SOWING THE SEEDS OF REBELLION—SEE THIS WEEK'S ST. FRANK'S STORY!

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Handy's heart nearly stopped beating at the shock of what he saw.

THE SCHOOLBOY DESPOT!

Another Powerful Long Story of Sinclair's tyrannical rule over the West House at St. Frank's, and how it leads to the beginning of a serious revolt.

No. 555. OUT ON WEDNESDAY. January 23, 1926.

Near the prostrate figure lay a bicycle, and none of the new arrivals needed any telling what had happened. Nipper opened his door, and leapt out.

THE SCHOOLBOY DESPOT!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Another powerful story of Guy Sinclair's mad rule of the West House at St. Frank's. Mr. Stokes, the Housemaster, has been compelled to hand over the position of prefect of the West House to Sinclair from the more capable Morrow, and to support the new prefect in his cruel persecutions, because his lips are sealed by a promise to a friend. For Stokes had been seen in one of London's most disreputable night clubs, and his reason for going there was to rescue the son of his friend from ruin and disgrace. Exposure by Sinclair would mean his dismissal from St. Frank's, or giving an explanation that would implicate his friend's son, and as Stokes had promised the father not to do this, he must perforce give way to Sinclair's impossible demands. Feeling in the West House is now running very high against Sinclair, and, to a certain extent, against Stokes. There is already signs of a revolt coming, and that, not before very long, as the trend of events in this week's story plainly indicates.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF HANDFORTH.

WALTER CHURCH turned over in bed with a deliciously drowsy sensation of comfort. He was half-awake and half-asleep, but he nevertheless had his wits about him enough to know that it was daylight. But the rising-bell hadn't gone yet, and the bed was a thing of joy.

He took one glance out of the window—a rather foggy glance, since he was still heavy with sleep. He could just see the outline of the West House, opposite. There was a cold look in the air. An east wind whistled against the window, and the January morning was thoroughly shivery.

But the rising-bell hadn't gone yet.

Church snuggled down again, and confidently told himself that he had another full hour in bed. Of course, he hadn't. He knew he hadn't. But he nearly convinced himself that he had. And in this comfortable frame of mind, he prepared to continue a dream which had been unaccountably interrupted.

It wasn't usual for Church to wake up in advance of the rising-bell. But he didn't mind it in the least. He thought it was rather topping. It was all very well to be a sound sleeper, but what on earth was the use of waking up the very minute you had to get out? Church had often felt that bed wasn't all it was cracked up to be. He generally went to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, so he never really enjoyed it.

At least, so he said. He didn't take into consideration the eight hours of unconscious enjoyment. So this morning he was able to pull the bedclothes round him, and nestle down in sheer, unbounded luxury.

There was just one corner that worried him. There was a kind of draught down there, where the blankets had become disarranged. But he was too thoroughly lazy to worry about such a detail. It was a cold winter's morning, and he was good for another hour in bed.

He tried to think of that dream. It was certainly a bit mixed, but he distinctly recollected a fight with Handforth. He had taken on Handforth single-handed, and had not only succeeded in thrashing his leader, but had completely altered the shape of Handforth's face. Church was very anxious to continue the dream, so that he could complete the good work.

These sort of things weren't possible in real life, but there was some consolation in dreaming about them. He was just dozing off again, lulled by the gentle snores from McClure's bed, when another sound came. The sound of a drawer. McClure knew that drawer well. The beastly thing was always sticking unless you happened to wangle it in one certain way. He and McClure had no difficulties, but Handforth had never once closed the drawer without making a fuss over it. But, then, Handforth was Handforth.

Of course, he had imagined it. How the dickens could the drawer make that noise of its own accord? It was a nuisance, too, because he had just caught a clear glimpse of Handforth's altered face again. It was even better than Church had first hoped. In some extraordinary way, Handforth's nose had got round the side, and Church wasn't at all sure that his appearance wasn't improved. Handy's nose had always worried him. It seemed to stick out so much. What was the use of it, anyway?

Another sound came, and this time Church was really roused. It wasn't the sound of an ill-fitting drawer, but a crash of glass, followed by a smothered exclamation. Church sat up in bed like a rabbit suddenly appearing out of its burrow.

"Great guns!" he ejaculated blankly.

Handforth was near the mantelpiece. Church stared at him in a dazed kind of way. The celebrated Edward Oswald was fully dressed—and, what was more to the point, he was considerably over-dressed. And he was looking at Church in a scared, startled sort of way.

"Who told you to wake up?" he hissed fiercely. "Go to sleep again, you fathead! The rising-bell won't ring for twenty-five minutes!"

Church received a shock.

"Only twenty-five?" he said, with a pang. "I thought I was good for another hour—— But what the dickens are you up to, Handy? You're dressed!"

"Can't I dress now without asking your permission?"

"No need to bark at me!" persisted Church, now thoroughly awake. "I thought there was something rummy about that sound I heard. Were you messing about with that top drawer just now?"

Handforth breathed hard.

"No; the rotten thing was messing about with me! It's always sticking—particularly when a chap wants to be quiet! The fact is, I wasn't going to disturb you fellows at all."

"So you started chucking glass about?" asked Church.

Handforth snorted.

"That was nothing," he said, with a sniff. "Only somebody's watch on the mantelpiece. It's not hurt much——"

"Watch!" gasped Church. "You—you don't mean——"

"It's only broken the glass," interrupted Edward Oswald. "Go on—make a fuss! I believe the hands are missing——"

"My watch!" hooted Church wildly. "You dangerous lunatic! What's the idea of chucking my watch into the fireplace?"

He leapt out of bed so hurriedly that his feet got entangled in the folds, and he landed on the floor head first. Under the circumstances, it was hardly reasonable to suppose that McClure would continue sleeping. Besides, Church had dragged all McClure's bedclothes off in an effort to save himself.

"Goal!" said McClure lustily. "Go it, you chaps—— Eh? What the—— Who's pinched my sheets?" he added blankly. "Hi, you fatheads! Gimme those bedclothes!"

Handforth was thoroughly exasperated.

"Blow your rotten bedclothes!" he snapped. "Out of sheer consideration for you. I've been creeping about like a mouse for the last half-hour! And this is all I get for it."

"My watch!" moaned Church feebly.

He had dragged himself over to the fireplace, and was examining the wreckage with a mournful eye. The hands were certainly missing, and the dial was cracked. And when Church shook the instrument there was an ominous rattle within. It was a piece of pure optimism to place the watch to his ear to listen for a tick.

"Ruined!" he said grimly. "You—you destructive rotter! You must be mad! Getting out of bed at this unearthly hour, smashing watches!"

"What about my bedclothes?" asked McClure frantically.

Handforth breathed hard.

"Blow the watch!" he growled. "I'll pay for it to be repaired—although you don't deserve it. You shouldn't leave the thing on the mantelpiece like that! I only just knocked the hairbrush against it. Go to sleep, blow you!"

"But what's the idea of getting up?" asked McClure, who had rescued his bedclothes himself, and was now draping them around him. "Great Scott! Have you gone off your rocker, Handy?"

