he's the lord of the manor!" said Handy.

"He's the lord of the manor, but I'll guarantee he doesn't know a thing about what goes on over his estates," I replied. "He's so eaten up with his garden that he leaves everything to this bullying overseer—this king of the castle. So we're going to bring about a change."

"Rather!" agreed Reggie Pitt.

There were about six of us lolling in the grass just in front of the four comfortable caravans. These latter were drawn up on the smooth grass, bordering the dusty country lane. We had just finished a rather late luncheon, and Fatty Little was bustling about, clearing up. In his capacity as chief cook of the party, Fatty was busy from morning till night. But so long as he was dealing with food, and things appertaining to food, he was happy. Such work was a pleasure.

We were all attired more or less carelessly—all, that is, with the single exception of Archie Glenthorne. We wore light shoes, comfortable grey flannel trousers, cricket shirts open at the neck, and straw hats. We didn't look particularly smart. Archie, on the other hand, was a dazzling picture of splendour. He insisted upon going about attired in spotless white flannels, white boots, and silken shirts. He may have looked a picture, but I'll bet he wasn't half as comfortable as the rest of us.

But what did we care, anyway?

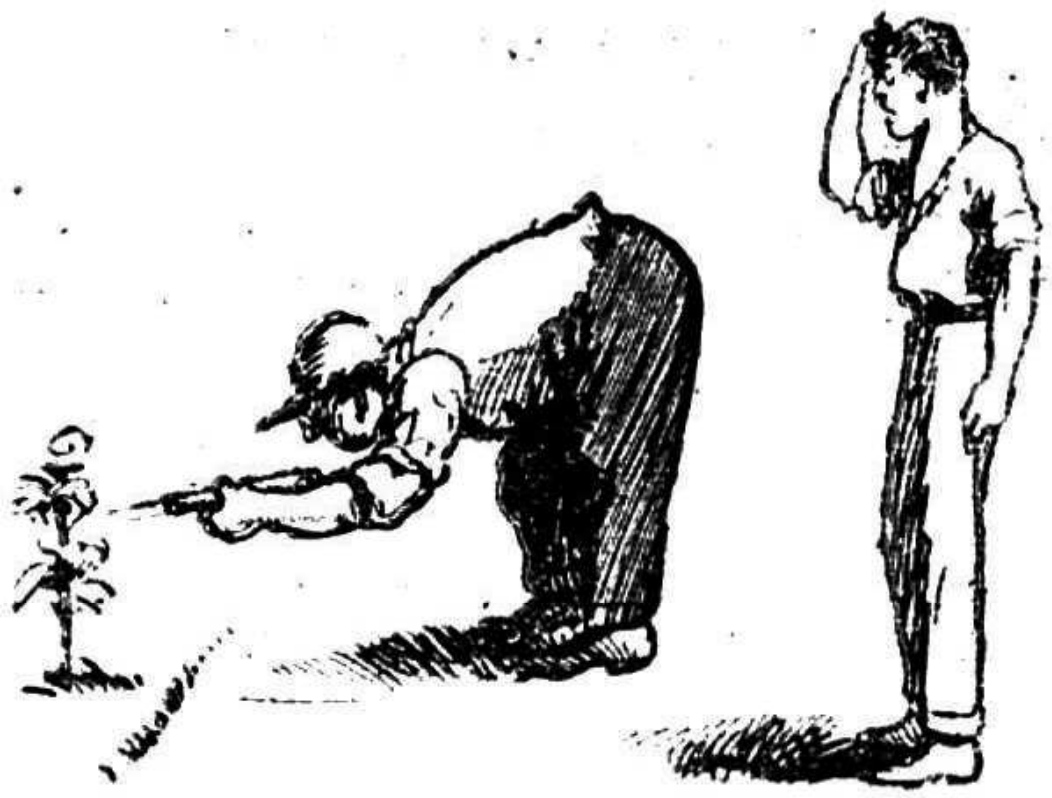
There were sixteen of us in the party—all juniors of St. Frank's, and all Removites excepting Willy Handforth, who was in the Third. We had been caravanning during the Whitsun holidays—which, by the way, were practically at an end. In a day or two we should have to present ourselves at school for the new term.

We had been having a fine time, and had enjoyed our tour immensely. Jogging along the highway, we had encountered numerous minor adventures, and the simple life had been one long round of pleasure. The country was looking at its best—fresh, green, and delightfully attractive.

And our camping spot at the moment was the most glorious of all. It was situated on the Bushwick estate, with fair parklands rolling away into the distance, with a wonderful stream winding its leisurely course through the valley, with willows gracefully adorning the banks, and with poppy-laden meadows on all sides. The sun shone, and the air was filled with the quivering hum of insects.

A more peaceful scene could scarcely be imagined.

But it has been truthfully said that appearances are very deceptive. And this



Sizzzzz!

Another spray of green-fly exterminator went on its way.

"Infernal things!" said Lord Bushwick, unconscious of Willy's presence. "A good thunderstorm, and these confounded things would die by the hundred! I shall have to see about it!"

scene was not likely to be very peaceful for long. War had been declared, in fact, and there was every prospect of an early battle.

And this battle would be pitched between the caravan party, and Simon Ratley and his subordinates. Exactly how we had come in contact with the bullying steward was quite an interesting little story.

We had camped on this spot the previous night—and it seemed that providence had prompted us to do so. For we had seen a glare in the sky. We had found a thatched cottage burning, with the inmates fast asleep and unaware of the disaster. Only by strenuous efforts had we rescued them.

They proved to be a young married woman, a Mrs. Grant, and her two tiny children. They were alone, for Mr. Grant was working in Great Winstead, a fairish town about four miles away.

Well, we had managed to salve a good deal of the furniture, too—though the cottage itself was burned to a mere heap of ashes. After spending the night in one of our caravans, which we had placed completely at her disposal, Mrs. Grant and her children had been astonished to find that we had placed the rescued furniture in the Spinney Cottage, which was on the Bushwick estate.

We had found the cottage quite empty, in good condition, and open to the world. So we had considered ourselves justified, under the extenuating circumstances, in taking unauthorised possession. We felt that a mere word of explanation would suffice, when the owner got to know.

But, at that time, we knew nothing of Mr. Simon Ratley.

He had come along soon after Mrs. Grant had been installed. In the most brutal, bullying way, he had ordered her to clear out. He had acted like a blackguard, and we had ducked him in the pond. That was the formal declaration of war.

And it turned out, that Ratley wasn't the owner at all—but merely the agent. Several of us had gone up to the castle to interview Lord Bushwick. But, although we had met his lordship, we had been unable to get anything out of him except flowers. And her ladyship had refused to listen—referring us to Mr. Ratley.

That, in a nutshell, was the position.

We were expecting some kind of action on Ratley's part at any moment. He had warned us that the Grants were to get out within an hour, or they would be turned out. That hour had elapsed long since, and nothing had happened. Some of the fellows were beginning to suspect that it had only been a hollow threat. But I felt differently.

During the morning Grant himself appeared—a shabbily-attired young man, but a perfect gentleman. It seemed that he had previously been engaged at Bushwick Castle, but had lost his employment owing to the vindictiveness of Simon Ratley. This had driven the Grants into the cheap little thatched cottage, and for many weeks Grant had managed to keep things going by working at an unskilled job in Great Winstead. On arrival, he had been terribly scared, believing that his wife and children had perished.

Grant was full of gratitude towards us for all that we had done for his family. But he wasn't feeling very comfortable about the present state of affairs. Both he and Mrs. Grant felt that they ought to leave the Spinney Cottage—for, after all, they had no real right there.

But I considered they had. In any case, it was our quarrel, for we had been the ones to take possession. And it was up to us to settle the matter. I knew well enough that once Lord Bushwick knew the full facts, he would act above the head of his steward.

The great difficulty was, explaining matters to his lordship. By what I had seen, it was an almost hopeless task. As for the countess, she was out of the question. A haughty, pompous lady, she wouldn't deign to concern herself with any such business.

"Yes, we're going to bring about a change," I repeated thoughtfully as we sat in the grass. "What kind of a man is this Ratley—a man who is harsh enough to turn a woman and two little kids out into the road, almost penniless, after their own cottage has been burnt to ashes?"

"He's not a man at all," said Church. "He's a beast!"

"Of course," I agreed. "He's nothing more nor less than a tyrant. He seems to have got his knife into the Grants—some quarrel that took place when Grant himself was sacked, I suppose. But I'll bet a penny to a pound that Grant wasn't to blame. He's a white man. Ratley is as crooked as a serpent!"

"And yet he holds full sway," said Reggie Pitt.

"That's just it," I went on. "These men manage to keep responsible jobs, somehow. There's no doubt that he's a capable manager, and I expect he's making a pretty good thing out of it for himself. But this quarrel of ours is larger than a mere difference of opinion about Spinney Cottage."

"How do you mean?" asked Handforth.

"Why, by all that Mrs. Grant told us, and things we've heard from others, Ratley is looked upon as a kind of ogre by these simple country people—particularly in Market Bushwick," I replied. "He rules with a rod of iron, and never has any mercy. And, of course, it's Lord Bushwick who gets all the blame. These country people don't realise that Ratley acts on his own initiative, and that the earl knows practically nothing of what is taking place. That's the worst of placing too much faith in one man—and letting him go his own sweet way without supervision. If we can help these rustics, we'll do it."

"Champions of the oppressed, eh?" grinned Pitt.

"Rats!" I said. "Right's right, and you can't get away from it. The people on this estate are living in a kind of feudal era—and all because of this bullying steward. And old Lord Bushwick doesn't know a thing about it! Our game is to open his eyes."

I rose from the grass and stretched myself.

"Better go up to the cottage, and see if there's anything doing," I added.

The others agreed, and we left a couple of fellows in charge of the camp, and then walked up the lane towards Spinney Cottage, which was nearly half-a-mile distant.

Upon arrival, we found Cecil de Valerie and Jack Grey and Dick Goodwin and Bob Christine and a good many other fellows on guard. Grant was outside in the front garden, too.

"It's all right—nothing's happened yet," said Christine shortly.

"But we're ready," declared Grey. "We've got all sorts of ammunition—clods of earth, pails of water, and a few other things. If Ratley comes along with a gang, we'll hold the fort."

"Look here, boys—I don't like it," said Grant abruptly.

He addressed me in particular—knowing that I was the leader. Grant was a quiet man, rather good-looking, and devoted to his wife and children.

"We want to deal with this affair ourselves, Mr. Grant," I pointed out. "I know it's a pretty uncomfortable position for you——"

"I don't think you quite understand," interrupted Grant. "I was formerly employed at the castle—I was, in fact, the electrical engineer in charge of the lighting plant."

"Pretty good position, wasn't it?" asked Handforth.

"A fine position," replied Grant quietly. "A generous salary, congenial work—I'm an electrical engineer by profession—and a splendid little house in one of the prettiest parts of the park. Rent free, of course, and no worries of any kind. It was a position that any man might envy."

"I don't want to be inquisitive, Mr. Grant——"

"Oh, it's all right—you boys saved the lives of my wife and kiddies," said Grant. "If I can't be frank with you, it's a pity. You want to know why I lost the job? Well, it wasn't through any fault of mine. Goodness knows, I'm not trying to make out a case for myself. It was simply vindictiveness on Ratley's part."

"That's what we thought," remarked Christine.

"He—well, I suppose I'd better be frank about it," went on Grant. "He was rude to my wife, and one day I gave him the length of my tongue. I couldn't help it—I had to let it out. I came to within an ace of smashing his head, but managed to pull up in time."

"By George!" said Handforth warmly. "Why, I'd have slaughtered him on the spot! I'd have chucked him in the lake, and held his head under until he gurgled for mercy!"

Grant smiled faintly.

"For weeks Ratley had shown a marked hostility towards me—and a marked interference with my work," he said. "Well, that quarrel came, and it meant the end of everything for me. The hound trumped up some sort of charge against me, and I was kicked out like any dog. Ratley put one of his own friends into my position—and he's there now."

"What a beastly shame!" said Pitt indignantly.

"Well, there you are—that's one of the things we have to put up with in this life," said Grant quietly. "You see, Ratley had got full command, and can do pretty well as he likes. It wouldn't surprise me to find out that Lord Bushwick knows nothing whatever about the affair. As for the man who's now in my job—well, I've every reason to believe that he's hand-in-glove with Ratley in swindling—— No, that's not right," he added. "I mustn't make accusations that I can't justify by facts. My own suspicions are valueless. Forget that bit, boys."

We said that we would try to. But Grant's opinion only coincided with our own.

"And after that?" I asked.

"Why, I was pretty well stranded," said Grant. "I had a chance of getting that little thatched cottage—it happened to be vacant. As you know, it's not any too easy to get houses nowadays, and moving is a costly business. It was only a few miles away, and so I took it. And I got a post—if you can call it a post—in a factory in Great Winstead. But that's gone west now—and I'm practically at a loose end."

"I'll tell you what, you chaps!" said Handforth, turning to the rest of us. "We're going to put this thing right! We're going to make that fatheaded old earl reinstate Mr. Grant—even if it's only for the sake of the kids. A jolly fine pair of nippers, if you like! It's not often I take to infants like that, but I don't mind admitting they're a couple of lively young bounders."

"It's good of you, boys—too good!" said Grant quietly. "And now about this cottage. Ratley naturally wants to pitch us out—if we were complete strangers, he'd probably allow us to remain. But after what happened weeks ago he nurses a whole lot of vindictive hatred. He'll move Heaven and earth to throw us out, and heap all the indignity he can on our heads. I don't want to give him the opportunity of doing that. I'd rather get out quietly. And, after all, the law's on his side—we've got no right here."

"I understand your point of view, Mr. Grant—and I want you to understand ours," I said firmly. "You didn't take possession of this cottage—and neither did Mrs. Grant. It was our idea from the first—and at that time, remember, we didn't know a thing about this quarrel of yours. We naturally assumed that any landlord would be only too willing to allow a stranded family to take shelter in an empty cottage. That's only common humanity. It's something above laws and all that. And, having taken up that stand, we mean to maintain it. It's our quarrel—not yours. We want you to let us go through with it. And if there's any scrapping, it'll be better for you to stay indoors. We shall be more comfortable."

Grant looked at us with a great deal of warmth.

"You're a fine set of youngsters," he said, his voice just a little husky. "Somehow, I'd almost given up the hope of finding somebody who was really human. When a man's down, he generally gets nothing but kicks. Thanks, boys. You've put new heart into me. All right—I'll agree."

"That's just as well, Mr. Grant—because the enemy's coming!" remarked Pitt cheerfully. "By the look of it, we're going to have a pretty lively time! There's a whole army corps coming up the lane!"

"The more the merrier!" declared Handforth grimly.

But, as I looked down the lane, I couldn't help feeling a little uneasy. Simon Ratley was approaching—as good as his word. And with him came fully a dozen burly men—game-keepers, for the most part, and one or two husky farm labourers. Sixteen boys against twelve such men was not exactly an easy proposition, more particularly as several of our chaps were at the camp, and not available. Things looked like being fierce, as they say in America.

I noticed that pretty Mrs. Grant was looking out of one of the front windows, and

she was rather pale and anxious. Her husband went in to her. It was a trying time for them.

Ratley came up, and halted—his army behind him.

"Still here eh?" said the steward unpleasantly. "Are the Grants here?"

"Find out!" retorted Handforth.

"That means they are," said Ratley. "All right. I'll give you just two minutes to start clearing out. If you don't——"

"Save your breath, Mr. Ratley," I interrupted. "There's only one way to get us out of this place—and that is to throw us out. You'll have a pretty tough time, I can promise you."

Ratley laughed harshly.

"You think you stand any chance, you young fool?" he snapped.

"Determination can do a lot," I replied. "And we're not entirely unprepared."

"It's no good waiting, men!" shouted the steward, turning fiercely. "These brats are the worst specimens I've ever come across. Get to work! Throw them out into the road—and keep them out! And you needn't be gentle! Throw the Grant paupers out, too!"

"You blackguard!" shouted Handforth furiously.

Swish!

With all his strength he hurled the contents of a pail of water. That water was muddy and black, and it left the pail in one solid body. Handy's aim was dead true.

Before Simon Ratley could duck or dodge, the hurtling body of water caught him in the face and chest. Spla-a-ash! The overseer was soaked, and he staggered drunkenly under the impact.

"Hurrah!" yelled the juniors. "St. Frank's for ever!"

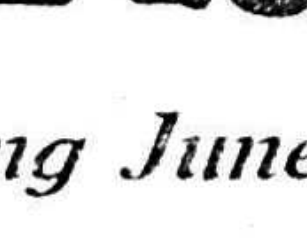
"On the ball, you chaps!"

Swish! Whizz! Swish!

The battle started in real earnest, and in a moment was in full swing.

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE OF SPINNEY COTTAGE!



SIMON RATLEY cursed furiously.

He had not expected that water, and he was drenched. For the second time that day, too! It was hardly surprising that he yelled to his men to hurl us out at all costs.

"Kick the young cubs out!" he bellowed. "By thunder! They shall pay for this!"

He obtained a firmer grip on his heavy stick, and advanced. At that moment, however, a clod of earth struck him in the neck, and he collapsed into the dust. He uttered an enraged curse.

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, ye cripples!"

The fight was now proceeding grimly. The game-keepers and farm labourers were a determined crowd. Ratley, no doubt, had

romised them a liberal tip if they succeeded in pitching us into the road.

Moreover, they dared not refuse. Ratley could dismiss them on the spot if he wanted to—and jobs were none too easy to get. These worthy fellows may have been all in sympathy with the Grants and the St. Frank's fellows. But for the safety of their own skins, they had to fight.

"Stow it, young gents!" gasped one of the men. "Come quiet, now!"

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "Take that!"

Swish!

Another pail of water went on its way.

"Whooh!" gasped the soaked game-keeper. "You young varmints! 'Tain't no use o' your goin' on like this. We'll have you out afore we've done. We ain't got no quarrel, young gents—we don't want to hurt yer!"