"Can't I get up, without all this fuss?" asked Handforth aggressively. "If it hadn't

been for that beastly watch I should have been out of here by now——"

"Yes, but what's the idea?" insisted McClure. "That waistcoat!"

"Eh? What's the matter with it?"

Handforth looked at his waistcoat anxiously. Church, mollified by the prospect of having his watch repaired free of charge, spared time to examine the waistcoat. His expression became blank.

"Take it away!" he said hoarsely.

"Isn't it all right?" asked Handforth anxiously.

"All right?" repeated McClure. "I've never seen such a ghastly thing in my life! I suppose it's a jape? You've dressed yourself up like that to rag some of the other fellows?"

"Jape?" howled Handforth. "This waistcoat's the latest thing! I didn't mean you chaps to see it until later on."

Church nodded.

"It's a bit of a dirty trick to spring it on us before we're properly awake," he admitted. "You can't go out in that thing, Handy! You'll have all the dogs after you! And look at the rest of you!"

Handforth gazed down himself with deep concern.

"What's the matter with me?" he demanded.

"You've got your best togs on!" said Church. "That collar, too! Is it a new one? You'll strangle yourself——"

"I've had enough of this!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "You're just trying to pull my leg—and it won't work! I'm going out. You needn't ask me any questions, because I shan't answer."

His chums were more concerned than ever. Handforth wasn't usually a difficult fellow to arouse in the morning. He wasn't like some of the others, who clung desperately to their beds until the last possible minute, and then indulged in a kind of scramble to get down in time. But he had never been known to deliberately get up an hour before time, and dress in his best clothes, with the addition of a fancy waistcoat of loud design.

It was winter-time, too—a cold, raw morning. There was every incentive for a fellow to remain in bed until the last second. Handforth's chums were utterly amazed.

"But where are you going to?" asked Church. "You didn't say anything about this last night, Handy. What's the wheeze?"

"Lots of chaps get up early," blustered Handforth. "There's nothing funny about it. Can't a fellow put in some footer practice without a lot of idiots making a mystery out of it?"

"Footer practice?" repeated McClure, staring.

"Why not?" challenged Handforth.

"Well, of course, now I understand!" said McClure brightly. "I suppose you're wearing the new colours? But it's hardly necessary to put your new bags on, is it?"

Handforth started.

"By George!" he breathed. "I—I'd forgotten—— Who said I was going to put in some footer practice?" he demanded warmly. "I'm going over to the West House—— I mean, that is——"

"The West House?" repeated Church wonderingly.

"I didn't say the West House!" roared Handforth, turning red. "At least, I did, but I didn't mean—— Blow you!" he added gruffly. "Mind your own business! Can't I go for a walk before brekker without all these questions? Willy told me she's always up early——"

He paused in dire confusion; but the damage was done.

"She's always up early?" repeated McClure. "My hat! Are you spoony on one of the cooks, or something? There's never any telling with you, Handy—you change so often! I shan't forget that waitress at Wembley——"

"It's Mary Summers!" grinned Church. "What a couple of asses we were not to think of it before! He's dressed himself up like this for her benefit! And he's going to hover round the West House——"

Church couldn't contain himself any longer. He howled with laughter, and McClure joined in. For about two seconds Handforth stood it. He had turned to the colour of a peony, and his eyes blazed. Then, with one roar, he dashed out of the dormitory.

CHAPTER II.

SINCLAIR, THE DICTATOR.

ONE might have supposed that Handforth would have turned upon his chums and slaughtered them on the spot. They had been half-prepared for such a move, in spite of their burst of uncontrollable laughter.

But if there was one thing Handforth feared, it was ridicule—particularly on such a delicate subject. Over any ordinary school matter he would have attacked Church and McClure without hesitation. But his one desire now was to get away by himself.

Besides, after taking such a lot of trouble over dressing, it would be a pity to ruin his appearance. By the time he reached the lobby he was cooler, and he was glad that he had come away. He could easily deal with his chums later on, when he was more fittingly attired.

He glanced at his watch anxiously, and found that the rising-bell would be going within a few minutes. He dashed into the cloak-room, donned his overcoat, and left the Ancient House.

Although the morning was cold, he made no attempt to button his overcoat. In fact, he sauntered across the Triangle with an air of

carelessness which was totally foreign to his nature. And he allowed his overcoat to flap open, so that his full glory was revealed.

As a rule, Handforth dashed about the school in a fairly untidy condition, and he had hardly ever been known to saunter. He was a fellow of action, and he never wasted much time when he wanted to get from one place to another.

His present actions, therefore, were doubly conspicuous. Curiously enough, he convinced himself that he was acting in a perfectly normal way, and that nobody could possibly suspect his real object. Yet he grew nearer and nearer to the West House, and finally strolled casually past the front of it, and then turned down alongside the wing.

He walked on in an abstracted way, as though he were deeply engrossed in some mental problem. At least, this is what he assumed he looked like. As a matter of fact, he was eyeing every lower window of the West House with eager care, and there was an expression of alert expectation in his eyes.

He rounded the lower end of the building, and turned into the West Square. All was quiet here. He had the Square quite to himself, for at this early hour few people beyond the domestic staffs were moving.

At last Handforth strolled through the West Arch, and found himself in the Triangle again. Then he started round the West House for a second time. A footstep sounded on the steps just as he was turning the angle, and he swung round with his heart giving a wild leap. Then he frowned. The newcomer was only Mr. Stokes, the Housemaster.

Handforth felt that he had been swindled. He had no desire to see Mr. Stokes. In fact, Mr. Stokes was one of the very last people he wanted to see. It was just like Mr. Stokes' nerve to show himself at all!

"Good-morning, Handforth!" said the Housemaster, as he paused. "What is the world coming to?"

"Is she up yet, sir—— I mean, good-morning, sir!" gasped Handforth. "Just taking a stroll, sir. Lovely morning, sir!"

Handforth was frightened. Quite unconsciously, he had started speaking his thoughts aloud—a most disconcerting habit of his. Fortunately, Mr. Stokes appeared to have heard nothing. Indeed, the Housemaster was examining Handforth's appearance with undivided attention.

"You seem to be ready for some special occasion, young 'un," he said amusedly. "Has Mr. Lee seen that waistcoat? I'm not at all sure that he'll approve of it. You juniors can't appear publicly in such things, you know!"

"I—I—— That is, I thought I'd just take a stroll, sir," said Handforth, buttoning up his overcoat with haste. "Couldn't resist the morning, sir. Looks like being a ripping day."

Mr. Beverley Stokes looked at Handforth curiously. It was just beginning to spit with rain, the wind was rising, and a more threatening morning could scarcely be imagined. Handforth was clearly wandering. He was nervous, too—jumpy and uneasy.

"I don't wish to be inquisitive, Handforth, but there's something you want?" asked Mr. Stokes. "You have wandered round the West House twice—and perhaps more than that. What's the idea? Why has my House become so interesting to you? Being an Ancient House boy, I should think that your interests would be——"

"These buildings, sir," said Handforth, waving his hand. "Wonderful Gothic architecture, sir. A chap can't help admiring it! I've always thought the West House was topping! It makes us Ancient House chaps jealous, sir!"