"No—you're the ones who'll get hurt," grinned Reggie Pitt.

Ratley's men were inclined to think that the whole affair was a kind of joke. They entered into the battle with grins, apparently under the impression that they would have us out in no time.

They were mistaken.

The juniors dashed into the fray with a will. They massed themselves round the front door, and I kept a careful watch on the garden path round the side of the house. If any of the enemy went in that direction a few of us would dash through the cottage to bar the back door.

Archie was doing as much as anybody. He forgot all about his elegant clothes. When it came to a serious scrap, Archie was as game as they make 'em. He threw all thoughts of appearance aside, and just sailed in. And he could use his fists scientifically, and with good effect, too.

As for Clarence Fellowe, he was a surprise-packet.

Fellowe was the new junior for the Ancient House Remove. He hadn't been at St. Frank's yet, but was due to start with the new term. His people were in India, so we had taken him along with us, much to his delight.

Clarence was an extraordinary fellow in many ways. He was as thin as a lamp-post, and six feet tall. His eyes were dreamy, and he had never been known to smile. And he found it impossible to string any number of words together without making them rhyme.

For this reason—and because of his length—we had dubbed him "Longfellow." It was a nick-name that suited him to perfection. He had proved his courage to us at our first meeting, but I had no idea he was so good at fighting.

His great height gave him an advantage, and he was so thin that he could double himself up like a pocket-knife with extreme rapidity, and dodge any amount of blows. And his punch was formidable.

He entered the fray with obvious enjoyment.

"Come on, my bonny lads!" he shouted. "We'll soon wipe up these cads!"

"Help!" panted Church. "He's rhyming even now!"

"We've got to keep 'em back!" said Longfellow, as he planted his bony fist into the face of a burly enemy. "And you can take that whack! The fight is getting hotter—all right, I'll take this rotter!"

Ratley raved and shouted, but took care not to enter the fight himself. Perhaps he thought it would be undignified—but it was far more likely that he didn't relish it.

I could see that matters were getting serious.

Several of our chaps had been pitched into the road, in spite of all their efforts and struggles. And the rest, of course, had harder work than ever. But still we plugged desperately on.

Willy Handforth was one of the unfortunates to get hurled out.

He picked himself up, breathing fire. Then, just as he was about to dash back to the attack, he paused. A thought had come to him. And when Willy thought of something it was generally good. He was a brainy youngster.

"By Cæsar!" he gasped, breathlessly.

In a flash he was off up the road, running for all he was worth—like a scared rabbit. One or two juniors who saw him out of the corner of their eyes thought that Willy was fleeing.

But Willy wasn't that sort.

He had seen that the defenders were in for a hopeless task. In the end the steward's men were bound to win. Through sheer weight and power they would wear down the resistance of the juniors. It wasn't to be expected that the boys could hold out. We had never believed that Ratley would bring such a gang with him.

So Willy considered that he could be spared.

And the idea which had come to him was a rather startling one. He had heard all about Lord Bushwick, and he was fairly certain that he would find his lordship in the castle gardens.

He dashed towards the old stately mansion like a hare. Arriving at the lodge gates, he shot in, breathless and eager. If only he could get hold of the earl now! It didn't matter to Willy that others had failed to interest his lordship in the affairs of Mr. and Mrs. Grant and family. Willy always got what he went after—he had never been known to fail.

And he had his own particular methods of getting what he wanted.

Within a few minutes, Willy emerged round a bend of the drive, where he came within view of the beautifully laid-out lawns and flower beds of the castle. He paused, gazing about him irresolutely.

He caught sight of Gibbons, the head gardener.

This worthy individual was busy with a pair of shears, and he looked round with a slight frown as he observed the junior.

Gibbons was not feeling in the best of tempers. For half an hour past Lord Bushwick had been conversing with him—and his lordship's conversation always bored Gibbons to distraction.

Willy dashed up to the gardener.

Lord Bushwick had been described to him as a dilapidated-looking individual, wearing a gardening apron and various ancient articles of attire. Willy wasn't sure, but he had an idea that this old chap was Lord Bushwick. True, his face looked somewhat rugged and gnarled, and he had no great aristocratic bearing. But, so Willy told himself, you never can tell with these earls.

"I say—are you Lord Bushwick?" he asked, bluntly.

Mr. Gibbons straightened himself and removed a stem of grass from his mouth.

"No, I ain't!" he replied briefly.

"Then who are you? I want to see Lord Bushwick——"

"My name's Gibbons, and I'm head gardener," said the old fellow. "And if you take my advice you won't go nigh Lord Bushwick just now. That's him, over yonder—just by them rose trees. But take yourself off, young 'un. His lordship won't listen to ye——"

"Won't he?" said Willy, grimly. "We'll see about that."

He dodged rapidly across the lawn, and a moment later came within view of the rose garden. Lord Bushwick was busy with a syringe, and he was spraying his beloved roses with great diligence. Death was being dealt out in large chunks, as Archie would have remarked.

Willy arrived, panting—and triumphant. Lord Bushwick was so intent upon his task that he did not even see the junior at first. There was an expression of deadly determination on his face.

Sizzzz!

Another spray of green fly exterminator went on its way.

"Infernal things!" said Lord Bushwick, fiercely. "There! How do you like that? I can't understand why we don't get any thunder! Nothing like it—nothing like it at all! A good thunderstorm, and these confounded things would die by the hundred! I shall have to see about it!"

Willy grabbed at Lord Bushwick's arm.

"Quick!" he gasped. "You're wanted!"

Willy had decided that it would be better to take his lordship by surprise, and simply carry him off by storm, as it were. He didn't know Lord Bushwick!

"Eh? What's that? What's that?" said the earl, frowning. "Go away! Good gracious, boy! Why do you come bothering me? Go away! Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"It's urgent!" panted Willy desperately. "Come at once, sir!"

"I will not come—I refuse to come!" snapped his lordship. "These green flies are an absolute pest——"

"Something terrible is going on down the road, Lord Bushwick!" shouted Willy. "You simply must come and see! Quick! There's not a second to waste! If you don't come now, it may be too late!"

Lord Bushwick filled the syringe again.

"It astounds me," he observed. "It astounds me why some firm or other can't produce a really reliable green fly killer! This stuff is utterly useless—a mere waste of money, and a waste of time! But it's the best I can get, so what am I to do? The infernal insects like it, I believe! They seem to thrive on it! Pah! As for slugs——"

"Oh, my hat!" said Willy desperately.

It was quite clear to him that his plan had failed. Willy was not the kind of fellow to give up because of a little setback of this kind. The only thing was to get another plan. And an idea entered the junior's fertile brain almost before a second had elapsed.

There was only one way to move this flower fiend, Willy decided.

"Rather!" he agreed heartily. "Green flies are horrible things! As for slugs, I can't make out why they were ever created! Slugs and snails are no good, any way! And earwigs are simply nothing more nor less than a pest!"

Lord Bushwick paused, and gazed at the junior with interest.

"Quite right—quite right!" he said approvingly. "My boy, I can see that you possess a large amount of common sense! Now, Gibbons—Gibbons actually tells me that earwigs do a certain amount of good——"

"You musn't take any notice of Gibbons, sir!" scoffed Willy. "He's a professional gardener. And everybody knows that professional gardeners are pigheaded and obstinate. They always want their own way, and seem to think they know everything!"

His lordship gazed at Willy with even greater intentness.

"Splendid!" he declared. "I am glad to find that you are in full agreement with me, my lad. What you say is correct—quite correct! These professional gardeners are all the same——"

And his lordship went into a long statement regarding professional gardeners in general, and Gibbons in particular. Willy listened smiling and cool—although, inwardly, he was fuming with impatience. Every second was of importance. But if he attempted to drag Lord Bushwick away, he would fail—unless he acted with discretion.

"My goodness!" he said, his voice full of awe. "What lovely roses! I say, sir! What magnificent blooms! Aren't they gorgeous?"

Willy stared at the roses, apparently dumb

with fascination. And his lordship beamed with sheer delight.

"I have always said that boys are soulless!" he remarked. "Obviously, I was wrong. I have even gone so far as to declare that boys never appreciate beauty. I apologise. I can see, my dear lad, that you have a wonderful eye——"

"Of course, they're jolly fine roses, but I'm rather fond of wallflowers, personally," went on Willy. "Wallflowers may not be quite so classy, but they've got a ripping niff!"

"Ahem! A ripping niff?" repeated Lord Bushwick absently. "I must confess that the word is new to me——"

"Perfume, sir, I mean."

"Oh, quite—quite," agreed his lordship. "Yes, indeed! As you say, wallflowers have a most exquisite perfume. Come with me, my boy. I will show you some wallflowers that will make you——"

"Just a minute, Lord Bushwick," interrupted Willy. "Have you ever seen wallflowers growing on a rose tree?"

"What? What? Good gracious!" said his lordship blankly.

"Fact!" said Willy, nodding. "Wallflowers—actually growing on a rose tree! Down the road, you know—in a garden at the bottom of the hill. I thought you'd be interested, so I just popped along."

"But—but this is astonishing!" gasped Lord Bushwick.

"Of course it is," said Willy, grabbing the earl's arm. "Quick! Come on! You'll be absolutely amazed when you see it! There's that rose tree, standing in the garden, filled with beautiful blooms—and wallflowers intermingled with the roses! You never saw such a thing in all your life!"

Lord Bushwick flung the syringe down.

"Where—where is this amazing rose tree?" he demanded feverishly.

"I'll show you!" replied Willy promptly. "This way!"

He started running off, and Lord Bushwick accompanied him at a trot. The earl's eyes were gleaming, and his whole face was flushed with intense excitement. He had forgotten his own gardens, he had forgotten his own slugs and green flies, and could think of nothing else but this astounding phenomenon.

"Of course," he puffed, as they ran along—"of course wonders can be done when it comes to grafting. But when you tell me of wallflowers growing on a rose tree—I cannot bring myself to believe——"

"All right—you wait!" said Willy confidently.

He grabbed his lordship's arm, and hastened him along. They shot out of the drive, much to the astonishment of a gamekeeper who was within sight. His lordship did some strange things, but this was surely the strangest of all.

"Bless my soul!" panted the earl. "Is—is it necessary to run, my boy? Dear me!

Handforth gave the thing a kick. "You—you reckless idiot!" I gasped. "Don't kick it like that! Of course it's a bomb; unexploded, too. The slightest touch might cause it to explode."

I am becoming exhausted! Is it necessary to go along at this mad pace? The dust——"

"Never mind the dust, sir," interrupted Willy. "We'll soon be there. And somebody might steal that tree, for all we know!"

This had the effect of silencing the old peer. He trotted along obediently, receiving a tug every now and again as Willy jerked at his sleeve. And almost before his lordship was aware of it, they came within sight of a cottage.

Willy's eyes gleamed as he saw what was going on.

Just down at the bottom of the hill Simon Ratley was triumphant.

The defenders had been beaten. After putting up a magnificent scrap, they had found themselves incapable of stemming the tide. The burly gamekeeper and farm labourers had all the advantage. And after one or two juniors had fallen, temporarily knocked out of the fight, the rest was comparatively simple.

The invaders had flung the juniors out into the road, and the whole position was reversed. Ratley and his men held possession. And to get them out was quite impossible.

Handforth was still pegging away—still fighting when he had the opportunity. And

Reggie Pitt and Tommy Watson and I helped. The others, for the most part, were put out of action.

Again and again we tried to rush the enemy, but again and again we were beaten back. And just as Willy and Lord Bushwick came in sight, Mrs. Grant and her two children were being hustled out of the gate by Simon Ratley.

Grant himself was at the rear, held firmly by two of Ratley's men. He was fighting desperately, attempting to get free. But could do nothing against his burly assailants. Ratley had reserved the pleasure of turning the mother and her children out for himself.

And the juniors could do nothing against this, because they were held in check by the other members of Ratley's gang. After all our promises to help the unfortunate family, this state of affairs was disastrous.

"I'll just show you that when I say a thing, I mean it!" said the steward harshly. "Now, take your brats and get from here! I don't care where you go to—but you won't remain on this property!"

The little children were crying pitifully.

"You—you inhuman brute!" roared Pitt fiercely.

"You blackguard!" hooted Handforth.

"As for you boys!" shouted Ratley, turning on them. "I'll see that you suffer for the impudent way—— Get away from me, confound you!" he added suddenly, as one of the little children clutched at his coat.

He gave the child a push, and it rolled over.

And at that very second Willy Handforth and Lord Bushwick arrived. His lordship was still full of the wonderful rose tree, and he was blind to everything that went on. However, this was an exceptional thing. Even the earl came to a halt, dusty and perspiring, and stared at Ratley in astonishment.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, breathing hard.

"There you are, sir!" panted Willy. "Now, look at this! There's Mr. Ratley—turning these poor people out of this cottage! I only just got you here in the nick of time!"

His lordship frowned.

"What's all this, Ratley?" he asked, his voice sharp and inquiring. "What's all this? What on earth are you doing, man? Did I see you throw that child over? I am amazed——"

"These people were trespassing on your property, your lordship," snarled Ratley, shooting a venomous glance at Willy.

The man was beside himself with rage. A glance had told him that he had to thank Willy Handforth for his lordship's untimely arrival. The whole battle had come to an end. The gamekeepers stood idle—looking rather sheepish. They had been compelled to obey orders, but they were privately ashamed of the work they had been doing.

And the juniors all crowded round, excited and filled with fresh hope.

"Good!" shouted Handforth. "Look here, Lord Bushwick, ain't you going to do something to Ratley? He's turned these people out, and——"

"One moment—one moment!" interrupted his lordship. "I don't fully understand this position. Good gracious me! What is all this to-do? Why should the peace and quietness of this glorious afternoon be disturbed in such a disgraceful way? Come, come, Ratley—I am waiting!"

Simon Ratley took a deep breath.

"I explained the situation to you earlier, your lordship," he began.

"Nonsense!" said the earl. "This is the first intimation I have received that anything of the sort was going on. What do you mean, Ratley? You say that you explained the situation? Rubbish, sir! Rubbish!"

Ratley gritted his teeth.

"You were in the garden, your lordship!" he exclaimed. "I told you that these people had unlawfully taken possession——"

"Don't talk nonsense to me!" snapped his lordship. "Good gracious! Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? I know nothing of these people—these boys! Nothing! Come, come! Who is this lady? And how dare you handle her and those little children in such a rough fashion?"

"I did not touch them——"

"Fiddlesticks!" interrupted the earl. "Do you hear me, sir? Fiddlesticks! I distinctly saw you with my own eyes. I'm surprised, Ratley—I am astonished! I cannot imagine what has possessed you! I demand an instant explanation."

Lord Bushwick was fairly bristling with heat. For the moment he had forgotten all about his beloved flowers, and his kindly old face was suffused with the flush of indignation. Chivalrous to a degree, it appalled him to see a woman being treated with roughness.

I stood looking on, tensely interested. The other fellows were equally alert. Handforth was the only one who wanted to intervene—he was terribly anxious to step forward and explain the whole situation. But Handforth's explanation was likely to create further confusion. The leader of Study D was never very concise. He was held in check by three or four fellows.

Simon Ratley was so startled, and so enraged, that he hardly knew what he was saying. The arrival of Lord Bushwick on the scene was the very last thing he had expected.

The earl's sudden appearance was something like the explosion of a bombshell. His lordship had always remained in his gardens on a fine day—wild horses could not have dragged him away. And as for coming to a tiny cottage like this—and on foot—the thing was unprecedented.

Ratley knew that he had to thank the juniors—at least, Willy Handforth. And his rage against the whole crowd of us knew no bounds. At the same time, he managed to control himself by a masterly

effort of will. Any exhibition of his temper before Lord Bushwick would not tend to help his own cause.

"Very little explanation is needed, your lordship," he said, breathing hard. "This cottage is on your own estate, and for some weeks it has been empty—I have been holding it in readiness for the foreman of the Yew Farm, who intends moving here in about a fortnight——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted his lordship. "Never mind about the Yew Farm. Bother the Yew Farm! Good gracious me! What has the Yew Farm got to do with this matter? Confine yourself to the point, Ratley!"

"I am doing so, your lordship," said the overseer thickly. "It was these boys who broke into the cottage, and took possession of it. I ordered them away, but they merely insulted me. Therefore, since there was no other course, I felt compelled to bring these men along and eject the intruders by force."

"What about Mrs. Grant and the children?" roared Handforth. "You rotter! You cowardly blackguard! Why, don't you tell Lord Bushwick the whole truth? Why don't you explain why we took possession of the cottage——"

"Hold your infernal tongue!" snarled Ratley venomously.

"Dear me! Dear me!" said the earl. "This is most distressing! I must urge you, Ratley, to control yourself. It seems that there is more in this than meets the eye. Yes, indeed! I must give it my personal attention."

He moved forward, adjusting his spectacles, and caught sight of a rose-tree which was growing in close proximity. It was not a particularly bright specimen of its kind, and the roses were of an inferior quality.

"H'm! H'm! Not so bad—not so bad!" murmured his lordship, pausing and examining the bush. "A pity—a great pity! This tree needs pruning badly. I shall have to tell Gibbons—— Good gracious! What am I doing? Ah, yes, of course!"

He came back to himself with a start, and for a second or two he appeared to be somewhat bewildered. His mind was still occupied with roses But, shaking himself, he thrust the matter aside, and brought himself back to earth. He found that Mrs. Grant and the children were immediately in front of him.

"To be sure—to be sure!" said the earl, beaming, and peering closely into Mrs. Grant's face. "Quite familiar, if I'm not mistaken. I seem to remember having met you, madam. I must confess that my memory is somewhat poor——"

"I am Mrs. Grant, your lordship."

"Ah, yes! To be sure!" exclaimed the earl. "Mrs. Grant? Splendid—splendid! But I must acknowledge that I am no wiser. I seem to recollect having heard the name somewhere——"

"My husband was the electrical engineer at the castle, your lordship," said Mrs. Grant. "But Mr. Ratley dismissed him ——"

"Indeed!" said his lordship. "Why, of course! How absurd of me! Grant—eh? Yes, yes—I remember now! A splendid young fellow, if I judge rightly. Ratley told me something about Grant at the time. A pity he had to go—a great pity. And these, I presume, are your children? Chubby little youngsters, by gad!"

Lord Bushwick patted them on their curly heads, and then glared at Ratley.

"Infernal wretch!" he said severely. "You, sir! How dare you knock these little children about? How dare you? Have you no manliness?"

"You don't understand!" shouted Ratley, in desperation. "It was this woman who took possession of the cottage——"

"What—what?" interrupted his lordship. "Why, not five minutes ago you told me it was the boys——"

"If you'll pardon me, Lord Bushwick, I think I can explain the whole situation in a few moments," I interrupted, growing tired of all this cross-talk. "I will explain the whole thing in a nutshell, and if you are a fair man, you will not have any difficulty in judging the case."

His lordship beamed upon me.

"An excellent suggestion, my lad," he declared. "Go ahead!"

But just then George Grant stepped forword from the cottage.

"You won't mind, Nipper, will you?" he said quietly. "I'd like to tell this story. I'm afraid you won't describe your own part of the affair with the eloquence it deserves. Lord Bushwick, may I explain matters?"

"Certainly—certainly!" said his lordship. "Why, upon my soul! Grant, my dear boy! How are you? How are you? Splendid! I had no idea that you were here! I am delighted to see you again!"

He grasped Grant's hand warmly, and worked his arm up and down like a pump handle.

"Are you going to listen to this man?" demanded Ratley, his voice quivering with anger. "You cannot expect the truth from Grant. I dismissed him for insubordinate behaviour——"

"Mr. Ratley, you will oblige me by remaining silent," said Lord Bushwick coldly. "Under ordinary circumstances, I would heed you, but after witnessing your recent conduct, I must confess that I am gravely annoyed with you. Now, Grant, my boy, what is it?"

"I just want to explain about this cottage, Lord Bushwick," said Grant. "The boys declare that they are to blame, but I cannot allow that. You see, the whole trouble started last night. My wife and children only narrowly escaped a terrible death by fire. Their cottage was burned to ashes——"

"Good gracious me!" ejaculated Lord Bushwick, startled.

He gave Grant his full attention.

His face was serious and alert as he listened to the young engineer's story of the fire. Grant did not go into any details regarding his own troubles. He simply told a straightforward story of the fire—repeating everything that his wife had told him.

Lord Bushwick learned how the St. Frank's fellows had been camped near by how they had seen the glare in the darkness, and how they had hurried off to the rescue.

With much eloquence and stirring enthusiasm, Grant described how his wife and children had been saved—how a great deal of the furniture had been rescued, too. Then he told Lord Bushwick how we had given Mrs. Grant and the children one of the caravans for the night, and how, in the early morning, we had transferred her belongings to this cottage.

Knowing it to be empty, Grant explained, we had taken temporary possession, feeling certain that the owner would raise no objections. Grant concluded by offering to leave at once, if Lord Bushwick so desired. But he was not going to have his wife and children ordered about by Simon Ratley.

Lord Bushwick turned and looked at the steward coldly.

"Well, Ratley, what have you got to say?" he asked.

"This man has told you a whole pack of preposterous lies!" shouted Ratley, his face crimson with rage. "He is a common blackguard——"

"Dash it all!" interrupted Archie, adjusting his monocle. "I mean to say, how absolutely frightful! You give me a pain, laddie. I am growing to regard you as a particularly fearful chunk of fungus."

"I tell you——" began Ratley explosively.

"Hold your tongue, sir!" cut in the earl. "Do you hear me? Good gracious! Am I to stand here, and listen to your nonsense? I have not the slightest doubt that you have made a particularly atrocious blunder, Ratley. Boys! What have you to saw with regard to the whole affair?"

"It's true, sir."

"Everything happened exactly as Mr. Grant told you, sir."

"Ratley is a beast, sir!"

Lord Bushwick nodded as the juniors broke into an excited chorus.

"Very well—very well!" he said. "Enough! Mr. Grant, I shall have no objection to your remaining in this cottage with your wife and family. Stay as long as you like, my dear fellow. As for Ratley, take no notice——"

Simon Ratley nearly choked.

"Lord Bushwick," he exclaimed thickly, "am I to be treated like an office-boy? It is not in keeping with the dignity of my position for you to act over my head ——"

"Neither is it in keeping with your position for you to behave like a common hooligan, sir," said Lord Bushwick warmly. "How dare you? Good gracious me! Am I to be browbeaten by my own employees? You will oblige me, Mr. Ratley, by taking all your men away—and I shall be glad of an interview with you this evening. I am displeased with you, sir—greatly displeased! Huh! The idea!" concluded his lordship, producing an enormous handkerchief, and blowing his nose with considerable violence.

Ratley managed to control himself.

"With regard to this cottage," he said, shooting an evil glance at Mr. and Mrs. Grant, "the rent is thirty shillings a week."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Mrs. Grant, under her breath.

"Eh? What's that? What?" said Lord Bushwick. "Thirty shillings a week? This cottage? Fiddlesticks, sir! Bosh! The rent of this cottage is less than a third of that sum. As for you, Grant," he added, beaming on the young electrician—"as for you, you are at liberty to remain here as long as you please. Don't bother about rent at all."

"Oh, but really, sir!" protested Grant, flushing with pleasure. "I must not impose upon your good nature——"

"Don't presume to argue with me, young fellow!" snapped his lordship, glaring. "Upon my soul! I do nothing but argue with Gibbons from morning till night! Am I to have no rest at all?"

"Oh, but——"

"Rubbish!" growled the earl, turning to the juniors. "As for you, young men, I am delighted with you—delighted! You have behaved as British boys should behave. Huh! I must confess that I am pleasantly astonished. The way in which you put the fire out, and saved the cottage was remarkable! By gad!" added his lordship, gazing at his property. "One would scarcely imagine that a fire had taken place at all."

I grinned.

"It wasn't this cottage, Lord Bushwick," I pointed out. "It was——"

"No, no, of course not!" said the earl. "Stupid of me. Of course, these good people were taking refuge here, eh? Well, Ratley? Well, sir? Why don't you go? Haven't I told you to go? Don't stand there nibbling your lip, confound you! I am annoyed with you, Ratley—your presence worries me!"

The steward, thoroughly squashed, turned away with a muttered exclamation. For months—for years—he had been accustomed to ruling the whole estate as though he were the literal owner. And to be put

(Continued on page 15.)

POWERFUL NEW NELSON LEE SERIAL NOW RUNNING!

No. 27. PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." June 9, 1923.

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

IN response to this invitation, Nelson Lee repeated the story he had already told at Scotland Yard. The Prince listened to the tale with the profoundest interest, and was thunderstruck with astonishment by the news that Paul Herman was "Number One" of the League of the Iron Hand.

"And this vault is in Herman's house, then?" he asked, when Nelson Lee had concluded his story.

"Yes."

"And the house is probably the headquarters of the league?"

"That remains to be seen," said Nelson Lee. "We haven't had time to search the place yet."

He turned to the Chief Commissioner and pointed to the three safes.

"I would suggest we begin with those," he said. "I'm rather an expert at picking locks, as you may know; and if you're willing to accept my help, I'd like to try my luck on those."

"I shall be only too glad to accept your help," said the Chief. "First of all, however, I must arrange for the removal of our prisoners. Then whilst we are searching the rooms upstairs, you can try your skill on these safes."

This arrangement was duly carried out, and after the Prince had taken his departure, and the prisoners had been marched off to the nearest station, the Chief and a couple of inspectors set to work to search the house, whilst Nelson Lee devoted his energies to picking the lock of the biggest safe.

Over an hour elapsed before success rewarded the detective's efforts. By that time the Chief and his men had concluded their search, but had found nothing of an incriminating nature; nor had they found any trace of Paul Herman, who had successfully escaped from the house by means of the secret passage leading from the library.

At first sight it seemed as though Nelson Lee had been but little more successful than the Chief; for when at last he succeeded in opening the safe, it proved to contain nothing more important than counterfeit coins and bogus bank-notes.

Whilst Lee was tackling the lock of the second safe, O'Brien arrived. The Irish detective had kept watch on the Centurion until the doors had been closed and all the lights extinguished. He had then returned to Curzon Street to tell Nelson Lee that Herman was still at the club!

"Sure, this beats me altogether," he

said. "I would have taken my oath that Herman never left the club after he entered it at half-past two this afternoon. He must have disguised himself whilst he was at the club."

When at last the lock was picked, a further disappointment awaited the eager searchers. For the contents of the second safe was exactly similar to those of the first.

But when the lock of the third safe had been picked, what a chorus of triumphant cheers rang through the underground vault!

For in the third safe they found a list of members of the League of the Iron Hand, giving their names, occupations, and addresses; a list of the various "district lodges" of the league, with the names of the "presiding officers"; and scores of letters and reports, relating to various robberies committed by the league, and referring to the manner in which the plunder was to be disposed of.

"You have done the best day's work to-day that ever you did in your life!" exclaimed the Chief, as he wrung Nelson Lee's hand with enthusiastic fervour. "You have not only enabled us to rescue the Prince of Iliryia, but you have given us the means of dealing the death-blow to the League of the Iron Hand.

"Armed with these documents," he continued, "our task will be of the easiest. By noon to-morrow every member of the league will be under arrest, and the headquarters of the league and all the so-called district lodges will be in our hands. In other words, you have smashed the League of the Iron Hand. Your triumph is complete!"

"Not yet," said the detective quietly. "Paul Herman is still at liberty, and until he has been arrested it is premature to say that my work is done."

EXIT THE LEAGUE!

IF one were to devote a dozen pages to describing how Paul Herman looked and acted when, after his flight, he arrived at Hartop Manor in a swift hired car, one could not improve on the single sentence in which one of the servants summed up his impressions to Cundle.

"I never but once seed such a face afore," the servant said; "an' that was a man wot 'ad suddenly gone mad an' murdered 'is wife!"

Paul Herman had not "gone mad" in the literal sense of the words; but the events which had taken place at Curzon Street—the ruin which he foresaw would follow on those events—had filled him with a species of frenzy that was partly despair and partly murderous fury, and which was hardly to be distinguished from actual madness.

"In less than twenty-four hours from now," he mused savagely, "all the lodges will be in the hands of the police. Within a week every member of the league, except myself and the servants here, will be in custody. The work of three years has been razed to the ground in a single night, and by this time next week the League of the Iron Hand will have been wiped out of existence!

"And all this I owe to Nelson Lee and O'Brien! For the wreck of all my hopes and plans I have to thank those two, but mainly Nelson Lee. From the day he threw down the gauntlet of defiance one disaster has followed another; until now, thanks to Nelson Lee, the league has been blotted out, and its president reduced to the status of a fugitive from justice.

"For three years I have laboured to build up an organisation the like of which the world has never seen before. For three years success has crowned my efforts; and now in a single night the whole of my three years' work has been undone; the organisation I have built up has been toppled over like a house of cards, and all my cherished hopes and plans have been brought to naught!"

. . . . . .

Paul Herman's forebodings proved only too true. By daybreak on Friday morning the headquarters of the league in Walworth Road, and the many clubs and cafes which had been used as district lodges were in the hands of the police. By Friday night nine-tenths of the members of the league were under arrest, and the police, assisted by Nelson Lee and O'Brien, were actively searching for the rest.

The terrific sensation which ensued

when the news was published in the papers may be better imagined than described. The daring and successful attempt to kidnap the Prince of Ilirya, his speedy liberation by Nelson Lee and the police, the discovery that Paul Herman was Number One, the death of Fairfax, the wholesale arrests which followed the opening of the safe in the underground vault—all these provided the public with a feast of sensations.

Nelson Lee and O'Brien were the heroes of the hour, and the two detectives would have been more than human if they had not felt a certain amount of pride at the brilliant success which had crowned their long and weary investigation. But there was one fly in the ointment of their satisfaction. Paul Herman had disappeared, and all trace of him was lost.

In accordance with a pre-arranged plan, the two detectives paid a visit to the Centurion Club, in the hope of being able to elucidate the mystery of Herman's disappearance.

By the courtesy of the committee, they were permitted to examine Paul Herman's private suite of rooms. But nothing came of their examination. It is true that they found ample proof of the fact that Herman had been in the habit of using the room for the purpose of disguising himself. But, as it never occurred to them to examine "Squire Mandeville's" rooms, they naturally failed to obtain any clue to the mystery they had come to investigate.

Except for this one failure, however, the detectives' success was absolute and complete. In a little over a week every member of the league whose name appeared on the list found in the safe had been arrested and lodged in gaol. Thousands of pounds' worth of stolen property had been recovered. Fairfax's yacht had been taken possession of by the police, and the crew had been arrested. At Walworth Road the police had found and seized a quantity of up-to-date machinery for the manufacture of counterfeit coins; whilst at several of the "district lodges" plate and presses had been discovered which had obviously been used for the production of forged banknotes.

But why prolong the record? Suffice it to say that by the following Saturday night, to quote Paul Herman's words, "the whole of his three years' work had been undone, and the League of the Iron Hand had been wiped out of existence."

THE ABDUCTION OF VERA LANGFORD.

VERA LANGFORD and her uncle and guardian, Sir Hugh Langford, were seated in the drawing-room at Moscar Grange. Both were in evening-dress. Sir Hugh was pretending to read a paper, but was really furtively watching Vera, who was seated on the couch in an attitude of utter dejection.

The poor girl was but a shadow of her former self, though her beauty seemed rather to have been heightened than lessened by the sufferings she had undergone; and her sufferings had been great.

For seven weeks she had never been allowed outside the grounds of the Grange. Sometimes, for days at a time, she had been locked up in her room, and had been kept on semi-starvation diet. All her letters, including two from Donald Stuart, had been intercepted and burnt, so that whether Donald were alive or dead, where he was, and what he was doing, she had not the faintest idea.

Every day of those seven weeks, and sometimes several times a day, Sir Hugh had endeavoured, by cajolery or threats, to induce her to promise to marry "Squire Mandeville." But cajoleries and threats, and even ill-treatment, had failed to break her spirit, and to all her tyrannical guardian's demands she had ever replied, with unfaltering firmness, that nothing in the world would induce her to become the wife of the squire of Hartop Manor.

"Mandeville's late!" growled Sir Hugh, as he glanced at his watch. "He said in his note that he would be here by half-past seven. Ah, here he is, I think!"

The vibrating hum of a motor-car was heard outside. Sir Hugh rose to his feet, drew aside the curtains, and peered through the window.

"Yes, it's the squire," he said, as he saw Mandeville step out of the car and enter the house.

He strode over to Vera's side, and regarded her with a glance that was meant to be awe-inspiring.

"Now, remember what I've told you!" he said, in a low, fierce voice. "This is the first time Mandeville has been to see you since your father's death. You are to be very, very nice to him, and if he asks you to marry him, you will of course say 'yes.'"

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind!" said Vera, with a defiant toss of her head. "I shall tell him, as I have told you, that I am engaged to Mr. Stuart, and that if I can't marry Mr. Stuart, I shall never marry anybody!"

A spasm of rage convulsed her guardian's face, but ere his anger could vent itself in words a footman knocked at the door.

"Mr. Mandeville would like to speak with you in the library, sir," he said, addressing Sir Hugh.

Somewhat puzzled by this unusual request, Sir Hugh made his way to the library, where he found Paul Herman—whom he only knew, of course, as "Squire Mandeville"—standing with his back to the fire, and still in his motor-coat.

At the sight of Herman's haggard, bloodless face, Sir Hugh started back in alarm.

"Good heavens, what's the matter?" he gasped. "You look ghastly!"

"Never mind my looks," was the ungracious rejoinder. "I've come here to-night to speak to you about Miss Langford Have you kept your bargain?

Have you prevented her and Stuart communicating with each other?"

"Yes."

"And have you endeavoured to persuade Miss Langford to regard my suit with favour?'

"Indeed I have!"

"With what success?"

Sir Hugh averted his eyes. He dared not confess that his endeavours had met with utter failure.

"She—she hasn't exactly consented yet," he said. "But I have hopes—great hopes—that in another week or two——"

"I can't wait another week or two," interrupted Herman. "I am leaving England to-night—for ever!"

Sir Hugh stared at him in stupefied amazement.

"You are leaving England to-night for ever?' he repeated.

Herman nodded, and thrust his hand into his pocket.

"You know what these are," he said, drawing out a packet of letters. "And you know that I have only to send them to the British Government, and you will be utterly and completely ruined. Don't interrupt me," he continued, as Sir Hugh was about to speak. "I know what you're going to say. You're going to remind me that I gave you three months in which to gain Miss Langford's consent. That is perfectly true; but, as I've already told you, I can't afford to wait any longer. I am leaving England to-night, never to return, and my object in coming here is to ask you if you are willing to do something for me, in return for which I will make you a present of these letters You will then be able to burn them, and thus destroy all proof of the treachery of which you were guilty when you were a trusted official of the Government"

"I'll do anything to get back to those letters," said Sir Hugh eagerly—"anything in the world! What is it you wish me to do?"

"Before I answer that question," said Herman. "I must first let you into a secret. You have read in the papers, of course, of the extermination of the League of the Iron Hand?"

"Of course."

"And you know that No. 1, alias Paul Herman, mysteriously disappeared after the failure of his attempt to kidnap the Prince of Ilirya?"

"Yes; the police have been searching for him everywhere, but without success."

"Well, they have found him now. At least, they have discovered who he is, but they haven't captured him. He gave them the slip this evening, and hurried off to Moscar Grange."

"Do you mean to say that Paul Herman is here?" gasped Sir Hugh.

Herman nodded.

"Where is he?" demanded Sir Hugh.

"Standing in front of you," said Herman coolly. "I am he!"

Sir Hugh recoiled, as though he had been struck.

"You!" he gasped, in a hoarse, incredulous voice. "You Paul Herman! You the mysterious Number One! You the outlawed head of the League of the Iron Hand!"