"I am surprised to hear that, Handforth," said Mr. Stokes. "The architecture of the Ancient House is precisely the same. I don't think we'll press the matter," he added drily. "Just one of your little practical jokes, I suppose? You are really waiting for some of your confederates to turn up? All right, I won't spoil the fun."

Mr. Stokes naturally came to the conclusion that Handforth was taking part in a jape of some sort. He looked round the Triangle, and frowned.

"You haven't seen my niece, I suppose?" he added casually.

"Is she out, sir?" gasped Handforth. "I haven't seen—— I've been round the West House three times——"

"She's out somewhere," said Mr. Stokes. "Went for a walk, I believe. Mrs. Stokes asked me to come and find her, but I'm afraid she's worse than some of you boys. An extraordinary girl for mischief!"

"She's wonderful, sir!" said Handforth stoutly. "By George, I always thought Irene was pretty good, but your niece beats her into fits! I mean, she's so jolly pretty!"

"Indeed?" said Mr. Stokes, staring. "I had no idea that she had made such an impression on you, Handforth. Indeed, I didn't know that you had met. It's rather a good thing, because if you see her, please tell her that she is wanted."

"Rather, sir!" said Handforth. "I'll rush round everywhere. By the way, I suppose I couldn't transfer into the West House?" he added, as a thought struck him. "The Ancient House is all right, but—— Oh, well, I mean——"

"I don't think you had better shift, Handforth," said Mr. Stokes grimly. "Be satisfied where you are."

"But the West House chaps are having an awful time with Sinclair, sir, and they can do with me there. Besides, I should be near—— I mean, there's nothing like the West House, sir," he ended feebly.

"Coming from an Ancient House boy, your words are remarkably frank," said the Housemaster. "I always thought you were a staunch Ancient House fellow, Handforth. There's something the matter with you this

morning. I don't believe you are fully awake yet."

He turned back into the West House, and Handforth felt, somehow, that he had made a priceless ass of himself. He hadn't meant to say a single thing that he had said. And then, before he could collect his thoughts, a cheery hail sounded from the East Arch. He turned with a gulp, and stared.

A trim figure was just emerging from the archway. She was a girl of about fifteen—slim, graceful, and remarkably pretty. What was more, she was waving her hand! Edward Oswald's heart leapt wildly. He had cherished a hope that she would condescend to speak to him. But he had never dreamed that she would actually hail him in this friendly fashion, and wave her hand!

"By George!" he breathed tenderly.

He stood there, frantically trying to think of something to say when she came up. It was most awkward. He had prepared all sorts of words, but not one of them would come to his aid now that they were needed.

Mary Summers hadn't been at St. Frank's long—only a day or two, in fact. She was staying with her aunt and uncle for two or three weeks, and the West House considered itself very fortunate. For Mary was a delightful girl, without any "side," and with any amount of high spirits. Just the sort of free-and-easy girl the fellows liked.

Handforth stood there, at the bottom of the West House steps, with a fixed smile on his face—a kind of prepared effect which really made him look awful. He clutched at his hat, and tore it off.

"'Morning, Miss Mary!" he blurted out. "Jolly pleased to—— Eh? I say!"

He stood there, blank. Instead of greeting him, she had run straight past, and was already in the House. As a matter of fact, she had been waving to Mr. Stokes, and she hardly saw Handforth at all. He was left there, stranded, like something thrown up by the tide.

"I say!" he repeated weakly. "I—I thought——"

Then he pulled himself together. Obviously, there was something wrong. He wouldn't admit for a minute that she had deliberately overlooked him. After waving to him, too!

He rushed into the West House, and was just in time to see Guy Sinclair, of the Sixth, grasping Mary Summers by the arm, and pulling her up short. Sinclair imagined that he and the girl were alone.

"Steady on!" he said easily. "No need to hurry, is there?"

"Let me go!" said the girl frigidly.

"Oh, the icicle stuff, eh?" grinned the head prefect of the West House. "Miss High-and-Mighty. That's no good with me, kiddie! Let's have a look at you!"

He took a firmer grip on her arm, and swung her round.

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH MAKES A DATE.

GUY SINCLAIR'S manner was patronising.

Being a fellow of eighteen, he felt quite a man in comparison to this slip of a girl. After all, she was only a youngster. Sinclair felt that he was doing her a great honour by deigning to notice her.

"Stokes' niece, eh?" he said, eyeing her up and down critically. "I've seen you dodging about once or twice. I'm hanged if you're not pretty! What's the idea of being up at this early hour?"

"Let me go!" she said coldly. "You're Sinclair, aren't you?"

"Splendid!" grinned the prefect. "Got it first time!"

"I've heard about you," said Mary. "If you don't release my arm, I'll smack your face! You're the fellow who has been causing such a lot of trouble in the West House. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"By gad!" said Sinclair. "You've got a nerve, kid! And you're not going to escape so easily——"

Smack!

Mary was as good as her word. There was something about Sinclair which she cordially detested. It wasn't merely his insolent air of familiarity—his overbearing friendliness. She disliked him by instinct. He was probably the most dandified fellow in the West House. In a certain way he was handsome, and he was spruce from head to foot. Yet she detested the very sight of him.

It was quite a hard smack. Sinclair recoiled, but retained his grip on her slim arm. For a second a scowl crossed his features, then he uttered a sudden laugh.

"You'll pay for that!" he snapped. "By gad, smacked by a mere kid of a girl! Yes, my lady, you'll pay for that!"

He gave one pull, and jerked her closer. Obviously, his intention was to kiss her by way of retaliation. But Handforth, in the doorway, was electrified into activity. For a moment or two he stood there aghast—but that smack had aroused him. Sinclair's present action positively made him see red. And when Handforth saw red it invariably followed that quite a lot of red was spilt.

"You cad!" he roared, charging forward.

"Eh? What's that?" snapped Sinclair, turning round. "Clear out of this House, Handforth!"

"You let Miss Mary go!" bellowed the junior.

"You infernal young hound——"

"I'll give you two seconds!" roared Handforth.

"Please! Please!" pleaded Mary, in alarm. "There's no need to——"

Crash!

Handforth didn't wait for any further argument. With one well-directed drive, he dealt with the matter in his own inimitable fashion. When Handforth punched, he meant it. And just at this moment there was a sting behind his blow which literally took Sinclair off his feet.

The punch landed squarely on Sinclair's nose, and the prefect reeled over backwards, tripped, and crashed headlong. Mary Summers stood back, startled—but by no means scared.

"Thanks awfully!" she said, with a grateful glance at Handforth.

"Get up, you rotter, and I'll knock you down again!" thundered Handforth, beside himself with joy. "Come on! You've got no authority over me, you miserable worm! You ought to be horse-whipped!"

Handforth's pleasure was delirious. In the first place, there was nothing he loved better than punching a face that he cordially detested. It was his greatest joy in life—a kind of pet hobby. But in this case he was also serving Mary. And what more on earth could he have wished for?

Sinclair pulled himself up, scowling fiercely. He wasn't a pretty sight. His nose was red and puffy, and blood was already flowing.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he snarled. "I'll have you dragged before the Head and flogged, you insubordinate young puppy!"

"Get up—and I'll finish the job properly!" snorted Handforth. "Who cares for you? I've a good mind to transfer into this House, so that I can punch you every day! You wouldn't walk over me, I can tell you, my lad!"

Sinclair had an impulse to fall upon this junior, and annihilate him. But he hesitated for two reasons. No senior could so sink his dignity, particularly in the presence of a girl. Besides, Sinclair was troubled by the thought that he might get annihilated himself.

"Get out of here!" he stormed, by way of retreat. "I'll report you to your Housemaster later."

"I don't think you will!" said Mary grimly. "You'd better let the whole thing drop. If there's an inquiry, I shall say exactly why your face was punched, and I don't think you'll care much for that. There are some things that had better be forgotten."

Sinclair realised the truth of these words, and he twirled on his heel without a word, and strode off. That action alone proved his caddishness. No word of apology had left his lips. Indeed, such was his self-importance that he deemed himself the injured one.

"I can't understand why uncle allows that fellow to be head prefect!" said Mary, frowning. "I've asked Aunt Joyce about it, but she won't say anything. I believe there's something queer going on."

"That's what we all believe," replied Handforth. "I say, it was awfully good of you to let me punch that beast!"

"I didn't let you punch him—I tried to stop you!" smiled Mary. "Still, I'm glad you did it. It's probably done him good. My word! That fist of yours is pretty dangerous!"

Handforth regarded his knuckles lovingly.

"Sinclair's not the only fellow who knows it!" he said, with pride. "Why, there's hardly a fellow in the school who hasn't tasted it, one time or another."

She looked at him, startled.

"Oh! I didn't know you were such a terrible fighter!" she said, backing away. "How dreadful!"

"I—I mean, all the rotters, of course," said Handforth hastily.

"I was only spoofing you!" laughed the girl. "I think it's rather nice to be able to hand out a good punch. We girls can't do that sort of thing, worse luck. Well, I must be going——"

"Oh, I say," protested Handforth. "I—I was wondering—— I suppose you're not going out anywhere? You wouldn't like me to fetch something, or carry some parcels, or something?"

Her eyes twinkled.

"I'm going down to the village after breakfast," she replied. "There is no reason why you shouldn't come if you want to. I shall have one or two things to carry back——"

"Good egg!" said Handforth eagerly.

She nodded to him in her friendly way, and ran off. And Handforth turned away and looked dreamily happy. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, coming downstairs at that moment, greeted him twice before he answered.

"Oh, hallo, you chaps!" he said, with a start. "I've a good mind to get a transfer into this House! It's the finest House at St. Frank's!"

Grey fainted into Reggie Pitt's arms.

"Brandy!" he murmured feebly.

"Eh?" said Handforth, with a start. "What's the idea of this rot?"

"The finest House at St. Frank's?" grinned Pitt. "My dear chap, you're dotty! This isn't a House at all—it's a convict settlement! We're prisoners—and Sinclair is the chief warder."

"Anyhow, it's the finest House at St. Frank's!" insisted Handforth. "If I can get a transfer, I'm leaving that mouldy hole of an Ancient House. I'm coming to join you chaps!"

Reggie Pitt stared, and Jack Grey nearly fainted again. If anybody else had described the Ancient House as "mouldy," Handforth would have felled him with one swift blow. And here was Edward Oswald saying it himself!

"My dear chap, you're wandering!" said Pitt kindly. "Life isn't worth living in this hole! Sinclair's the absolute dictator. His word's law. We can't call our souls our own these days. A chap has only got to breathe extra hard in this House, and he's led to the gallows! That's the sort of life we lead. At any moment the chopper may come down on one of us."

Handforth didn't seem to hear.

"But she's here!" he murmured softly. "She's up and down the passages, and tripping—— Eh? Oh!" he went on, with a start. "Yes, I suppose it's a bit rough. Why don't you knock Sinclair into the middle of next week?"

"Too dangerous," said Pitt. "But what's that you were saying about somebody tripping——"

"I've just knocked Sinclair down, you know," interrupted Handforth casually. "Found him pestering Miss Mary. So I sailed in, and biffed him over. Caught him a beauty."

The two West House juniors were freshly startled.

"You knocked Sinclair down?" asked Jack Grey, in an awed voice.

"Clean floored him," nodded Handforth.

"Handy, old man, you're my friend for life!" said Pitt, clasping the Ancient House junior's fist. "Any fellow who biffs Sinclair is a national hero! Put it there!"

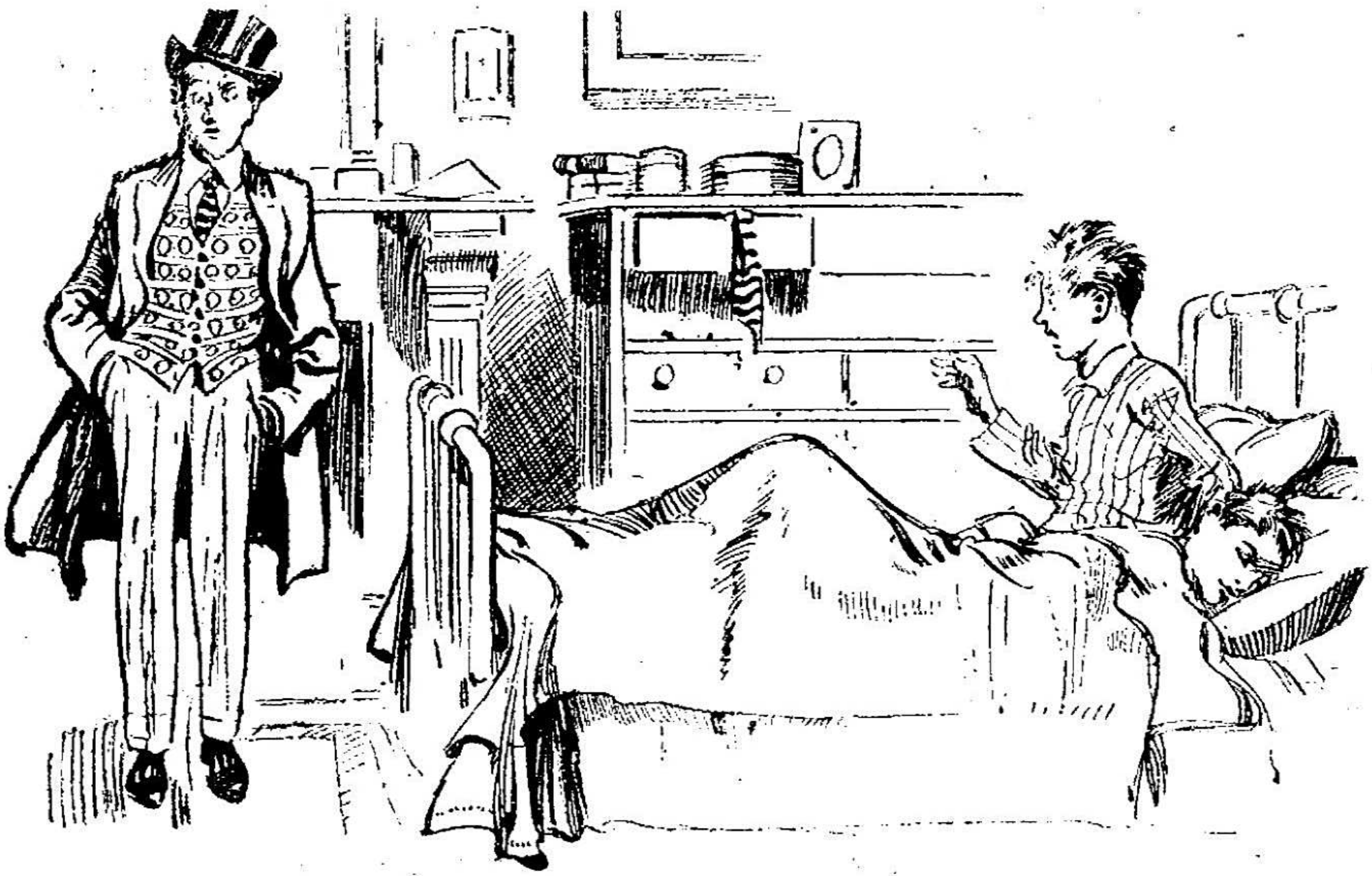
CHAPTER IV.