"I am," said Herman; and in half-a-dozen sentences he briefly described the double life which he had led as Paul Herman, of Curzon Street, and Squire Mandeville, of Hartop Manor. Then he told how Nelson Lee, Nipper, and a couple of Scotland Yard men had that afternoon been seen lurking near the Manor, and how he had managed to elude them and come to Moscar Grange in the car.

As he finished his story, Sir Hugh heaved a sigh of relief, and his eyes wandered in the direction of the bell.

Herman read his thoughts like an open book.

"Ring the bell, and send for the police, and give me in charge, if you like," he said calmly; "but, remember, these letters are still in my possession. If I am arrested I shall give them to the police, and you will join me in the lock-up."

The look of relief died out of Sir Hugh's face. He saw that he could not ruin Herman without, at the same time, ruining himself.

"You misjudge me!" he said, trying to look injured. "I never thought of betraying you to the police. But you haven't told me what it is you wish me to do. You say you are leaving England, never to return. Where are you going?"

Herman pondered for a moment before he replied. Then a curious smile played round the corners of his mouth, as a villainous thought occurred to him.

"Can I trust you?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" said Sir Hugh.

"Then I'll tell you," said Herman. "When I founded the League of the Iron Hand, I knew it would not last for ever. That is to say, I knew it was practically certain that the police, sooner or later, would get on the track of the League, and exterminate it, root and branch.

"In order to prepare for such an emergency, I decided to provide myself with a suitable retreat to which I could retire and spend the rest of my days in peace and safety.

"For this purpose I purchased a small island off the Azores, which had formerly belonged to an ex-member of the Portuguese Government, who had built himself a magnificent residence there.

"Some day, perhaps, I will tell you more about this island. For the present it is enough to say that I have furnished the house with every modern convenience, and that I have a large staff of servants on the island who are devoted to me, and who only know me by the name of Dom Jose da Silva.

"Under the name of Dom Jose da Silva, I have banked considerable sums of money from time to time in the National Bank of Lisbon; so that, although the League is now broken up, I have still an income of several thousands a year. I have also, as Dom Jose da Silva, bought a fast turbine yacht, which is known as the San Miguel. Needless to say, the officers and crew of the yacht only know me as Dom Jose, and they have no suspicion that I am an Englishman, much less that I am Paul Herman, the fugitive president of the League of the Iron Hand.

"In case it became necessary for me to flee the country at a moment's notice, I have always kept the yacht at some English port, with everything in readiness for an immediate start. She is now at Portsmouth, which is only thirty miles from here. In two hours after leaving this place, I shall be on board the San Miguel, and an hour later I shall be on my way to the Azores."

"I am still waiting to hear what it is you wish me to do for you," said Sir Hugh.

"I love your niece," said Herman simply. "I want to make her my wife. Unless I can do so, life has no further charm for me. I would rather stay here, and end my days in gaol, than go abroad and live without your niece."

"Well?" asked Sir Hugh.

"I want to take Vera with me," said Herman. "When once she is on the island I have little doubt that I can speedily convince her of the sincerity of my love, and persuade her to marry me."

Sir Hugh's face had turned as white as his evening cravat.

"You want to take Vera with you to your island?" he repeated, as though he doubted the evidence of his ears.

"Yes," said Herman. "And if you'll bring her to Portsmouth—my car will easily hold the three of us—I'll give you these letters as soon as she is safely aboard the yacht."

Sir Hugh shook his head.

"It can't be done," he said. "She wouldn't come with us. Nothing would persuade her to take such a journey at this late hour. She'd suspect it was a plot to kidnap her."

"I'll undertake to persuade her, if you'll let me," said Herman.

Ere Donald had recovered from his stupefaction, a constable came rushing down the archway, followed by an excited crowd of people, all of whom had been attracted to the wharf by the report of the revolver.

"How?"

Herman whispered something in his companion's ear. Sir Hugh started, and turned, if possible, a shade paler.

"But if you have this wonderful power," he said, "why don't you hypnotise her and make her promise to marry you?"

Herman vigorously shook his head.

"I love your niece," he said. "I want her to marry me of her own free will. It would give me no joy to have a wife whom I had mesmerised into marrying me. I am prepared to hypnotise her in order to get her aboard the yacht; but I will never, never marry her until she is willing to take me of her own free will.

"But we are wasting valuable time," he added, as the clock struck eight. "Every moment I remain in England adds to my danger. I have now taken you completely into my confidence, and told you all there is to tell. If I persuade Miss Langford to come with us, will you accompany us to Portsmouth and remain with us until she is safely aboard the yacht?"

Sir Hugh strode up and down the room with agitated strides. Herman watched him for a moment or two in silence; then he held up the packet of letters.

"If you refuse," he said, "these letters will be in the hands of the police within the next half-hour. If you consent, they will be given to you as soon as your niece is on board the yacht. It is for you to choose. Which shall it be?"

For a moment—but only a moment—longer Sir Hugh hesitated. Then a look of reckless desperation crossed his face.

"I accept your terms," he said. "She's in the drawing-room. Come along, and get it over."

. . . . . .

Vera rose to her feet when the two men entered the drawing-room. Herman thought he had never seen her look so beautiful.

"Good-evening, Miss Langford!" he said, holding out his hand.

Vera coldly ignored the proffered hand, and contented herself with a formal bow; and then, to her mingled surprise and indignation, Herman planted himself in front of her and folded his arms across his chest.

"Look at me!" he commanded.

Scarcely knowing why she did so, Vera raised her eyes to his.

"What do you mean by speaking to me like that?" she demanded. "Why should I—should I—should——"

Her voice died away into an inaudible whisper; her arms dropped limply to her sides, and a vacant look came into her face. Herman's eyes were glittering like those of a snake. He stretched out his hand and laid it on her head.

"You have just received news of the serious illness of a very dear friend in London," he said. "You have asked me to take you in my motor-car to see your friend. You will now go up to your room, and put on your hat and cloak, and rejoin your guardian and myself at the front door."

Like one in a trance, Vera left the room. Sir Hugh then donned his hat and overcoat, and followed Herman to the car, where presently they were joined by Vera.

"We are going up to town to see a friend of Miss Langford's who has been taken seriously ill," explained Sir Hugh to the wondering butler. "We may be absent for a day or two, but I will wire to you when we are coming back."

As he uttered these words he handed Vera into the car, and seated himself beside her. Herman took his seat in front, and a moment later the car, with its three occupants, was racing down the dark, deserted road with the speed of an express.

WHAT DONALD SAW AND DID.

THE reader will doubtless remember that after Donald Stuart had been rescued from the clutches of Herman and his confederates, the Government commissioned him to build an airship in the dockyard at Devonport.

In accordance with this arrangement, as already recorded, Donald left London and secured lodgings in Devonport. On the following day, however, he received an official communication from the Government, informing him that they had changed their plans and that they had decided that the new airship should be built in the Royal dockyards at Portsmouth. To Portsmouth, accordingly, Donald shifted his quarters, and two days later he started work on the new vessel.

The next ten days were busy ones for the young inventor, but were not marked by any incident that calls for special mention. On the eleventh day, however, something occurred which was destined to change the whole current of his future career.

Taking a stroll on this particular evening, he paused for a moment to light his pipe. Whilst he was fumbling for his matches, three figures turned into the lane out of an adjoining side-street, and walked briskly past him on the opposite side of the lane.

For a moment Donald could scarcely believe his eyes. One of the figures he recognised at a glance as Vera Langford. The second he recognised as Sir Hugh. The third was a complete stranger to him. As the reader knows, it was "Dom Jose da Silva," alias Paul Herman, alias Squire Mandeville, alias Number One.

"Vera here! And with her guardian and another man!" gasped Donald. "What does it mean? Why has Sir Hugh brought her to Portsmouth? Who is the other man? Where are they taking her?"

In obedience to an impulse which he could neither explain nor resist, he turned swiftly on his heel and glided after the three figures. A moment or two later, to his intense amazement, he saw them turn down the low, dark archway which led to Gunter's Wharf.

To say that Donald was mystified is but feebly to describe his state of mind. For

nearly a quarter of an hour he stood staring at the archway, waiting for the three figures to reappear. Then, with his brain in a whirl of suspicion and doubt, he crossed the road and stole down to the wharf.

By that time Vera and Paul Herman had been taken off in a boat which was awaiting them. Sir Hugh Langford was standing alone with a revolver in his right hand, and his eyes fixed in a glassy stare on the twinkling lights in the harbour.

"Four hundred and ninety-three; four hundred and ninety-four; four hundred and ninety-five!" Donald heard him mutter as he approached.

"Sir Hugh—you know me, of course—I'm Donald Stuart," said Donald, planting himself in front of Sir Hugh and speaking in rapid, agitated tones. "I saw you come down here about a quarter of an hour ago with Miss Langford and another man. Where are they now? Who was the other man? Where have they gone?"

"Four hundred and ninety-six; four hundred and ninety-seven," said Sir Hugh, without looking at Donald or showing any sign of having heard him.

"Sir Hugh!" cried Donald, almost beside himself with fear and excitement. "Are you mad, or drunk, or what's the matter with you? I'm Donald Stuart. Why don't you answer my questions? Where is Vera? Why has she left you? Why are you standing here, with that revolver in your hand?"

"Four hundred and ninety-eight; four hundred and ninety-nine; five hundred!" said Sir Hugh; and as he uttered the last word he suddenly raised the revolver to his head and clapped the muzzle to his temple.

With a cry of horrified alarm, Donald threw himself forward and struck up the baronet's arm. But he was just a fraction of a second too late. Even as he struck up Sir Hugh's arm, the revolver went off with a loud report; and the next instant Sir Hugh pitched forward, with a stifled groan, and collapsed in a huddled heap at Donald's feet.

Ere Donald had time to recover from his stupefaction, a constable came rushing down the archway, followed by an excited crowd of people, all of whom had been attracted to the wharf by the report of the revolver.

"Merciful powers above! What's happened?" cried the constable, gazing with horrified eyes at the limp and motionless form at Donald's feet.

Donald strove to reply, but the events of the last few moments had proved too much for his overstrained nerves.

For a second or two he swayed from side to side like a drunken man; then he stumbled forwards and fell fainting into the constable's arms.

. . . . . .

When his scattered wits returned, he was lying on a couch in the house-surgeon's room at the Portsmouth Royal Hospital. By his side were the house-surgeon and a sergeant of police.

"You're all right now, Mr. Stuart," said the house-surgeon, as Donald struggled up into a sitting position on the couch. "You know who I am, of course. We met at the barracks the other night, you know. I'm the house-surgeon of the hospital!"

"Then I'm at the hospital, I suppose?" said Donald, passing his hand across his aching brow. "But why am I here? What has happened?"

Before either of his companions could reply, a flood of recollection swept over him.

"Ah, yes; I remember now!" he exclaimed, with a shudder of horror. "Is he—is he dead?"

"You refer, no doubt, to the man who shot himself on Gunter's wharf," said the house-surgeon. "No, he isn't dead, but he's in a very bad way. He was brought here at the same time as you."

"You know who he is, I suppose?" said the sergeant, speaking for the first time.

"Oh, yes!" said Donald. "Do you?"

"No."

"He's Sir Hugh Langford, of Moscar Grange," said Donald.

The sergeant made a note of the name; then he turned to the house-surgeon.

"Is it safe to question him?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" said the house-surgeon. "He only fainted, and he's all right now. Question him as much as you like."

The sergeant turned to Donald.

"Would you mind telling me all you know about this strange affair?" he asked.

"Not at all," said Donald. "But I warn you that I can't tell you very much. The whole affair is a mystery to me.

"I was walking down Waterhouse Lane, about half-past ten," he continued, "when I saw two men and a lady turn into the lane out of Bond Street. By the light of a street-lamp I recognised one of the men as Sir Hugh Langford, and the lady as his niece; Miss Vera Langford. The other man was a complete stranger to me."

He then described how he had followed Vera and her two companions; how he had seen them turn down the archway leading to Gunter's Wharf; how he had waited a quarter of an hour; and how he had then stolen on to the wharf.

"By that time," he continued, "Miss Langford and the stranger had disappeared, and I can only suppose they had left the wharf by boat, probably for the purpose of embarking on some vessel in the harbour. Sir Hugh was standing on the wharf, with a revolver in his hand. He had a peculiar, vacant look on his face; his eyes were fixed in a glassy stare; and as I approached I heard him counting to himself.

"I spoke to him, and asked him where Miss Langford and the other man had gone. He paid no heed to my questions, but went on counting like a child repeating a lesson. I spoke to him again, but instead of answering me, he continued to count; and then, suddenly, he raised the revolver to his head, with the evident intention of committing suicide.

(Continued on page xii.)

The Case of the Semi-detached House!

The Adventures of Gordon Fox, Detective.

CHAPTER I.

RANJIT SINGH — THE SECRET DOOR — THE MYSTERIOUS BOX—IS IT MURDER?

BETWEEN eleven and twelve o'clock on a dark autumn night, after dining with a City friend at one of the big, old-fashioned houses in Clapham, Gordon Fox was walking down the High Street towards the Clapham Road. Over his evening-dress he wore a long plaid coat, into the pockets of which both his hands were deeply thrust.

He was strolling slowly along, content with the world and himself—in a tranquil mood that may have been partly induced by his host's rare Burgundy.

He had been doing nothing in particular for a fortnight, and a fresh case was the very last thing he was thinking of now.

As he tossed away the end of his cigar, and paused by a lamp-post to fill and light his pipe, a taxi overtook him from behind. There was a shout to the driver, the vehicle was pulled up with a jerk, and out jumped a man of about the detective's age, with shrewd features and a heavy moustache.

"I thought that was you, Fox!" he exclaimed eagerly. "I knew the coat. You're just the man I want. I was rushing off to Scotland Yard for Harkness, but you'll do better. I'll be more than grateful if you'll give me a little help on the quiet."

"What's wrong, my dear Mole?"

"It's a queer affair. Murder—murder most mysterious!" replied John Mole, who was a police inspector of the second grade at Scotland Yard.

Gordon Fox promptly thrust his friend into the cab, and stepped in after him.

"Where to?" he asked. "Tell the man."

"Back again, cabby—back to Thurlow Road!"

The taxi swung round, and as it sped through the quiet streets, Inspector Mole explained the situation in a low voice, briefly and concisely.

"The story begins in India," he said. "Ten years ago, a Mr. Charles Danvers, then a man of forty, was dismissed from the Civil Service in Calcutta for negligence, or something of that sort. He was an entomologist—a collector of insects—and, with his servant, a Hindoo named Ranjit Singh, who had the reputation of being a magician, he went off to the jungle of Bengal and lived for a year in a lonely spot in a little bungalow that belonged to him.

"During this period a rich Parsee merchant, who was travelling alone through that part of Bengal, mysteriously disappeared. He was carrying a large sum of money, and it was believed that he had been killed and robbed by dacoits.

"Nine years ago, Mr. Danvers came home to England with his servant, and recently some natives, while digging in the compound of his old bungalow for treasure that a fool of a fakir had promised they should find, came upon the body of the Parsee. He had been murdered by a blow on the head.

"The affair was hushed up, and the Calcutta police sent written instructions to Scotland Yard, stating that one of their men would follow by the next steamer with the necessary evidence for arrest.

"Here is where I come in. I was put on the case, and I had no difficulty in finding Charles Danvers, who had not changed his name. He was living, with his native servant, at 27, Thurlow Road, Wandsworth Common. It was a semi-detached house, with another one joined to it, and for nearly a week I have kept it under observation by day and night, with the help of three plain-clothes men from the Yard.

"The Hindoo has not stirred out of doors, but tradesmen's boys have called as usual, and each morning Mr. Danvers has gone for a walk—under surveillance, of course. This evening, when I went on duty, I was told that Mr. Danvers had not gone out during the day, and that he had not been visible, though the servant had been seen several times at the window. I thought nothing of this at first, so I let the two day men go home. I had Constable Drew to share my watch. But, later, I began to feel uneasy. I suspected that something was wrong—I had no idea what—and in the end I decided on a bold step. Leaving Drew on

guard, I managed to get into the house by the kitchen window.

"The first floor was deserted, and so was the second. I crept noiselessly up to the third and top floor, heard footsteps, and threw open the door of a room at the back.

"Here stood the Hindoo, rigged out like a Britisher, in tweeds and a bowler hat, with a lighted candle in one hand and a portmanteau in the other. He showed fight at once, but I knocked him down and stunned him, clapped a pair of irons on his wrists, and tied his ankles with a bit of rope. There was a comparatively fresh cut on his left hand, and another on his cheek. I opened the portmanteau, and inside were clothes that I had seen Mr. Danvers wearing, and a bag containing a large sum in gold and banknotes. I made a thorough search of the house, called in Drew, and the two of us searched again, but not a trace of Charles Danvers did we find. I left the constable in charge of the prisoner, and was on the way to Scotland Yard when I met you."

"And what do you make of all this?" asked Gordon Fox.

"Only one thing. The Hindoo has murdered and robbed his master, and hidden the body in some secret place."

"A natural suspicion, but don't be in a hurry. You think Mr. Danvers may have been aware that he was watched?"

"Very likely he was."

"He could not have slipped away since yesterday evening?"

"Impossible! Not even in disguise, for he limps badly, owing to an injury to his leg. It was chewed by a tiger years ago."

"And what about the house that adjoins No. 27?"

"It was to let furnished when my duties began," Inspector Mole answered in surprise, "but four days ago it was taken by an elderly man with a grey beard."

At this juncture the cab pulled up in front of No. 27, and the detective and his companion alighted.

They hurried through the front garden, entered the house at the rear, and as quickly as possible made their way to the top floor. The candle was still burning in the back room, and Constable Drew, pale and shaky, was just in the act of staggering to his feet. The Hindoo had vanished! The man explained in a few words.

"I hardly know how it happened, sir," he said. "It was done as quick as lightning. Before my very eyes the fellow slipped out of ropes and fetters, jumped up, seized a chair, and fetched me a stunning blow on the head, which left me unconscious till now. He must have been a magician."

"I think he bore that reputation," Gordon Fox said drily; and a serious expression came into his eyes as he observed that the room was absolutely unfurnished except for the broken chair. "Doesn't it strike you as queer, Mole," he added, "that you should have found the Hindoo up here on the top floor, in his empty apartment, with his hat on and a portmanteau in his hand?"

"My word, it is rather odd!" assented Inspector Mole.

The detective picked up the candle, and looked about for a moment. He entered a closet at one end of the room, closely examined the wall, and found a secret door that had been cut in the thin partition.

With some trouble, he opened it, and then called his companions.

"Hallo! What does this mean?" exclaimed the inspector.

"It means much," replied Gordon Fox. "Come, we'll investigate."

He led the way with the light, and the three passed through into the adjoining house.

They descended from floor to floor, finding all dark and silent until they reached the lower hall, where a gas-jet was burning dimly. A tall grandfather's clock stood on one side, and near-by a hammer and a screwdriver lay on an oaken bench. There was a drawer to this. The detective opened it, and picked up a grey wig, and a heavy beard and moustache to match. Inspector Mole clapped a hand to his brow.

"It's clear as daylight now!" he cried in dismay. "I see it all now, Fox! At twilight last evening a long wooden box, marked 'plate,' was removed from here by an ordinary waggon. It was done so openly—the occupant of the house helped to carry it out—that my suspicions weren't roused. The grey-bearded man was Ranjit Singh. He discovered that secret door upstairs a week ago, slipped out from here in his disguise, and hired this furnished house from the agent. It was a part of his cunning plan for murdering and robbing his master And the dead body of Charles Danvers was in that box! No doubt it was the case to this clock, and he found it stowed away somewhere!"

"Your deductions are admirable," said Gordon Fox, with a quiet smile.

And he led the way out of the house.

CHAPTER II.

A JOURNEY TO ESSEX—MR. MEAKIN OF MYRTLE COTTAGE—THE INSPECTOR SUCCEEDS.

GORDON FOX was at work early the next morning, and with a fairly clear idea of what he had to do. He was aware that it would waste time to search for the waggon that had carted away the box, and as for the latter, he was satisfied that it had been sent out of London. His first step was to ring up by telephone a Wandsworth house-agent, from whom he learned that the furnished

dwelling in Thurlow Road had been let for three months to an individual by the name of Garling. This information proved of no value to the detective, nor had he expected that it would. He pursued his inquiries in another direction, visiting the large railway-stations, and by noon he believed that he was on the track of the box, though there was a chance that he was wrong.

It was at Liverpool Street that he met with success, and from there he wired to Inspector Mole, who shortly arrived with Constable Drew, both in plain clothes. The three travelled down to Essex by a slow train, and it was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the little village of Shotford, a few miles from the sea. Gordon Fox at once sought the station-master.

"A large box was unloaded here yesterday," he said, "addressed to a Mr. Meakin, of Myrtle Cottage. Has it been delivered yet?"

"It has been stolen, sir," was the startling reply. "It was marked 'plate,' and I think some London thieves must have followed it down here by a later train. Anyhow, it was stolen from the goods-shed last night, and carried off in a cart. The wheel-marks were traced from the door of the shed to the London Road, where they were lost, of course. The local police are working on the case, but they haven't found any clue."

"Has Mr. Meakin been here?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir; he arrived early this morning," replied the station-master, "and he was greatly upset when he heard the news."

"He did not return to town?"

"No; he walked over to Myrtle Cottage, which he has just taken furnished from a London agent. I expect he'll be here again to-day."

"Can you describe this Mr. Meakin?"

"An elderly gentleman, sir, with grey hair and beard, and very dark skin."

"That's the man; it didn't take him long to get a fresh disguise," Gordon Fox told himself. "How far is Myrtle Cottage?" he added, aloud.

"A couple of miles to the south, sir," said the station-master. "That road yonder passes it."

The detective drew Inspector Mole aside.

"This is unfortunate," he said. "A life may be at stake. But I believe that box to be near by, and I want you to look for it. The thieves would not have carried it far. They would have opened it at the first opportunity, at some lonely spot, and then fled."

"So I should imagine—at the sight of Mr. Danvers' dead body!" said the inspector. "But how am I to go about it?"

Gordon Fox gave his instructions as the three walked into the village, where without delay they hired two traps at the largest inn, the Red Lion. Inspector Mole drove off in the first one that was ready, taking the London Road, and a few moments later Constable Drew and the detective climbed into the other vehicle and started for Myrtle Cottage.

It was a bleak and chilly afternoon, and the journey was uninteresting. For more than a mile the trap containing the two men bowled along between the hedges, up hill and down; and then, as it swung round a sharp curve, an elderly, grey-bearded man was seen approaching on foot, already within half a dozen yards.

"There he is!" gasped the constable.

He drew rein, and before the horse had stopped, Gordon Fox was on the ground. At the same instant Mr. Meakin took to his heels, with his pursuer after him, but he was soon caught as he was about to leap the hedge. In the struggle that followed his false wig and beard came off, revealing the swarthy features of Ranjit Singh.

"What do you want with me?" he demanded, when he had been handcuffed and lifted into the trap.

"For one thing, you are charged with complicity in the murder of a Parsee merchant in India nine years ago," replied the detective; and at that the Hindoo shook with fear.

A quick drive back to Shotford, and the prisoner was lodged in the police-station. Gordon Fox had a private interview with him there, and when he came out into the village street, with an anxious expression on his face, Inspector Mole hastened over to him from the Red Cow opposite.

"I've got my man!" said the detective.

"The Hindoo?"

"Yes; he's locked up. And what luck have you had?"

"The best of luck," was the reply. "I've found the box. The screws had been taken out, but I didn't lift the lid."

"Good work!" exclaimed Gordon Fox. "And now for the finish! We must get that box open without a moment's delay, and Ranjit Singh must go with us."

"Ranjit Singh! What for?"

"You will see, my dear fellow!"

THE LAST CHAPTER.

OPENING THE BOX—BACK TO LIFE—GORDON FOX EXPLAINS.

THE two traps shortly left the village again. In one were Gordon Fox and his two companions, and in the other, driven by a lad, were the Hindoo and a local constable. They drove nearly a mile out on the London Road,

turned off into a narrow, grassy lane that showed the faint ruts of cartwheels, and presently stopped in a tract of dense woodland. The whole party climbed down, and Inspector Mole led the way to a secluded spot close by. Here, in the midst of thickets and dried bracken, was the wooden box.

"The thieves were frightened off," said the detective, in a low voice, "but they appear to have left things as they found them."

Amid breathless silence he removed the lid, disclosing a layer of straw-cases, such as are used for wine bottles. He pulled back some of the straw, raised a sheet that was underneath, and disclosed the waxen face of a man. Anybody would have sworn that he was dead.

"Charles Danvers!" gasped Inspector Mole. "I knew it!"

Gordon Fox smiled.

"Come," he said to the Hindoo, "undo your clever work."

Ranjit Singh, whose wrists had been released, stepped calmly forward. He removed two little plugs of cotton from the nostrils of the apparently dead man, stroked his forehead, and made a few passes over him with one hand. Mr. Danvers opened his eyes. A faint flush tinged his cheeks. He drew a deep breath, sat up, and looked about him—gazed with an expression of bewilderment that soon turned to one of comprehension and dismay. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not a pleasant awakening," he said. "I see that Fate has gone against me, so I must make the best of it. I am at your service, gentlemen, if you are ready to take me to London."

The detective picked up a grey wig and a heavy beard and moustache to match. Inspector Mole clapped a hand to his brow.

"By heavens, what does it mean?" exclaimed Inspector Mole.

"Hypnotism of a superior kind, that is all," replied Gordon Fox. "For centuries it has been practised in India, where masters of the art, such as Ranjit Singh, often show their skill by burying men alive for days In this case it was a simple device, suggested by the discovery of the secret door, for enabling Mr. Danvers to escape from Thurlow Road. The Hindoo, going out in disguise from the adjoining house, leased that from the agent in one name, and hired Myrtle Cottage in another.

There, master and servant counted on remaining safely for a time, until they could find an opportunity of leaving the country. As for the cuts on the Hindoo's face and hand, they were doubtless caused by a clumsy use of the screwdriver when fastening the lid of the box down."

. . . . . .

The detective's theories were subsequently confirmed by Charles Danvers, who admitted that he had been warned of the police surveillance by a letter from a friend in India; but neither he nor his servant would speak of the charge against them, nor was it ever known if they were guilty of the murder of the Parsee merchant. Ranjit Singh committed suicide by poison during the voyage to India, and Mr. Danvers died in prison while awaiting his trial at the High Courts of Justice in Calcutta.

THE END.

THE LEAGUE OF THE IRON HAND!

(Continued from page vii)

"I knocked up his arm, but I was too late; and almost before I had realised what was happening he was lying, bleeding and unconscious, at my feet. Then, I suppose, I must have fainted; for after that I remember nothing more."

The house-surgeon and the sergeant exchanged bewildered glances.

"You say he was counting to himself when you found him on the wharf?" asked the house-surgeon.

"Yes."

"What an extraordinary thing! Why do you suppose he was counting?"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea. I thought at the time he was either drunk or mad."

"Did he appear to recognise you?"

"No. He didn't even seem to see me, much less to hear me or recognise me."

"What was the other man like?" asked the sergeant.

Donald described him to the best of his ability, and the sergeant entered the description in his notebook. Then he questioned Donald at great length, but without gaining any further information.

"And that is all you know about the affair?" he said, as he closed his book.

"Absolutely," said Donald.

The sergeant sighed.

"I'm afraid your information doesn't throw much light on the mystery," he said. "I wonder who that other man was, and where he and Miss Langford have gone?"

"So do I," said Donald bitterly. "I would give all I possess at this moment to know the answer to that question."

"Ah, well," said the sergeant, as he rose to his feet, "Sir Hugh will doubtless be able to tell us when he comes round."

He turned to the house-surgeon.

"There's no chance of his coming round to-night, I suppose?" he said.

The house-surgeon shook his head.

"Not the slightest," he said. "As a matter of fact, it's more than likely he'll never come round. However, you may depend upon it that if he shows any sign of returning consciousness I'll let you know at once."

"Is he seriously injured?" asked Donald, when the sergeant had taken his departure.

"Very," said the house-surgeon. "But for your action in knocking up his arm, he would doubtless had been killed on the spot. As it was, instead of entering the brain, the bullet glanced off the outside of the skull, fracturing the bone and giving rise to considerable internal bleeding."

"And you think he'll die without regaining consciousness?"

"I think it is highly probable, but I don't want to dogmatise on the point. He might recover consciousness, though my private opinion is that he won't."

"I hope he will," said Donald fervently. "Indeed, I hope he will."

"You are thinking of Miss Langford, no doubt," said the house-surgeon, regarding him with a sympathetic glance. "You and she are engaged to be married, aren't you?"

"There is no formal engagement between us," said Donald. "There would have been perhaps, if it hadn't been for Sir Hugh, who is her guardian, you know."

"For some reason best known to himself," he continued, "Sir Hugh has done everything in his power to keep Miss Langford and myself apart, and to force her to marry a young country squire, named Mandeville. For nearly two months he has kept his ward a virtual prisoner at the Grange, and all my letters to her, and all her letters to me, have been confiscated and burnt. And now, on the top of all this misery," he added, in a choking voice, "there comes this further mystery! Sir Hugh brings his nieece to Portsmouth in company with a strange man. The stranger disappears, taking Miss Langford with him, and Sir Hugh attempts to blow his brains out! What does it all mean? Who was the man? Where have he and Vera gone?"

He staggered to his feet and brushed away the gathering tears.

"I shall break down altogether if I go on like this!" he said, with a forced laugh. "I'd better go home before I make a fool of myself."

"Won't you stay the night here?" urged the house-surgeon. "Not as a patient, you know, but as my guest?"

Donald shook his head.

"I'd rather go home," he said. "I want to think things over, and decide what is best to be done. You'll let me know if Sir Hugh recovers consciousness, won't you?"

"I will," said the house-surgeon.

(Another Splendid Instalment Next Week.)

(*Continued from page* 14.)

in his place in front of a crowd of schoolboys was almost more than he could bear. The humiliation was complete.

The steward strode away, and snapped out some sharp orders to his men. They at once scattered, and hurried off in various directions. Ratley himself stalked away down the road, his brow as black as thunder.

"Somebody will go through the mill now," remarked Reggie Pitt. "Ratley is bound to let off steam, and the vials of his wrath will descend upon some innocent cottagers, or farm labourers, I expect. It's about time that rotter was kicked out of his position."

"Absolutely," agreed Archie. "I mean to say, a cur like that is nothing more nor less than a kind of excrescence. In other words, he's a dashed bounder! I sincerely trust that he is presented with a few dozen marching orders."

Lord Bushwick had wandered away, and was peering at the flowers in the little garden. Now that the crisis was over, his lordship had returned to his favourite amusement. An expression of impatience came into his face.

"Dear me," he murmured, shaking his head. "This is scandalous! These rose-trees are in a pitiable condition. They are —— Oh, by the way," he added. "By the way! Young man! Come here!"

He pointed an imperious finger at Willy Handforth.

"Want me, sir?" asked Willy innocently.

"Yes, by gad, I do!" said Lord Bushwick. "You told me of a somewhat remarkable rose-tree——"

"Yes sir—here it is," interrupted Willy calmly. "A rose-tree with wall flowers all over it. Just come and have a squint. Queerest thing you ever saw, sir. You ought to be interested."

The Lord of Bushwick fairly trotted over to the rose-tree which Handforth minor indicated. And, sure enough, wallflowers were to be seen intermingled with the somewhat second-rate roses which were all in bloom.

"Extraordinary!" murmured the earl. "Good gracious! How truly remarkable! What an astounding freak of nature——"

"Don't you believe it, sir!" I pointed out. "Just look a bit closer!"

"Closer? Eh? What's that?" said Lord Bushwick, adjusting his spectacles, and plucking at one of the wallflowers. "Why, bless my soul! What's this? It seems that the wallflowers are not actually growing——"

"Well, not absolutely, sir," admitted Willy. "You see, I pulled them from another part of the garden, and stuck them in that bush. They're growing, ain't they? At least, they're not dead."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The earl gazed at Willy grimly.

"How dare you?" he exclaimed. "Boy! How dare you? Is it possible that you have attempted to fool me? Can it be——"

"Oh, come off it, sir," protested Willy. "I had to get you down here somehow—and that was the only wheeze I could think of."

The old earl suddenly broke into a chuckle.

"Bless my heart and soul!" he said. "So that was it? You deliberately told me that story so that I should come down here? Good gad! What a scheme! I'm hanged if it wasn't clever! Yes, by George—clever!"

He patted Willy on the back, beamed upon the Grants, and then pottered off towards the gateway. And two minutes later he had gone—puffing back up the lane towards his beloved garden.

And all the honours of the afternoon were for Willy Handforth. For, without a doubt, it was Willy who had succeeded in bringing his lordship on to the scene. And the situation had been saved.

CHAPTER IV.

A RELIC OF THE PAST.

"WELL, that's that!" observed Reggie Pitt. "I suppose we can be thinking about moving on now. I'm jolly glad about the Grants. They're fixed up all right. They'll be able to stay in that cottage in peace and comfort."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Nothing of the kind!"

"But Lord Bushwick gave them permission——"

"That makes no difference," interrupted Edward Oswald. "By to-morrow, the old josser will have forgotten all about it. And Ratley will step in, and do just as he likes. We don't leave this camp until Ratley gets the push!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the idea!"

"Absolutely!"

"Well, I'm not so sure about that!" I said slowly. "After all, we can't fight other people's battles all the time. It was a first-class idea for us to take up the cudgels for Mrs. Grant—but it's a pretty tall order if we've got to champion the whole countryside!"

We had moved down to our camp—leaving Mr. and Mrs. Grant and the children in peace—and now we were sitting on the grass in front of the caravans, enjoying a meal.

It was exceedingly pleasant, and we were naturally reluctant to move. But I had almost decided that we should be making preparations for departure. There were many hours of daylight left yet—and we could cover quite a number of miles before camping time.

And, even if the other fellows overlooked the fact, I didn't—the fact that the holidays were practically at an end, and it was up to us to get back to St. Frank's in double quick time. There would be no excuse for us if we were late. There would be a most unholy row with the Head if we turned up a day or two after the new term had started.

"You can go and eat coke!" declared Handforth politely. "It's all very well to jaw like that, but I'm going to see that Simon Ratley is pushed out of this place. Besides, there's another thing. What about Grant? A thoroughly decent chap—one of the best. We ought to see that he gets his job back at the castle."

I smiled.

"My dear chap, I'm just as keen on it as you are," I said. "But it's not a job that we can do in a day, or even a week. How do you suppose that we can kick Ratley out? I'd love to see the bully sent about his business——"

"Oh rot!" interrupted Handy. "I never knew such a chap for thinking of difficulties! If you leave it to me, there won't be any trouble at all. We've already started the game—old Ratley's had one for his nob. We've got to continue it until the beast is settled!"

I didn't argue—for the simple reason that it was hopeless to reason with Handforth. I was fully in agreement with his own inclinations. Nothing would have pleased me more than to see Ratley get his deserts. My only fear was that we should not be able to accomplish our aims in the short time at our disposal.

The others discussed the matter until Archie dozed off among the tall grasses. He would probably have dozed off anyhow, for Archie always felt sleepy after a meal. We all felt rather lazy, in fact.

It was so warm, and so peaceful, that we had no inclination to get up and start something. I was thinking rather deeply—wondering how we could help the community by disposing of Ratley—when my attention was attracted towards a ploughman, who was working sedately in a field in the distance.

This same ploughman had been there for some hours, guiding his instrument across the field and back again with monotonous regularity. He was just a part of the landscape.

I watched him idly at first. I was still thinking about Simon Ratley. And I was beginning to conclude that Handforth was right. We simply couldn't leave this spot until we had effectively dealt with that brute.