A NEW SOURCE OF INCOME.

"OH, it was nothing," said Handforth airily. "I generally biff somebody over before breakfast every day! Gives me an appetite, you know. If you like, I'll come over every morning."

"It's a bet!" grinned Pitt. "But I'm afraid it wouldn't work, old son. You say you found Sinclair pestering Miss Mary? By Jove, I wish I'd been here! I'd have knocked him down myself."

Handforth gave him a suspicious glance.



Church stared at Handforth in a dazed kind of way. The celebrated Edward Oswald was fully dressed—and, what was more to the point, he was considerably over-dressed.

"Oh, would you?" he growled. "Like your nerve! If anybody's going to protect her it's me——"

"That's why you want to transfer into this House, I suppose?" interrupted Grey, staring. "My hat! Now I know why you were looking so sloppy just now! Reggie, the poor chap's smitten!"

"I don't wonder at it," said Pitt. "She's a jolly nice girl. But he'll get smitten in a way he doesn't like if he poaches on our preserves! She belongs to the West House, Handy—so don't try any funny business!"

"You're a fine chap to talk!" snorted Handforth. "I thought you were junior skipper here?"

"So I am."

"Yet you allow this Sinclair bounder to put you on the floor, and wipe his feet on you!" growled Edward Oswald. "You're only a set of worms! We Ancient House chaps are disgusted with you! Sinclair confines you all to the House, and you meekly submit! I suppose you know you're the talk of the school? Where's your spirit?"

Reggie was in no way annoyed.

"It looks pretty weak, I dare say," he agreed. "But there's method in our madness, Handy. Don't say a word, but Sinclair is being spoofed. We're making him believe that we're cowed. But there's going to be an explosion here before long --and the whole school will hear it!"

Handforth looked eager.

"You're going to spring a surprise on the rotter?" he asked. "By George! You'd better let me into this secret! I'll handle it for you. Leave everything to me, and——"

"Thanks all the same, but we're not so helpless as we look," interrupted Pitt. "But mum's the word now. The sun isn't out, but the east wind seems to have brought up two or three insects."

Forrest & Co. had just appeared. They had recently belonged to the Ancient House, but were now firmly installed in the West House—at Sinclair's invitation. The Ancient House fellows had held quite a little celebration on the occasion. For the loss of such fellows as Forrest and Gulliver and Bell was regarded as a distinct blessing.

The trio walked straight outside and sauntered in the Triangle. Handforth glared after them.

"Those three chaps don't seem to be prisoners!" he remarked.

"They're Sinclair's specials!" said Pitt bitterly. "Birds of a feather, you know. He's head prefect, and he can do just as he likes. And Forrest & Co. are allowed all sorts of extra privileges. But their time's coming. We shall soon bundle them back to that mouldly old Ancient House."

"That which?" said Handforth aggressively.

"Your own words!" grinned Reggie.

"Eh? Oh, well—— You'd better go easy, all the same!" said Handforth, with a snort. "Hands off the Ancient House! I'd better be going now, but if you want Sinclair knocked down again, call on me!"

He strode out, and Pitt and Grey walked to the door, but did not venture out. A day or two earlier, Sinclair had invented a new form of punishment. Instead of gating the juniors in the usual way, he had confined them to the four walls of the West House. Any fellow who dared to set foot outside was liable to receive a swishing.

Sinclair was delighted with the success of his new order. At first, he had been prepared for trouble. But the juniors had submitted tamely. For two days they had been bottled up indoors—prisoners.

They weren't even allowed to attend football practice, or gym. Except when actually at lessons, every Remove junior of the West House was closely confined within the House. And much to the secret annoyance of Sinclair, not one fellow had attempted to ignore the order. He had hoped to find excuses for applying his cane, but he had been given no such opportunity.

Sinclair's reign was a drastic one.

He had been appointed head prefect at the beginning of term. And during this brief spell he had proved himself to be a harsh, relentless dictator. Life in the West House was something like a nightmare. Sinclair was misusing his power, and the intoxication of it had got into his head. He was suffering from the delusion that he could rule in any way he chose.

He was virtually the boss of the West House.

Mr. Beverley Stokes was a mere nonentity these days. Although Housemaster, he kept in the background, hardly ever mixing with his boys. At one time he had taken a keen, active interest in the juniors. He had joined in their games, and they had gone to him with their troubles. But this term he did everything possible to avoid them.

And Sinclair was at the head of things. For some reason which mystified the juniors, Mr. Stokes was allowing this upstart to control the very nerve centres of the whole House. Sinclair's was the final word. Nothing could be done without his consent. There was no higher appeal.

For such a man as Barry Stokes, the situation was intolerable.

But he was facing it bravely. Not one of his boys realised the torture he was suffering. Reggie Pitt and one or two others had a vague suspicion that Sinclair had some hold over the Housemaster. But, after all, it was only a suspicion.

Mr. Stokes was merely biding his time. He would never have submitted to this form of blackmail if there was a possibility of its permanency. But he was hoping to be released almost any day.

During the holidays, Mr. Stokes had visited a notorious night club in London—not on pleasure bent, but in order to rescue a young idiot from the disreputable place. By pure chance, Sinclair had been there, and had seen the Housemaster. And he had made capital out of a purely innocent affair.

For Mr. Stokes had given his word of honour to seal his lips. The young fellow's father had feared any scandal, and had sworn Mr. Stokes to silence. So the Housemaster dared not risk the chance of Sinclair spreading that story. It was innocent, but it sounded guilty. And in the event of an inquiry, Mr. Stokes would be in a hopeless position, since he was bound by honour to maintain silence.

He was waiting—waiting to be released from his promise. Both father and son were abroad, and they were difficult to locate. But Barry Stokes was expecting a development very soon. And then he would be ready to deal with Guy Sinclair as the young blackguard deserved.