Lord Bushwick hadn't the faintest idea of Ratley's harsh activities. If we could only set things right by some masterly move, all would be well. And now that we had taken up the fight with Ratley, we didn't like to leave, just because we had won the first round.

I was still watching the ploughman, as he made his way across the field with the same regular, slow movement. But the ploughman came to a halt in mid-field, and I saw the man leave his handles at the rear, and walk forward. He bent down, examining some obstacle which had presumably fouled the big steel blade.

"Now I wonder what on earth is wrong with him?" I murmured.

I was fully interested in the ploughman now. He was fully a quarter-of-mile away now, but the air was so clear that I could see every movement. And, suddenly, the man had staggered away from the plough, as though thoroughly scared. And the next moment he was running away, panic stricken.

He ran heavily—lumbering across the field with every ounce of speed that he could muster. And he was coming in our direction—towards the gate which opened upon the lane a few hundred yards away.

"My hat! What's the matter with the fellow?" I exclaimed, aloud.

"Eh?" said Tommy Watson.

"That ploughman!" I explained. "He's running away as though spooks were after him. Something seems to have scared him out of his wits."

"Yes, I noticed him, too," remarked Pitt. "Perhaps he's dashing away to the nearest pub. for a drink?"

Nobody took this suggestion seriously, and we were not left long in doubt. For a few minutes later, the ploughman—having reached the road—came panting along towards us. We sprang to our feet as he came to a halt in the lane, perspiring, panting and gasping.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Handforth, glaring.

The man, who was fairly elderly, could hardly speak for a moment.

"There be a big boomb up in yonder field," he gasped. "I struck it wi' me plough, I did! My! I reckon I'm lucky not to be blowed into a thousand bits, young gents. A narrer escape, if ever there wuz one!"

We stared.

"A boomb?" repeated Pitt politely.

"That be roight, young master!" said the ploughman, nodding. "One o' they gret boombs them Jarmins used to drop in wartime. Many's the time I've seed one o' they Zepherleens flyin' over the valley, like it wuz a fat old grub! Dang the Jarmins, sez I!"

"Oh, you mean a bomb!" I put in.

"That's what I sez—a boomb, young gents!"

"But you don't say that you found a bomb in that field?"

"Ay, 'tis there roight enough," said the ploughman, casting a scared look over towards the field. "Mebbe the blamed thing will bust up afore long. We'll see them hosses goo into little bits! Good hosses, too," he added regretfully. "But a man's life is wuth more than hosses, ain't it?"

"My dear fathead, you're dotty!" said Handforth, with a sniff. "The war's been over for years, and yet you talk about bombs! How many pints did you have at dinnertime? Or it may be the heat——"

"If you mean as I'm drunk, young gent, you're mistook!" said the countryman. "Why, with this 'ere beer now-a-days, a man don't 'ave no chance to get drunk, even if he wants to—which I don't, bein' of sober habits. I ain't bin drunk since Armistice Day——"

"Well, we needn't go into that," I interrupted. "As for this bomb, I expect you simply hit an old tin can of some kind——"

"Don't you believe it, my lad!" said the ploughman. "Why, wasn't I out there, in France for nigh on two year? I know what a boomb is—I've seed plenty on 'em, any way!" he added. "And that bomb's a lyin' there, right under the old plough—liable to go off any minit!"

"Oh, he's been seeing things," said Handforth impatiently.

"I don't know so much about that," I put in. "The Zeppelins came over this part of the country during the war—although they never did any damage. It's quite possible that a bomb fell in one of these fields and buried itself in the soft earth without exploding. Haven't you read in the papers how bombs have been found in different parts of the country? We'd better go and have a look—just to make sure."

The ploughman looked alarmed.

"Don't you go near thet plough, young masters!" he urged. "Why, like as not you'll be blowed to bits! They boombs are rummy things! An' arter all these years ther' ain't no tellin'——"

"After all these years, the bomb is probably harmless," I interrupted. "Anyhow, we'll have a look. There's no need to get alarmed, old chap. And you needn't come with us, unless you like."

"Come wi' ye?" repeated the man. "'Tain't likely!"

He sat down on the bank beside the lane, and mopped his brow with a big red handkerchief. And I started off towards the half-ploughed field, accompanied by eight or nine of the juniors. We were all quite curious, and had no particular thought of danger.

But I knew well enough that if the thing really was a bomb—well, it was probably fully alive, and quite capable of exploding. The fact that it had lain there for years was no indication that its vitality had died.

It did not take us long to reach the ploughed field. The horses, attached to the plough, were still standing quite placid, unconscious of the danger—or the supposed danger.

"I suppose we ought to be pretty cautious, you know," remarked Bob Christine. "There's no sense in asking for trouble—and if that bomb is alive, it might go off at any minute. A kick from one of those hoofs——"

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Handforth, striding on in advance. "Danger—I don't think! In any case, you're not afraid of a German bomb, I suppose? I'm going to have a look at the thing closely. And I'll bet it's not a bomb at all!"

He and I were the first fellows to get to the scene of action, so to speak. And the very first glance told me that the ploughman had made no mistake. There, just in front of the plough, and still half covered with moist earth, lay a big metal object.

Its shape was somewhat peculiar, and there was no question that it was one of the smaller "aerial torpedoes" which the German Air Force had used so liberally during the Great War. And this bomb was no shell—it was fully alive.

Handforth gave the thing a kick.

"Why, it's nothing to be afraid of," he sniffed. "Fancy calling this thing a bomb! I believe it's an old farm implement——"

"You—you reckless idiot!" I gasped. "Don't kick it like that! Of course it's a bomb—unexploded, too. It may be dead, but we can't tell. The slightest touch might cause it to explode."

"You're not afraid of it, I suppose?" asked Handforth tartly.

He bent down, seized the bomb, and commenced hauling it. It was of considerable size, and at first his efforts were of no avail. Then the bomb shifted somewhat, and suddenly rolled over a large hummock of earth. It lay there, fully exposed. Handforth gave it another kick.

"Drag him away!" said Church desperately

Three or four fellows seized Handforth, and pulled him out of the danger zone. Even if the bomb was dead, there was no sense in tempting Providence by kicking at it unnecessarily.

"The old chap was right—and I don't wonder at him being a bit scared," I remarked. "That plough blade might easily have caused an explosion. We shall have to do something, of course. We can't let the matter rest here."

"What can we do?" asked McClure.

"Well, it's our duty, I supppose, to inform the police," I replied. "Then they'll come along and take the thing away. I expect there'll be quite a commotion in the village when the news gets about."

I think most of the follows were feeling a great deal more comfortable after we had left the vicinity. But I did not do so until the plough had been shifted. Reggie Pitt and I, by careful manœuvring, succeeded in getting the plough out of that particular furrow. Then urging the horses on, we led them to the edge of the field.

The bomb was now left quite to itself in undisputed possession. The ploughman was waiting for us near the hedge. He had seen what we were doing, and his face was filled with admiration.

"Darn my hide!" he exclaimed warmly. "I reckon you young gents has got a whole lot of pluck! Why, even I wouldn't ha' done that, wi a boomb lyin' about, which it was like to go off any minit. An' me an old sodjer, too! You young gents are made o' the right stuff!"

"My dear chap, we couldn't leave your horses where they were," I pointed out. "If they had become restive, they might have kicked that bomb. The best thing you can do is to get your horses away, and tell your employer. It's most important that the police should know——"

"Ay, that's right enough, young master," said the man. "This here is a job for the police. They boombs ain't the kind o' things a honest man likes to handle. The police have got to do it!"

"Which doesn't say much for the honesty of the police," chuckled Pitt. "By the way, what's the name of your boss?"

"I be workin' on the Yew Farm, for Mr. Spraggs," said the ploughman. "O' course, he ain't my boss, really—only a kind o' foreman, as ye might say. The Yew Farm is on the Bushwick estates, and Mr. Ratley is the boss. Drat him!" added the man, with a bit of a scowl.

"You don't seem to like Mr. Ratley much?"

"Like him," repeated the labourer, "there ain't a man in the hull county what's more hated. Like as not he'll blame some of us chaps for that there boomb, and then ther'll be more trouble. Ratley won't last much louger, neither!" added the man darkly. "An' if it comes to that, no more won't his lordship!"

"What's the matter with his lordship?" asked Pitt.

"I ain't sayin' a word—tain't my place!" replied the countryman. "I've allus bin careful o' sayin' things. Joe Miles—that's my name. I've allus been known as a cautious man. But I will say as how Lord Bushwick ain't the kind of master he oughter be. Downtrodden—that's what we are! There's folks down in the village well nigh starvin'!" he went on indignantly. "There's men with wives an' kiddies what can't afford to give their families enough to eat. And for why? All because this 'ere tyrant pays starvation wages!"

"Do you mean Lord Bushwick?" asked Handforth.

"Ay," said Joe Miles. "I mean Lord Bushwick. But there! Tain't my place to say things. I'll be gettin' off, young gents. I'll put my hosses up, an' then goo to the village an' tell the policeman about that there boomb."

He made an extraordinary noise with his

mouth, which the horse at once understood. And we watched him as he went off down the road.

"Yes, we've got to stay here and see this whole thing through," I said slowly. "That man's got a totally wrong idea of Lord Bushwick—and I expect ninety per cent. of the other inhabitants share his views. Ratley is crushing these simple rustic people under his thumb, and they believe that Lord Bushwick is responsible. We've got to see that everything is put straight."

"Hear, hear!"

"Didn't I say it all along?" demanded Handforth. "Didn't I tell you so from the first? As for that bomb, I think we ought to shift it. How about carrying it down to the river, and dropping it in?"

"Nothing doing," I replied. "We should probably get into trouble with the authorities, And, after all, it is essentially a job for the police."

And all the others—with the exception of Handforth—agreed with me.

CHAPTER V.

THE GATHERING STORM!

"I DON'T like it!" I said, frowning.

I set my teacup down and gazed out across the meadows in the gathering dusk. Peace had descended on the valley—the quiet peace of a delightful English summer evening.

"Don't like it?" repeated Fatty Little.

"Why not?"

"Well, I'm a bit uneasy about it," I replied.

"Uneasy about your tea!" exclaimed Fatty, staring. "You—you ass! How the bloater paste can you be uneasy about a cup of tea?"

"Who's talking about tea?" I said impatiently.

"You are! You took a cup of tea, set the cup down, and then said you didn't like it," said the fat junior indignantly. "That's all rot! I pride myself that I can make as good a pot of tea as anybody——"

"Blow the tea!" I interrupted. "I wasn't thinking about tea! I was thinking about something far more important. I don't like this total inactivity."

"You mean about the bomb?" asked Pitt.

"Yes. It's nearly night time, and nothing has happened," I replied. "No sign of the police—or anybody else. And that bomb ought to be taken out of that field and rendered harmless as soon as possible. It's not nice to have unexploded aerial torpedoes lying about loose."

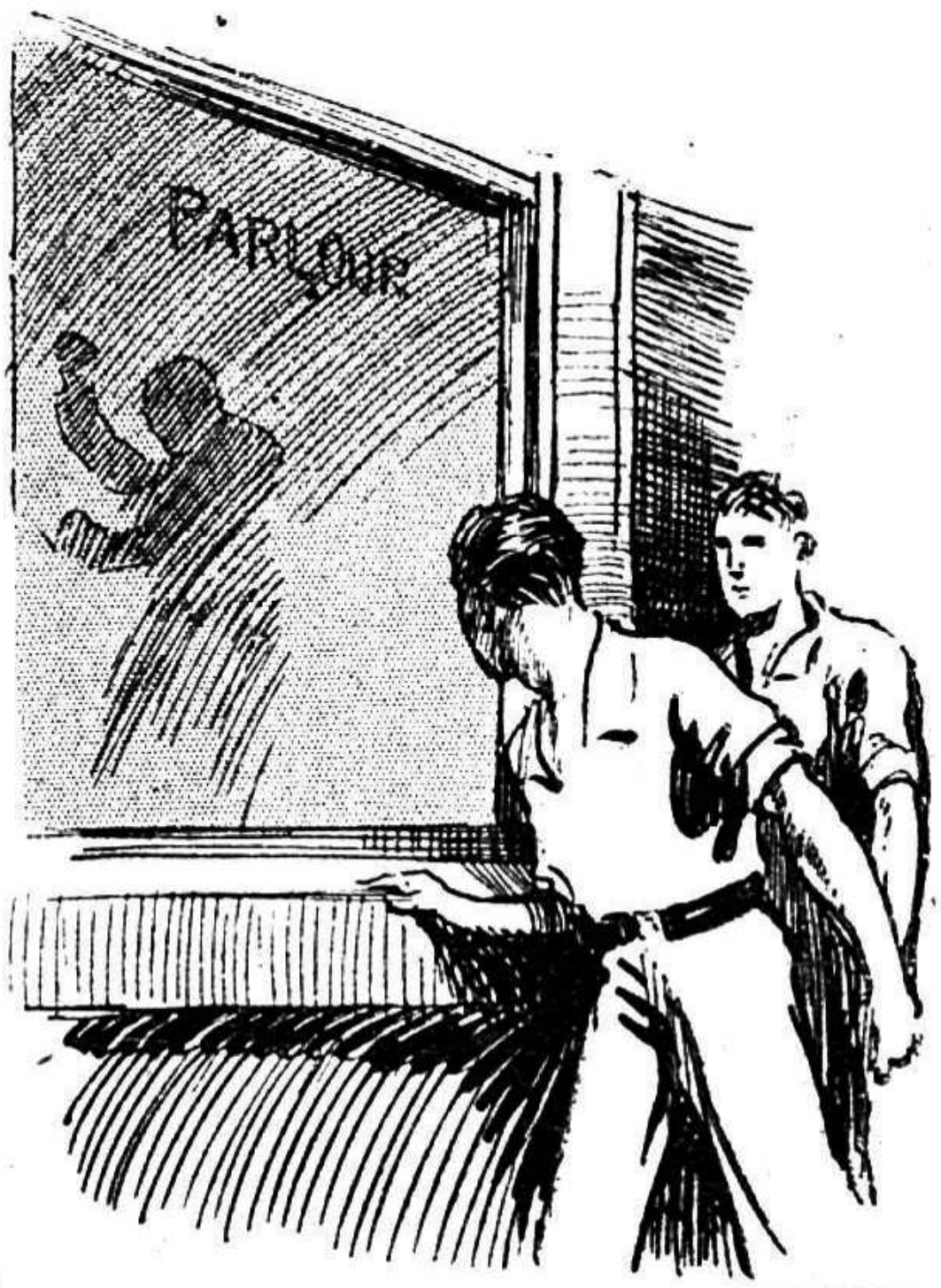
"Well, you ought to have taken my advice," said Handforth. "It won't take us long, even now, to chuck the giddy thing in the river."

But nobody regarded this suggestion with enthusiasm. As we had all decided, the task of removing the bomb was for the police. But, although it was now fairly late in the evening, there was no sign whatever of anybody coming. Since Joe Miles had departed with his plough, we had seen no sign of any living soul beyond just our own company. And, of course, we had been expecting whole squads of villagers on the scene, headed by the local constable. It hardly seemed possible that they would allow the bomb to remain there.

"I don't believe the old fathead told the police anything about it," said Tommy Watson. "That's the reason why nobody's been, I expect. He was half scared out of his wits, and he probably went straight home. Some of these village chaps have got no more sense than a giddy mule."

"Well, I'll tell you what," I suggested. "We've finished our feeding for the day, so we'll get up a little party, and stroll into the village. We're sure to see the local constable in the High Street, so we'll have a chat with him. It's no good relying on that ploughman."

There were many juniors who objected to the scheme, but several others voted it to be



"It ain't for me to say what's got to be done, mates," one of the men was saying in a thick kind of voice. "But you 'eard as well as I did. This 'ere bomb is lyin' up in the six-acre field. Ask Joe Miles—he's over in that corner!"

an excellent idea. Accordingly, Reggie and I set off soon afterwards.

Market Bushwick was by no means as grand as its name implied. It was a sleepy little village, set down in the heart of the valley, and reached only by means of narrow bye-lanes. Practically all the inhabitants relied upon the estate for a livelihood, and the place had an old-world appearance that would have delighted the hearts of tourists. Unfortunately, Market Bushwick was so far off the beaten track that strangers were quite a novelty.

By the time we arrived in the sleepy High Street, darkness had fully descended. One or two lights showed in a few cottages, but it really seemed that the village was already preparing for bed.

At the end of the street, however, lay the Bushwick Arms—the one hostelry which the village boasted. There was a tiny beer-house at the other end of the High Street, but this was only a mere cottage. The Bushwick Arms was a real inn—one of those old-fashioned spots where the male population of the whole district gathers of an evening to drink and gossip.

In fact, the Bushwick Arms was a kind of club. In the old panelled tap-room, men would sit about on the benches with large mugs of ale in front of them. The floor was of brick, with sawdust distributed sparingly. And behind the bar presided the landlord, a portly, cheerful soul.

"No sign of the one and only bobby," remarked Pitt, as we approached the inn. "I shouldn't be surprised if he's inside the hostelry partaking of half a pint. Shall we take a look in?"

"Well, I don't know," I said, hesitating. "We don't want to cause a whole lot of comment. Perhaps we shall be able to get a look in one of the windows. They're all wide open—which isn't surprising, considering the warmth of the evening."

We drew nearer and came to a pause outside in the dark road. There was not another soul in sight. And from within the Bushwick Arms came sounds of much hilarity. The villagers appeared to be enjoying themselves in a very thorough manner.

Although we didn't know it, it was the landlord's birthday, and he was distributing a certain amount of free drinks. The villagers themselves, in addition, were spending more money than usual. And as a result, now that it was nearly closing time, quite a number were in a somewhat merry condition.

"Let's creep round to the side and have a look in one of the windows," I suggested. "Come on."

Pitt followed me, and we were soon in the little garden of the inn, and here we found ourselves just opposite a window which was wide open at the bottom. But the space was covered by a large piece of wire gauze on which the word "Parlour" was painted.

Thus, although we could see clearly into the room, those inside could see nothing of us. And we could hear every word that was being said. Not that this was likely to be very entertaining. The gossip in the bar-parlour of a village inn is never extremely elevating.

There were eight or nine men in the room, some sitting down, some standing—but all with mugs of beer near at hand. The air was thick with tobacco fumes. And these men seemed to be holding a meeting of some kind.

The tap-room was in the front of the house, and this was only occupied by the elderly male members of the community. The bar-parlour seemed to be given over to the use of the younger set.

"It ain't for me to say what's got to be done, mates," one of the men was saying, in a thick kind of voice. "But you 'eard as well as I did. This 'ere bomb is lyin' up in the six-acre field. Ask Joe Miles—he's over in that corner——"

"Never mind Joe—he's drunk," put in one of the others. "As for what you're sayin', Ned Buckett, I can't make 'ead nor tail of it. None of us don't know what you're a-trying to get at."

"Ay, he's right," said another. "What's the idea, Ned?"

The man called Ned Buckett was a big, burly fellow with an unshaven chin, and shaggy eyebrows. He looked more like a poacher than anything else. His face was flushed with much drinking, and his eyes gleamed.

"I'm beginning to understand," I murmured. "Miles must have come straight to the pub and talked to these men, instead of giving his information to the police. I don't like the look of that Buckett fellow at all."

Pitt nodded.

"The village agitator," he grinned.

And he was right, too. It wasn't long before we found out that Ned Buckett was possessed of decidedly anarchistic views. Under ordinary conditions, no doubt, the man was just a harmless villager. But with a large amount of drink inside him, he had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement that gave him false courage and unsuspected fire.

The other men were also of the "firebrand" type—at least, in their present condition. They listened to Ned Buckett's words with eager interest, approving of all he said.

"You don't understand what I was saying?" demanded Buckett. "All right, I'll explain. Listen to me, mates. Ain't we had enough of this capitalistic tyrant what lives up at the castle?"

"Ay, we have!"

"Ain't we been downtrodden for years—ever since we was kids?" asked Mr. Buckett, after taking another swig of beer. "We ain't livin' in the days of slaves! This 'ere is the age of independence, when one man's as good as another. Just because this bloke is Lord Bushwick it don't say that he's any better than we are. He's a man—we're men! We're all made the same way!

'Tain't right as he should live in luxury in a castle, with servants, motor-cars, an' as much drink as he wants, while we've got to slave away, just to keep body and soul together."

"'Ear, ear!"

"Ned's right!"

"It's time this 'ere earl was knocked off his perch!"

"An' to-night's the time to do it!" shouted Ned Buckett. "You do as I tell ye, mates, an' things'll be all right; I know what I'm talkin' about. I've been readin' books—I'm better eddicated than what you are. What we ought to do is to copy them chaps over in Roosia. The land's ours! We work on it—we sow the seeds, and reap the harvest—an' yet we don't get nothin' but a starvation wage. It's time this Lord Bushwick was put in his place."

"Ay, so it is!"

"For years we've bin half-starved by this bloomin' tyrant," went on Ned fiercely. "Well, it ain't goin' on no longer! To-night we mean to go up to the castle, and tell the old brute what we thinks of him! An' if he don't meet our demands, we'll durned well make him suffer!"

"That's right, Ned—let's be movin'!"

"'Ear, 'ear!"

"Hold hard, mates," said one of the other men, who was not quite so influenced by drink. "There's no need to get excited. We can't do no good by going up to the castle——"

"Oh, can't we?" shouted Ned. "What about that there bomb?"

"Bomb?"

The room full of men fell into a hushed silence. They all stared at Ned, and their dull wits only half-grasped the significance of his words. Ned Buckett was just beginning to reveal the evil plan that had come into his mind.

"My goodness!" murmured Reggie. "Did you hear that? They're thinking about going up to the castle——"

"Hush!" I breathed. "This is beginning to look serious, Reggie. Thank goodness we came! We shall be able to take a warning up to the castle, so that they can be prepared."

"Oh, I expect they're only gassing," whispered Pitt. "It's all empty talk."

But I was not satisfied on that point. These men were apparently the worst hotheads of the village. In all probability they had talked in this strain week after week, and month after month. As Reggie had said—they had been gassing. But it seemed possible that it might get beyond the gassing point on this occasion.

"Yes!" repeated Ned Buckett. "And what about that there bomb? There it lies, up in the six-acre field yonder. It's one o' they bombs the Jarmins used during the war—a grey old thing, capable of blowing half the castle to bits. It's our chance, mates."

"It can't be done, Ned—we'd all find ourselves in prison arterwards," said one of the others, in beery alarm. "Why, 'tain't worth the risk——"

"There ain't no risk," interrupted Ned. "'Ow are the police to know who did it? They'll never find out; besides, it won't be necessary to explode that bomb. We'll just use it to scare the old tyrant. As soon as he knows what we mean to do, he'll give in at once!"

"Give in?" repeated another man. "Give in to what?"

"Our demands," replied the agitator. "We're goin' to tell the old rotter that we want double pay—and nothin' less. We ain't going to be put off with no idle promises. Not likely! Double pay—or we lets off that bomb!"

"That's a good idea, Ned."

"We'll do it!"

"'Ear, 'ear!"

The men were all talking at once—thoroughly aroused and excited. In a sober condition they would never have dared to go upon such an enterprise. But they were feeling reckless and dangerous.

And it was a clear reflection on Simon Ratley's rule. We had known for a long time that there was a great deal of dissatisfaction in the village, but we had never suspected that matters would come to such a pass as this.

And these people—as Mrs. Grant had told us—were not angry against Simon Ratley, but their hatred was directed against the Earl of Bushwick. They were all employed by his lordship, and they only regarded Ratley as an underling. They took their orders from him, certainly, but, after all, he was an employee just the same as themselves. They did not imagine that the earl was totally ignorant of the state of affairs.

And this was the result of Ratley's iron-handed slave-driving.

The younger set of the village were determined to take action. Possibly they would have done nothing of the kind in normal circumstances. But the news of that bomb had put the idea into their heads.

Ned Buckett was the ringleader.

Clearly, he had been reading Bolshevist and Anarchist literature, and his mind was filled with inflamed ideas. His better education was a peril to him. For he had insufficient sense to realise the danger and madness of his proposed scheme.

The other men were like sheep—they were quite ready to follow him.

Gazing into the room, through the gauze, we saw the agitator and his suporters preparing to leave. They drank down the last of their beer, and then proceeded to move out through the doorway.

And it was just at this moment that something happened.

Pitt and I had stopped there, determined to see all we could, and hear all we could. There seemed to be no question of the actuality of the plot. It had been decided upon, and action was now going to take place.

"Look here, we'll wait until they've cleared off, and then we'll whiz straight up to the

castle," I whispered. "We'll give Lord Bushwick the tip, and by the time those fellows arrive, the castle will be ready."

"Good wheeze!" agreed Pitt.

We stole away. But as soon as we got to the corner of the building we came face to face with two burly labourers. It was as much a surprise to us as it was to them. We had no time to dodge, for the men seized us at once.

"What's all this here?" demanded one of them. "Boys, eh? Now, then, what are you boys doin' round 'ere at this time o' night?"

"Don't be an ass!" I said curtly. "We want some supplies—we're from the camp up the road——"

"The camp, eh?" said the man. "Ah, I reckon you must be them young gents what Joe Miles was speakin' about. Quick, mates! Hold these kids tight! Like as not they'll talk too much if we let 'em go!"

I commenced struggling with all my strength.

"Don't let 'em hold you, Reggie!" I gasped tensely.

But, although we both did our utmost, it was a hopeless proposition. Several other men had come up as soon as the first man had spoken. And then, almost before we knew it, we were held tightly by many horny hands. The farm labourers and other estate workers were big fellows, with plenty of brute strength.

Ned Buckett came up after we had been secured.

"Don't you get on the idea?" he asked teasely. "These 'ere boys were listening—outside the window! The young brats must have heard all we said, darn their hides! If we let 'em go, there'll be no chance of us carrying out that plan. Hold them, mates!"

"Yes, but what can we do with the young 'uns?"

"Do?" said Ned. "Do? Now, lemme see——"

He paused for a moment, and then nodded.

"I reckon there's the old barn—just at the back. Nobody don't ever go there arter dark—'cept the rats. Bring 'em along, an' if they start yelping, give 'em something to yelp for!"

It was quite impossible for us to shout for assistance, for our captors held us tightly, and held their hands over our mouths. We were led quickly down a little footpath, until the outline of a big barn loomed up in front of us, dimly visible against the night sky.

This development had taken us by surprise.

I was wild with myself for having allowed the capture. Yet I couldn't very well see how Pitt and I could have avoided it. Listening outside that window, we had not

believed that these hulking village youths would have sense enough to scent danger. After all, they were nothing but the young firebrands of the community. The sensible, level-headed married men would never have participated in such a revolutionary enterprise.

At the same time, I was pretty sure that the same feeling was present in all these villagers. They had all suffered the same treatment from Ratley, and they all believed that Lord Bushwick was to blame.

But it was only these young hotheads who were rash enough to put their thoughts into actual execution. And the finding of that bomb had caused this sudden, unlooked-for outbreak.

And I was greatly alarmed.

I knew well enough that this mob was capable of any kind of violence. Half-drunk, the young men were not level-headed enough to realise the enormity of their plan. And when you get a set of roughs like that, all fixed upon the same idea, there is never any telling where the thing will end.

They were not criminals; indeed, in ordinary life these youths were probably as honest and straightforward as their fellows. But Ned Buckett was undoubtedly a rascal; it was he who was responsible for inflaming the minds of these others. Ned was one of those young fellows who believe that no man has a right to be better off than another. He did not see the argument that no two human beings can be alike; that two young men, starting off on the same path together, with the same chances in life, will go in totally different directions—one, possibly, to wealth and fame, while the other deseends to poverty and disgrace. Success or failure in this life depends upon the individual, and not upon any social standard.

One thing seemed certain to my mind.

And that one thing was this—these young men would certainly go up to the castle, and they would cause damage. And if they did not succeed in blowing themselves to bits with that bomb, they would probably succeed in half-wrecking the castle. And here were Reggie Pitt and I—prisoners.

It was galling to the extreme.

None of the other fellows knew of the plot, and could take no action. There wasn't a soul who could carry a warning up to the castle. Thus, these men would arrive, bent upon their deadly work, to find Lord Bushwick and his family unprepared. The firebrands would have everything their own way.

And just because we had been a minute too late in stealing off! It was enough to make a chap grind his teeth with helpless anger. Pitt, indeed, was doing so. But I managed to remain calm and outwardly cool.

And we were thrust into the barn, and taken to a small loft overhead. Here we were bound hand and foot with thick ropes, and thrown upon a pile of straw. We were left there, prisoners.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SIEGE OF BUSHWICK CASTLE!

"RECKON we'll need to be careful o' them boys," whispered Buckett cautiously. "The young varmints have got their camp just over yonder. If they catch sight of us, they'll go and give the warnin'."

The mob had arrived at the six-acre field—where the bomb was peacefully resting in the mould. A half moon had risen, and was shedding a weak, pale radiance over the wooded countryside.

Buckett's gang had grown considerably.

All sorts of other men had joined—many of them just out of idle curiosity, and not because they intended taking any actual part in the proceedings. They were in sympathy with a demonstration at Bushwick Castle, but did not agree with taking that bomb along with them.

And Reggie Pitt and I were still imprisoned in the barn—the only outsiders who knew what was being planned. And it was all the more exasperating because we were partially in sympathy with these villagers. We knew how they had been harshly treated by Ratley, and if the matter had merely been a simple demonstration against the steward, we should have stood by, and enjoyed the proceedings.

But it was something more deadly than a mere demonstration. These half-intoxicated young workers were bent upon grim mischief. And it was wrong that they should direct their animosity against Lord Bushwick. It was Simon Ratley who was wholly to blame.

But it would have been quite useless to point this out.

Everybody on the estate, almost, believed that the earl was the instigator of the harshness which had been a part of the rural life for years. The high rents for the cottages—the poor wages—the sharp methods employed by Ratley—all these things were laid at Lord Bushwick's door.

The crowd of men had approached the field by a roundabout route, taking various footpaths across the meadows. They had not gone anywhere near the caravan camp. Therefore, the juniors were in total ignorance of the situation.

"Them boys ain't seen us so far, an' if we're careful, we'll be all right," went on Ned Buckett. "Look 'ere, mates—most of you had best get on to the castle, and be there, waitin'. We'll be along later."

"That's a good idea," said one of the men promptly.

It was surprising how many others agreed. They didn't relish the thought of approaching too near that bomb, and they were willing enough to leave the scene, and make their way towards the castle—carrying with them several tools and implements that had been brought along. If it came to a fight,

these men would be armed with rakes and hoes, etc.

Only Ned Buckett and five others were left on the edge of the six-acre field. And these other five were kindred spirits—the most reckless youths of the village, and all were well filled with liquor. They cared nothing for bombs. In their inflamed state they were not afraid of anything.

Buckett himself had a packet of gunpowder with him—so nobody smoked. That gunpowder was to be used later on. At the moment, the mob confined itself to the task of removing the bomb.

A hand-truck had been brought along. And this was trundled to the centre of the ploughed field. It must be remembered that the spot was quite a respectable distance from the caravan camp—so none of the juniors there knew what was going on. The wind in the trees overhead effectually drowned all other sounds.

"Bust my buttons!" muttered Buckett. "It's a bomb right enough, mates! Look at it! I reckon it's big enough to bust up the castle, too! If we don't get what we want, we'll do some damage!"

"Ay, so we will, Ned!"

The half-dozen agitators gathered around the bomb, and after one or two preliminary tugs, it was gingerly lifted up, and then placed on to some old sacking in the hand-truck. By all appearances, the thing was harmless. These young men, no doubt, did not realise the actual danger of their undertaking, or they would never have essayed the task.

For, in all truth, that tarnished, rusty-looking cylinder of metal was liable to explode with fatal consequences at any second. Until it was examined, nobody could tell what condition it was in—but the probability was that any heavy jar would detonate the deadly explosive within.

The hand truck started off, pulled by two or three of Ned's men.

And after crossing one or two meadows, the lane was reached. And the little party set off towards the castle itself. The bomb had remained unchanged. It seemed as harmless as an empty dustbin.

The St. Frank's camp was still in the same state of serene unconsciousness. The villagers had come upon the road a good way distant from the spot where the caravans were stationed. So the juniors knew nothing.

Arriving at the lodge gates, these were found to be still open. The invaders marched in, taking care to make as little noise as possible. Before the demonstration commenced, Ned Buckett wanted to have his bomb in position, with the fuse all prepared.

Dark forms appeared from both sides of the wide carriage drive.

"Who's that?" muttered Ned, coming to a halt in front.

"All right, Ned—only us," came a voice. "We've been waitin' here. Is this where we start——"

"Just you wait a bit, mates," interrupted Buckett. "Stay jest where you are. Me an' these here chaps is goin' to fix up the old bomb. We'll be done in a minit or two. We'll call when we want you."

"All right—don't be long!"

The procession with the truck branched off on to one of the lawns soon afterwards, and very shortly came to a halt just against the terrace. It was only a few yards to the north wall of the castle from here.

At this particular point, the old stone walls rose up majestically, and high above there was a quaint tower. It was the most picturesque section of the castle, and Ned Buckett smiled grimly to himself.

"We'll set that bomb jest about here," he muttered.

With some difficulty, the bomb was taken from the truck, carried across the terrace, and placed just against the wall. Then Ned took the bag of gunpowder from his pocket, and proceeded to lay a fuse. Tucked just underneath the bomb itself there was a little tin box, tightly packed with gunpowder.

Thus, when the fuse got to this box—that is, when the fuse was lighted—there would be a minor explosion. Ned was convinced that this would immediately cause the old war relic to explode, in turn.

It was really a matter of chance. Ned didn't know much about these things, but it seemed to him pretty certain that the bomb could never withstand such a shock. And, indeed, there would be little doubt about the matter.

He laid the fuse across the terrace, and then down one of the yard garden paths—a line of gunpowder, unbroken, for several hundred feet. A match, applied to the end of this fuse line, would begin the deadly work. The gunpowder would flare up rapidly—until it reached the bomb.

"There you are, mates—that's about all we can do," said Ned, at length. "Mind you, I ain't sayin' that we shall set fire to this 'ere fuse. But if the old bloke doesn't agree to what we want—well, I'll be the fust to light the match."

The others, still as reckless as ever, heartily agreed. And a quick plan of campaign was made.

In the meantime, peace reigned within the castle. It was a kind of calm before the storm. The Countess of Bushwick reclined gracefully in the drawing-room, deep in the pages of one of the latest novels. At present there were no guests at Bushwick, and life was somewhat monotonous.

Her ladyship employed a companion, but this excellent lady had retired early, owing to a somewhat severe attack of neuralgia. Lady Bushwick, therefore, was left entirely to herself.

As for the lord and master of the mansion, he was deep in the cushions of a big lounge chair in the library. He was smoking a cigar, and upon his face there was an expression of great pleasure. He had just been reading an exceedingly entertaining

handbook on rhododendrons, and he had already come to the conclusion that everything that Gibbons had said on the subject was pure nonsense.

And his lordship had just been rehearsing a few well-worded sentences that he would deliver to the head gardener on the morrow.

"Of course," mused Lord Bushwick, placing the tips of his fingers together, and closing his eyes—"of course, I quite understand your point of view, Gibbons. At the same time, you must allow me to point out that your knowledge on the subject of rhododendrons is not only limited, but positively at fault. I might even say, Gibbons, that you are nothing better than an ignoramus!"

His lordship chuckled, and rubbed his hands together.

"Splendid—splendid!" he murmured. "I rather fancy that Gibbons will writhe at that. Indeed, I am almost certain that—— Dear me! What in the world can be the matter? What on earth——"

He paused, starting forward in his chair. Something had been thrown at his window—the big French window which opened out upon the terrace. And as Lord Bushwick gazed in that direction, something came crashing against a pane of glass, splintering it to atoms. A piece of rockery rolled over the carpet.