In the meantime, Sinclair was making hay while the sun shone. He had always longed for power—for unlimited authority. And now he had got it! As a result, he was turning the West House upside down, and steadily inspiring the whole House with a growing sense of revolt. His tyrannies were not merely against the Remove. The Third had suffered cruelly—for Sinclair and Kenmore worked their fags like slaves. Even Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, were allowed to have fags under Sinclair's regime. And these unfortunate youngsters had never a minute to call their own. Sinclair's clique included Forrest & Co., and they were all having the time of their lives. They smoked in their studies as a matter of course. They lounged into the dining-hall at meal-times just when they pleased. They went to bed at their own hours, and got up contemptuous of the rising-bell. For Sinclair's special set all rules and regulations were placed at naught.

But for the others the position was galling.

In order to show his power, Sinclair had acted like a despot towards the Remove. And he had succeeded in upsetting practically every member of the Fifth and Sixth. The whole House was against him—against him and the outsiders he had brought with him. But nothing could be done, for Sinclair was at the helm.

At that moment Sinclair was sitting in his study talking to Kenmore. They had been discussing Handforth, and had decided that it would be better to leave him severely alone.

"We're having enough trouble with these infernal juniors here—without stirring up that Ancient House crowd," growled Kenmore. "It's rough on you, Sinclair—your nose is looking groggy——"

"Leave my nose alone!" growled Sinclair. "I'm fed up with all these juniors. They're like a pack of monkeys! Even these three in our own circle are too jolly saucy."

"You mean Forrest and Gulliver and Bell?"

"Of course I do," said Sinclair. "Look what happened last night! We started that Cheerio Club of ours to get some sport at cards. And Forrest, the confounded cub, rooked me of seven quid!"

"Hang it, you can't blame the kid!" protested Kenmore. "It was an ordinary game of poker——"

"You naturally excuse the beggars because you were on the winning side, too!" interrupted Sinclair. "But I wanted to double that seven quid—and lost the lot. Hang it, Kenmore, I'm nearly broke!"

"That's a bit awkward," said Simon Kenmore coolly. "I make it a rule never to lend anything, or I'd offer you a pound or two. I say, why don't you give these Remove kids an option?" he added, with a grin.

"A what?"

"By gad, that's an idea!" went on Kenmore, looking keen. "They're prisoners, aren't they? Confined indoors for a week, eh? Well, why not give them the option of a fine? You ought to rake in a small fortune!"

CHAPTER V.

THIN ICE.

GUY SINCLAIR pursed his lips, and shook his head.

"Steady, old man," he said slowly. "That would be sailing too near the wind, wouldn't it? I've made up my mind to force these kids into obedience, but it's a different thing if I take their money."

"Who's to know?" asked Kenmore. "You're broke, aren't you? I was suggesting a way of getting some cash. Look at young Singleton, for example. He reeks of the stuff, and he'd pay a fiver like a bird. Get him in here, and tell him he can have complete freedom for five quid, providing he doesn't breathe a word to the others. You can deal with some of the other fellows in the same way. That young chump of a Pippinton would pay a tenner like a shot."

Sinclair's eyes gleamed.

"There's something in it," he admitted. "And continue a system of these fines, you mean? Instead of a swishing or lines, get out a graduated scheme of fines? It's worth thinking about, Kenmore!"

"Of course it is," said the other. "I think you ought to give me a percentage for suggesting——"

"We can leave that until later," interrupted Sinclair. "There goes the breakfast-bell, anyhow. Yes, by Jove, I'll get that idea into working order! It's pretty thin ice, but I think it'll bear."

They left the study together, both of them impressed by the possibilities of this rascally suggestion. It had only occurred to Kenmore by chance. But Sinclair soon recognised the prospects. With unlimited power, he saw no reason why he should come a cropper. And much as he loved persecuting the juniors, he was willing to forgo this pleasure in certain cases if they were willing to shell out.

But nothing was done in the matter as yet. Sinclair had no intention of rushing into it recklessly. He was satisfied with the way things were going. The juniors were meek—resigned, even. That very afternoon the St. Frank's Junior Eleven was due to

play Bannington Grammar School. And although Pitt was the best forward in the Junior School, he had made no request for liberty. All the spirit seemed to be knocked out of the juniors.

If Sinclair had been a little less egotistical, he would have recognised the danger signals. There was something suspicious about the Remove's tame submission.

Immediately after breakfast Dick Hamilton & Co. came over from the Ancient House. Dick Hamilton—or Nipper, as most of the fellows called him—was anxious about the match. He was captain of the Junior Eleven, and he was very keen upon Pitt and Grey playing. He wanted Singleton, too. All three men were necessary.

Strangely enough, Handforth took no part in the momentous discussion. He had lost all interest in football. He had even taken an intense dislike to his own chums. He had never credited how hateful they could be.

It was quite the usual thing for them to sally forth together. And as soon as breakfast was finished, they found themselves making for the fresh air. Church and McClure clung to their leader like leeches. At least, so Handforth felt. He didn't realise that they had always followed him about in the same way.

"You chaps doing anything before lessons?" he asked carelessly. "You'd better go along to the study, and read, or something."

"But I thought we were going over to the West House, with Nipper and those other chaps?" asked Church. "There's a big jaw on about this afternoon's match. We've got to get Pitt in the team somehow——"

"Don't bother me with trifles," interrupted Handforth.

"Trifles?" ejaculated McClure, staring. "It's the most important subject under the sun! Bannington are hot this term, and we've got to put all our best men into the team."

"I don't think it will," said Handforth musingly.

"Don't think it will what?"

"It's a bit threatening, but the rain ought to hold off for an hour, at least," went on Edward Oswald. "Look here, you chaps can buzz off! I'm going out for a little stroll. I want to think things out."

"We'll all go together," suggested McClure.

"No, we won't!" roared Handforth.

"But, my dear chap——"

"If you tack on to me, I'll jolly well ——"

Handforth broke off with a gulp, and stared through the open doorway. Just along the Triangle, a slim figure had come into view. Mary Summers had left the West House, and was walking briskly towards the gates.

Handforth gave one yell, and dashed out. Church and McClure watched him for a moment, and then exchanged significant glances. Words were unnecessary. The thing was obviously getting serious.

"Awfully sorry, Miss Mary!" panted Handforth, as he ran up. "Two of the chaps kept me——"

"Oh, yes, you're coming down to the village, aren't you?" smiled the girl. "You needn't trouble, you know. You might be late for lessons——"

"I don't care!" said Handforth promptly. "They can give me a public flogging if they like! It'll be worth it—— I mean, a chap's got to be polite to a lady," he added hastily.

They set off together, and beneath one of the chestnut trees three youthful faces gazed at one another with even greater significance than those glances of Church and McClure.

"You heard that?" said Willy Handforth coldly.

"Every word!" replied Juicy Lemon, shaking his head.

"Poor chap!" said Chubby Heath. "He's smitten!"

Handforth minor, the self-appointed leader of the Third, was in no mood for humour. Indeed, there was a sad light in his eyes. He had thought better of his major than this.