"Upon my soul!" gasped Lord Bushwick. "Good gracious me!"

He rose to his feet, astonished and very annoyed.

"This, of course, is quite beyond a joke!" he exclaimed firmly. "I strongly object to people throwing chunks of rock through my windows! Indeed, I will not have it! Most decidedly not!"

He was about to approach the window when he heard sundry shouts outside. It sounded very much as though a brawl of some kind was going on, and the earl paused. He was not capable of thinking with any great rapidty, for he had never had occasion to do so.

But it struck him that it would be wise, perhaps, if he remained indoors. He had not the faintest idea who could be causing this unprecedented disturbance. Such a thing had never before occurred in the whole history of the castle, so far as his lordship was aware.

And then the door burst open, and Lady Bushwick appeared.

"Claude!" she exclaimed imperiously. "Go outside at once!"

His lordship blinked.

"But, really, my dear!" he protested. "It appears that some slight disturbance is taking place. You will observe that the window is no longer in its usual condition. I sincerely trust my flowers are not being affected——"

"Bother your flowers!" interrupted the countess sharply. "Really, Claude, cannot you think of anything but your absurd flowers? I believe there are some men out on the lawn—possibly some tramps. We must do something. Ring up the police at

"It's all right; I shall only be half a minute now," I said, as I wrestled with the second rope. "The blighters are a bit tight—even now. I thought those chaps wouldn't know enough about tying up to do the job properly. But, by Jove, they knew what they were about!"

once! Instruct Jevons to go outside and investigate!"

Lord Bushwick looked round rather helplessly.

"Of course—of course!" he muttered. "An excellent suggestion, my dear. Yes, indeed! A perfeetly excellent suggestion. Where is Jevons? Upon my soul! The man is never here when he is wanted!"

He rang the bell impatiently. And Jevons, the stately butler, who had been sampling a glass of fine old port in his own retreat, obeyed the summons with dignified reluctance. He was not accustomed to being called to the library at such an hour as this.

"You rang, your lordship?" he inquired, entering the library.

His lordship nodded.

"Rang? Of course I rang!" he replied. "I quite understand your point of view, Gibbons. But I must point out that your knowledge on the subject of rhododendrons —— No, no! That's wrong! Let me see! Where was I?"

"What are you talking about, Claude?" demanded her ladyship, staring.

"A little slip, Helen—quite a little slip," said Lord Bushwick. "Now, let me see. Ah, yes! Jevons, I want you. Go outside on the terrace, and find out what the noise is about!"

Jevons bowed.

"Yes, your lordship."

He stalked sedately to the French windows, threw them open, and walked outside on to the terrace. A perfect hail of shouts and

yells greeted him—to say nothing of large numbers of carrots, turnips, and quite a number of lettuce. Jevons staggered under the onslaught.

"What the—— My eye!" gasped Jevons faintly.

He hadn't really intended referring to his eye, because that member was injured. But the next moment the butler staggered back, a carrot having caught him fairly and squarely just over the left eye. Jevons went down, his knees sagging.

He crawled back into the library, dazed and bewildered. He had been a butler for twenty-two years, but never before had he met with an experience like this. And Lord and Lady Bushwick gazed at him wonderingly.

"This—this is extraordinary," said his lordship. "What is the meaning of this affair, Jevons? How dare you play these games with your friends? And why, what—— Good gracious me! Have these carrots and things been pulled up from my garden? This is nothing short of an outrage!"

Jevons regained his feet with difficulty.

"I—I am mystified, your lordship," he muttered. "I cannot imagine what it all means!"

"Perfectly good vegetables!" said the earl, picking up one of the carrots. "Bless my soul! A wilful waste, Jevons! Where is Gibbons? Why is he not looking after his garden? Where's Ratley? What's Ratley doing? Am I supposed to deal with this affair personally? Do I pay my servants to look on?"

Jevons was quite unable to answer these quick fire questions.

"You ought to go outside yourself, Claude!" declared the countess firmly. "Are you afraid? Cannot you go on the terrace and see what the trouble is? I am surprised at you, Claude."

"But, my dear——"

"Go at once!"

"Oh, very well—very well!" muttered his lordship meekly.

He squared his shoulders, and marched out on to the terrace with the air of a man who goes upon a perilous mission. The earl had an idea that, since carrots and turnips had been thrown at Jevons, they might be possibly thrown at him, too. The thought was not pleasant.

"What is all this?" he demanded loudly. "What is all this?"

He appeared to be speaking to the thin air, for the lawns and gardens of Bushwick Castle were dark—at least, they seemed so to the earl, after coming out of the brilliant electric light within. As a matter of fact, soft moonlight bathed the scene, and the lawns immediately in front of the terrace was crowded with men.

"It's Lord Bushwick hisself!" muttered one of the invaders.

"Yah!"

"Tyrant!"

"Money grabber!"

"Leave him to me, you fellers!" shouted Ned Buckett, striding forward. "See here, Lord Bushwick, we've come to have a word wi' ye."

His lordship peered forward, startled by the chorus of voices.

"Who is it?" he asked petulantly. "Good gracious me! What is all this bother? Is there a fire somewhere? I demand an instant explanation! How dare you make all this noise at this time of night! Go away!"

"We'll go away arter we've got what we want!" retorted Buckett truculantly, as he ruthlessly strode across one of the beautifully laid out flower-beds. "I've got a word to 'ave with you, mate!"

"Oh, quite!" said Lord Bushwick. "But, really—— I mean, I cannot allow you to address me in that remarkable manner, my man. Why, good heavens! Are you standing in the middle of a flower-bed? This—this is appalling! Go away at once! You impudent scouudrel——"

"You'd best not take on that tone, Lord Bushwick!" interrupted Ned Buckett gruffly. "You an' me is equals, see! Mebbe you're a lord, and I'm only a bloke without any perticular eddication. But we're men—both of us. We're made of flesh and blood and bone. See? We're equals—everybody's equals. An' we're just about fed up bein' treated like we was a gang o' nigger slaves!"

"'Ear, 'ear!"

"That's the way, Ned!"

"Give it to 'im proper!"

"That's what I am a-doing of!" said Ned, warming to his work. "Look here, you bloated landowner! This 'ere land is just as much mine as what it's yours. Me an' my mates work on it, an' we ought to share it! Any'ow, we're tired o' bein' starved and bullied by your rotten Mr. Ratley! We've had enough of it—an' we've come 'ere to talk things over. Unless we get double wages, we'll blow the bloomin' castle to bits. An' that ain't no idle threat, either!"

His lordship was startled.

"This—this is beyond belief!" he exclaimed striding out on to the terrace. "My man, what grievance have you? And who are your companions? Are you strangers, or are you employed on the Bushwick estates?"

"We all work on the estates, sir!" shouted one of the elder men, from the rear.

"Ay, we work—and git nothin' for it!" snapped Ned Buckett. "In these days, it ain't right for one man to treat another like he was a African nigger! An' that's how we're treated by you and your agent, Ratley!"

"Good gracious!" said Lord Bushwick, amazed.

He rose to the occasion. Usually a placid, peace-loving man, this throng of disgruntled workers aroused him to action. Instead of weakly dodging back into the castle, and leaving an underling to deal with the situa-

tion, his lordship braced his shoulders, and advanced towards the crowd.

"You astonish me!" he exclaimed, his voice quite calm and firm. "Do I really understand that Mr. Ratley treats you badly? If so, I can assure you that he does so entirely without my knowledge, and entirely without my approval. Come, come, men! Let us have this matter out squarely. I have never been accused of being harsh or unjust. I am perfectly willing to meet you——"

"That's what they all say!" shouted Ned Buckett sneeringly. "Meet us, eh? I s'pose that means that you'll give us an extra bob a week, eh? But what about the wimmen and the kiddies? What about them? For years they've been half starved by your brutal methods! Ratley is hated wherever he goes—the kids run away from him, like he was the devil hisself! And many's the time that Ratley 'as turned folks out o' their cottages just because they was a week behind in their rent!"

"Ay that's true enough!"

"We've had more than we can stand!"

"There's goin' to be a change, or we'll know the reason why!"

All sorts of shouts and jeers went up, and as Lord Bushwick remained silent, these shouts became menacing. Some of the more reckless spirits began to deliberately trample over the flowerbeds. Others picked up stones, in readiness to throw.

And his lordship stood there, aghast. He did not believe these accusations against Ratley, for he had always trusted the man through and through. He had regarded Ratley as a kind of master man, who could do anything efficient to the finger-tips. At the same time, Lord Bushwick remembered the incident of that very morning, when he had caught the steward acting brutally towards Mrs. Grant and her children. It was significant.

"Let me speak!" shouted the earl, holding up a hand. "Men, men! Control yourselves! Bless my soul! Are you all mad? What is the trouble? Go away at once—and come back to-morrow in a more reasonable frame of mind. You will not find me difficult to deal with. If you have any real grievance, I will see that you are given a fair hearing——"

"We want our answer now!" broke in Buckett arrogantly.

"I regret that I cannot satisfy you," replied the earl, with quiet dignity. "It is necessary that I should have a conference with Mr. Ratley: Afterwards, I will send for you, and we will then——"

"Yah! We ain't goin' to be put off with that!"

"Not likely!"

"We want our answer now—an' if we don't get it, we'll blow up the castle!"

"Nonsense—nonsense!" said the earl. "Go away! Don't talk ridiculous rubbish! You have been drinking——"

"Ridiculous rubbish, hey?" interrupted the ringleader. "Look here, I'll give you one more chance—see? Will you give us an answer now, or would you rather see the castle blown up?"

"I refuse to converse further with you," retorted the earl curtly.

"Oh, so that's the way, is it?" snapped Ned Buckett. "All right! Mebbe you don't know that there's a bomb lyin' aginst the castle wall—one o' them Jarmin bombs, what wasn't exploded! Well, it's there, and it'll go off unless you agree to listen to us."

The Earl turned his back, and walked into the library.

Then Ned Buckett and one or two others, still criminally reckless, hurried to the end of the fuse, and Ned struck a match and threw it into the gunpowder. There were many men present who would have stopped this, if they had time, but the young ringleader acted swiftly—he feared that his supporters might back out at the end.

The fuse spluttered and sizzled—going along the garden path towards the terrace—a hissing burst of fire.

"Back—back!" shouted Ned hoarsely. "Get back, you fools!"

There was a wild stampede. And from the library window, Lord Bushwick saw what had happened—and a sudden cold hand seemed to clutch at his heart. He realised, in that second, that these men had actually prepared the explosive. There was no nonsense about it—it was true.

And just then Simon Ratley came hurrying round the terrace. He had heard the commotion, and had come to see what it was. Lord Bushwick caught sight of the steward, and hailed him at once.

"Ratley—Ratley!" he called urgently. "Do you see? Down the path, in the direction of the north tower! There's a fuse there—leading to a bomb! Put it out man—put it out!"

Simon Ratley stood stock still, as though turned to stone.

"A—a bomb!" he faltered, his voice husky.

"Yes, confound you—a bomb!" shouted the earl. "Put the fuse out before it is too late."

Simon Ratley caught sight of the oncoming burst of hissing fire. Panic seized him, and with one wild cry he turned on his heels and fled.

And the fuse, burning and spluttering, remained untouched.

CHAPTER VII.

SETTING THINGS TO RIGHTS.

"GOT it!" I muttered breathlessly.

"You've got your hand free?" asked Reggie Pitt, eager and tense.

"Yes!"

"Good man! You're a wonder!"

"I don't know so much about that," I grunted, as I struggled away with the ropes "I've been long enough! Goodness only knows what's been happening up at the castle."

"Well, anyway, we haven't heard any distant boom," said Reggie.

This was one comforting thought. If that bomb had exploded, the echo of the great report would certainly have reached the quiet village of Market Bushwick. Only a half-hour had elapsed since Pitt and I had been imprisoned, but to us it seemed an age.

We had managed to get the rough gags off our mouths in less than five minutes, but, although we had shouted lustily, there had been no response. So we had both been working hard at our ropes, hoping to free ourselves.

And I was the first to succeed.

"It's all right—I shall only be half-a-minute now," I said, as I wrestled with the second rope. "The blighters are a bit tight—even now. I thought those chaps wouldn't know enough about tying me up to do the job properly. But, by Jove, they knew what they were about."

"They jolly well did!" agreed Pitt grimly.

"One or two more hard efforts on my part, and the other ropes slipped from my wrists, and I was practically free. The rest was easy. I whipped out my pocket-knife, and in three minutes both Reggie Pitt and I were standing up in the straw, perfectly free.

"Good!" I said quickly. "Now we've got to rush like mad to the castle—unless we telephone."

"My dear chap, that's hopeless," said Reggie. "There's not a telephone in the village, and if we waste time in trying to find bicycles, or anything like that, it'll be too late. The only thing we can do is to run."

"Good for you!"

We slipped down the ladder from the loft, only to find that the barn doors were securely fastened on the outside. But this did not delay us very long. It only took us a couple of minutes to find a heavy piece of wood—which seemed to be a part of an ancient plough. Using this as a weapon, we drove it at the door, and splintered the woodwork.

Once outside, we found everything quiet and still.

There was no sign here of the disturbance which was probably going on near the castle. The summer evening was perfect, and most of the good people of the village had retired for the night.

"Come on!" I said grimly. "We've got to make some speed."

We set off at a run, and I was only too glad that we had been able to get away from that loft. And now that we were on the road, en route for the castle, I was troubled by many fears. Every moment I was expecting to hear a dull boom which would mean that the bomb had exploded.

But the boom did not come—and still we ran on.

"We've got to go right past the camp on the way to the castle," I panted, as we ran along. "We might just as well tell the other fellows to come along with us. And we've got to pass Grant's cottage too. I expect he'll join in the chase. There'll probably be a scrap with those young firebrands, so we'd better be ready."

"Yes," agreed Pitt breathlessly.

He didn't feel up to saying very much, for we were running hard. We were both in fine condition, and we were able to make good speed without feeling any ill-effects. And, in due course, we saw some twinkling lights down the bottom of the hill, and knew that we were in sight of the camp.

Just before arriving, we gave one or two hails, and, in consequence, by the time we arrived opposite the caravans, Handforth and Co. and Bob Christine and several others were waiting for us.

"Great pip!" said Handforth, as we panted up. "What's all the excitement about?"

Reggie Pitt and I paused, dusty and perspiring freely.

"No time to explain—come along with us!" I gasped.

"But look here——"

"I mean to say, kindly come across with the good old explanash, old bean!" put in Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say this dashing about, hither and thither—this way and that! Somewhat disconcerting, if you grasp the trend."

"Oh, gag him!" groaned Pitt. "There's a gang of roughs gone up to the castle with that bomb—they mean to blow the place up. Unless we hurry, we may be too late. Come on!"

"Blow it up!" shouted Handforth blankly.

"Yes."

"My hat!" said Handy. "We'll soon see about that! The awful rotters! Where are they? Lead me to 'em!"

Handforth commenced pushing up his sleeves in preparation for the coming scrap. But no more questions were asked, and two minutes later the camp was deserted. Everybody was hurrying along the lane, including Archie himself. The one and only Genial Ass was determined to be in at the finish.

And we made so much noise going along the lane that Grant was at the gate of his cottage as we came into sight. It only took a moment or two to explain to him, and he at once joined us.

And, all the while, we were listening for that sound which would mean Ned Buckett had succeeded in his evil design.

I breathed a sigh of great relief as we turned into the drive leading up to the castle. We heard shouts from all sides, and then saw that men were running wildly in all directions.

Caring nothing for the others, I dashed on. Grant just by my side. And we came within view of the lawns and the terrace. And there, clearly visible in the gloom, a sizzling

spark was hissing up across the wide terrace.

"The fuse!" I panted hoarsely. "By jingo, we're too late!"

"Not yet!" shouted Grant.

I had paused, not because I was afraid, but because I was momentarily taken a-back. And before I could get myself into action again, Grant was a dozen yards ahead of me. He raced across the lawn, reached the terrace, and then began kicking at the ground.

He severed the fuse in the nick of time—when the fire had reached within four feet of the bomb itself. Even then he was in a state of doubt, fearing that some of the sparks would jump across the space.

But, as I ran up, the last spark spluttered out. And we stood there, with the pungent smell of gunpowder in our nostrils, and with the castle still in a perfectly whole condition.

"Thank goodness!" I breathed. "That was jolly plucky of you, Mr. Grant."

"Nonsense," he grunted. "Rubbish!"

But, all the same, everybody knew that Grant had acted in an extremely courageous manner. Just twenty seconds later, and that first explosion would have occurred. Even if the ancient bomb had not exploded, the prepared one—brought by Buckett—would undoubtedly have gone off. And that would have been fatal to Grant.

The Earl of Bushwick came hurrying along the terrace, and he was obviously flustered.

"Good gracious me!" he exclaimed. "Is everything all right? What about the bomb? What about the fuse? Who is this? Confound it! Where are my glasses? Where in the name of the world are my glasses? Somebody is always bothering me!"

"It's all right, Lord Bushwick, there's no danger at all," said Grant.

"Oh, indeed!" said his lordship. "I know that voice!" he added, peering closely into the young electrician's face. "Ah, yes, of course! Grant! Splendid! And did you do this, my dear fellow?"

"It was nothing, sir—nothing at all."

"Oh, wasn't it?" said Handforth, running up. "It was jolly wonderful, Lord Bushwick. He risked his life to save the castle, and if he likes to deny it, he's a blessed fibber! That's all I've got to say!"

Lord Bushwick grasped Grant's hand.

"Thank you, my dear boy," he said quietly. "I realise what a fine fellow you are. And I can assure you that there shall be a very full inquiry into this whole affair—and, by gad, somebody will suffer!"

. . . . . .

As for Simon Ratley, and exactly what happened to him, there were some very great changes at Bushwick Castle following this exciting adventure. But what these changes were, and how they affected the lying steward cannot be entered into here.

But it certainly seemed to us that Ratley's days were numbered—at least, his days in the position of estate manager.

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