"It's not merely an offence—it's a crime!" he said. "Ted's willing to accept a flogging—just so that he can walk with her to the village and back! Why, it's one of the worst cases on record."

"Pretty awful!" agreed Chubby solemnly.

"I've suspected this for two days," went on Willy, with a fatherly air. "I've watched the signs. The poor old ass has been sickening for it since Thursday. And what of Irene? My only hat! Fickle isn't the word! The chap's nothing more nor less than a giddy deserter!"

"Of course, Irene doesn't really care twopence——" began Juicy.

"That's not the point," interrupted Willy curtly. "My major's always gone a bit soppy about Irene. You can see it in his giddy face when he meets her—at least, you could until now. But I'll bet he could pass Irene in the lane without even looking at her! That's the effect of this new love! I think something ought to be done about it."

"A fat lot we can do!" said Chubby. "Besides, if your major likes to be a blithering idiot, it's nothing to do with us."

Willy shook his head.

"That's just where you're wrong," he said, with a firm note in his voice. "As Ted's brother, I look upon it as my duty to see that he doesn't get into mischief——"

"But he's your major, you ass!" said Juicy, staring.

"That's nothing—just a matter of years!" retorted Willy. "Ted's a bit older than me, I'll agree—but he's no more capable of looking after himself than an infant in a giddy kindergarten. Besides,

what about Irene? It strikes me she ought to know something about this defection."

"This which?" asked Chubby.

"Defection."

"I'll bet you looked that up in a dictionary," said Chubby, with a glare. "You don't even know what it means!"

"My poor chump, it means back-sliding," said Willy patiently. "What a life! I spend half my time looking after Ted, and the other half teaching you chaps! What the dickens do you attend school for?"

"I don't see the point even now," remarked Juicy, scratching his head. "What do you mean—back-sliding?"

Willy tapped Juicy's head with rather unnecessary force.

"Deal!" he pronounced sadly. "But it seems a bit too soft—I believe it's only cork!"

"Look here, you ass——"

"Ted's back-sliding when he forgets all about Irene, isn't he?" demanded Willy. "There's nothing official about it, of course—they're not actually spoons—but Ted's got a soft spot for her. I believe he keeps a store of these giddy soft spots, you know. He's a public danger. He's liable to fall in love with any girl at first sight. It's a terrible responsibility for me."

CHAPTER VI.

LOOKING AFTER TED.

WILLY'S assumption of responsibility for his major tickled Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon so much that they cackled loudly. They kept on cackling until they suddenly observed a freezing glare on their leader's face.

"Finished?" asked Willy tartly.

"Sorry!" gasped Chubby. "But it's too jolly funny——"

"It only proves your low intelligence," interrupted Willy. "You're not even capable of appreciating exceptions. Most majors have to look after their minors. But in this case a minor's got to look after his major."

"You'd better let him hear you say that," grinned Juicy.

"He'd get wild, of course—but he knows it, all the same," replied Willy. "What would Ted do without me? Imagine it! Just think of him at St. Frank's alone and unprotected! Why, before the term was out, he'd be completely out of control and running wild. You don't know what a worry he is!"

"Well, we can't do anything now," said Chubby practically. "It's nearly time for lessons, and I'm blessed if I'm going to risk detention for your fatheaded major! As for that girl, she ought to know better!"

"Mary's all right," said Willy. "I don't usually take much notice of girls, but she's a bit above the average. That's why I'm anxious about her. Ted's liable to make himself a bother. Besides, there's Irene."

"By jingo, so she is?" said Chubby, nodding.

"Eh, where?"

"Just passed the gates," replied Chubby. "Talk of angels, and they appear, sort of thing!"

"Come on—we'll take advantage of this," said Willy crisply. "We'll give Irene the tip, so that she can know all about Ted's new love. Which way was she going?"

"Towards the village with some of the other girls."

"Better still!" grinned Willy, as they ran towards the gates. "We can give her the warning, and she'll catch Ted and Mary red-handed! My hat! Just imagine the way she'll give him the bird!"

"It'll be the cold shoulder and the glassy eye for your major," said Juicy, with a chuckle. "No girl likes to be chucked aside for another one. And Irene's a bit of a Tartar, I hear. She specialises in the frozen optic."

Out in the lane, they beheld four of the Moor View girls, about a hundred yards away, proceeding towards the village. Willy & Co. gave a series of cat-calls, and raced up.

"Hold on!" said Handforth minor breathlessly. "Something to tell you, Irene. Something important. If you've got any smelling salts handy, you'd better uncork 'em!"

Irene Manners and the other girls paused, and looked at the fags with friendly interest—not unmixed with a little suspicion. Doris Berkley gave Willy a very severe look.

"None of your larks!" she said grimly.

"Larks?" repeated Willy. "We've got some important news for Irene. Rather bad news, in fact. I'm just wondering how I can break it gently."

"Don't be a young duffer!" said Irene.

"All right—have it your own way," said Willy, with a snort. "But I gave you a fair warning. Ted's gone down to the village with Mary."

Irene appeared callously unaffected.

"Who's Mary?" she asked.

"Why, he must mean Mary Summers," put in Marjorie Temple. "She's a friend of mine, you know—she's staying with her aunt and uncle at St. Frank's. I'm going to bring her up to the school to-morrow——"

"Oh! So Ted's gone down to the village with her?" smiled Doris. "Renie, this looks serious."

"You'd better make inquiries," suggested Winnie Pitt.

Irene Manners turned slightly pink.

"Why should I make inquiries?" she asked coldly. "Do you think I care where

Ted Handforth goes, or who he goes with? I wish you girls wouldn't be so silly!"

Willy grinned.

"Not bad, but not good, either," he remarked. "You can't spoof us, Irene."

"What do you mean?"

"Come off it!" said Willy calmly. "Everybody knows that Ted's a bit gone on you—or he was until Mary came along. And you were gone on him, too. So it's your plain duty to chain him up again."

"You little wretch!" shouted Irene, now quite red. "Oh, you terror! Whoever heard such ridiculous nonsense?"

"Of course, we all know it's nonsense, but there's no accounting for the path of true love," said Willy sagely. "As far as I can see, it's a pretty tricky sort of path——"

"Another word, and I'll spank you!" cried Irene.

"Go ahead!" grinned Willy. "Personally, I'm blessed if I can see anything in you girls to rave about. I mean, you're only—— Well, you're only just girls. It fairly beats me."

"Thanks awfully," chuckled Doris.

"No offence, of course," went on Willy kindly. "But when it comes down to rock-bottom, what on earth's the good of you? All you do is to cost your people pots of money for new hats and frocks, and I've heard that you use about four pairs of silk stockings a week. Disgraceful, I call it!"

The girls lost some of their smiles.

"Then again," went on Willy, warming to his subject, "what do you do to justify your existence? Nothing! Even when you play games, they're wishy-washy and tame. You just walk about, and turn the heads of our poor majors. It's getting a bit too thick. I'm blessed if I can see why girls are allowed to live. They're only a bother to real people."

Irene lost her frown, and laughed heartily.

"That's just about enough of your kidding, Willy!" she said. "We ought to know better than to take any notice. As for Ted, why should I care who he's gone to the village with?"

"Well, I've warned you, and I've done my duty," replied Willy "I'm jolly glad to see that you've got the right spirit. I was always puzzled about you, Irene. I could never understand why you were soft on Ted. I'm glad to find you've got a bit of sense."

He nodded, and strolled back towards the Triangle with his chums. The girls looked at one another, and burst into another laugh. Irene laughed more loudly than the others, and affected an air of supreme indifference.

"It's no good, old girl," grinned Doris. "You can't fool us with that detached air! You're worried about Ted! Marjorie's chum has cut you out. Just when he was going to buy the ring, too!"

"If you think that's funny, I don't!" said Irene frigidly "I think Ted Handforth's a perfect idiot! I've always thought so!"

But as the girls continued their walk, Irene was very thoughtful and silent. As a matter of fact, she actually did have a particular liking for the aggressive Edward Oswald. In spite of his many failings, she admired his blunt directness—his straightforward honesty—his blundering, good-natured ways. In many respects, Handforth was a hopeless ass, but in many others he was an exceedingly likeable fellow. There was something remarkably human about him.

But Irene wouldn't let the others know for worlds that she gave the matter a second's thought. However, as they knew she was thinking on the subject all the time, this made a little difference.

In the meantime, Handforth was not exactly as happy as he had dreamed of being. He had set out on that jaunt to the village with a fine disregard for time, and with no thought of lessons. He had even forgotten the football match for the afternoon. Detention would be disastrous, for Handy was the junior goalie. He had a habit of concentrating on one subject, to the exclusion of all others. Willy always declared that this had a simple explanation. That a fellow's brain risked undue strain by thinking of two things at once.

Handforth, to be quite painfully frank, was hanging about in the Bellton High Street, with two huge parcels in his arms. There was no sign of Mary. She was in Mr. Sharpe's establishment, among the ironmongery, and Handforth had strict instructions to wait for her. Mary was evidently a girl who believed in taking advantage of her opportunities. Handforth was an excellent attendant when it came to carrying things.

She had been into two or three shops already, as evidenced by Edward Oswald's loaded condition. He had a hatbox in one hand, and two parcels in the other. He was vaguely fearing that she might be purchasing a dustbin, or something. This wasn't quite such a happy time, after all.

On the way down, he had waxed enthusiastic on the subject of football, but Mary had shown an absurdly keen interest in the doings of Dick Hamilton, the Junior Eleven's centre-forward. It appeared that she regarded the goalkeeper as a nonentity. And, as everybody with a grain of sense knew, the goalkeeper was the most important fellow on the field.

This sort of thing pained Handforth to the quick. But Mary was such a ripping girl that he forgave her. But when she started asking him about Dick's nickname of "Nipper," and of his associations with the celebrated Mr. Nelson Lee, Handforth thought that it was a bit thick. She had

actually praised Nipper to the skies for being such a wonder in the art of detection. This, of course, was the limit.

It was an extraordinary thing, but it seemed an absolute fact that she hadn't even heard of Handforth's detective abilities. He was secretly staggered. Such a pretty girl, too! And such ignorance!

And now, to cap it all, here he was, cooling his heels outside the ironmonger's, his arms aching, and his shoulder itching just where he couldn't scratch it. It was a rummy thing how a fellow's shoulder itched when he was carrying parcels.

The time was getting short, too. Handforth didn't worry much about this. He was rather hurt because she had left him outside. And she had been very explicit, too. That was the worst of it. Why, hang it, the girl was simply using him as a tool! When she came out he'd jolly well tick her off!

CHAPTER VII.

ROUGH ON HANDY!

"AH, Brother Edward!" Handforth turned with a start, and found William Napoleon Browne regarding him with benevolent interest. The tall Fifth Former was dressed with his usual neatness, and looked particularly smart. His overcoat fitted him like a glove, and his boots glittered, and his topper gleamed.

"I'm not 'Brother Edward' to you!" retorted Handforth gruffly.

"Rebuffed!" observed Browne, with a sigh. "Notwithstanding the cordiality of my greeting, I am rudely rebuffed. Alas, I fear you are not in the best of spirits, Brother Handforth."

"Mind your own business!" said Handforth bluntly.

"While appreciating the justice of your remark, permit me to describe it as somewhat crude," went on Browne. "Without being inquisitive, may I inquire the reason for this thusness?" he added, indicating the parcels. "A shopping expedition? A round of Bellton's palatial stores? No doubt you are awaiting the General Manager and the Secretary?"

"Rats!" said Handforth.

"Such an expression from the President of Messrs. Handforth & Co. pains me exceedingly," said Browne gravely. "It is evident that matters have been taking a somewhat distorted course. I will leave you to your troubles, Brother Handforth, and seek Mr. Sharpe on the subject of razor blades. I have officially learned that he is known throughout the district as the Safety Razor King."

"What the dickens do you want with safety razor blades?" demanded Handforth curiously.

"Ah, there we have a big subject," said the Fifth-Former beaming. "It happens to be Brother Chambers' birthday to-morrow, and it also happens that sundry keen-eyed lynxes have recently observed a suspicious growth on that portion of Brother Chambers' physiognomy which, in another fellow, would be the chin. Hence my hunt for the fungus-removers."

Browne passed into the shop, and a light of understanding came into his eyes when he observed the trim, neat figure of Mary Summers at the counter. Mr. Sharpe was busily encasing a huge bird-cage in brown paper. She turned and nodded.

"Oh, hallo!" she greeted. "You're Browne, aren't you?"

"In name only," declared William Napoleon. "A delightful surprise, Miss Mary. I gather that it is your serf who awaits without? Brother Handforth, I regret to say, is bristling with impatience."

"I don't wonder at it," said Mary contritely. "It's too bad! I only came for some curtain pins, but I couldn't resist this bird-cage. It'll make a nice present for Aunt Joyce."

"Not possessing X-ray eyes, I regret that I cannot view the trophy," said Browne sorrowfully. "Keen as my gaze is—we Brownes are justly celebrated for our eyesight—it is incapable of penetrating brown paper."

"You'll see it one day, I dare say," replied the girl. "I'm afraid Handforth will be terribly angry with me—particularly when I ask him to carry this cumbersome parcel."

"Brother Handforth, I can assure you, will go crazy with delight when he accepts this added burden," declared Browne. "For who would not be charmed to relieve fair hands of such encumbrances?"

"You do talk, don't you?" asked Mary.

Browne winced.

"A truthful observation, but somewhat liable to be taken in more ways than one," he said. "It has been justly said that we Brownes—— But stay! Yet another customer! Undoubtedly business is booming this morning. You will observe that Brother Sharpe is already making lightning mental calculations of his prospective profits."

The newcomer was Nipper. He entered with a rush—fairly dashing into the shop in a breathless condition.

"Some kettles, Mr. Sharpe—quick!" he said crisply. "I've just got time to dash back before the second bell—— Hallo! Didn't know you were here, Browne! Good morning, Miss Mary!"

Nipper pulled his cap off with great promptitude, and Mary gave him one of her friendliest smiles. In fact, it was even more friendly than any of the smiles she had

bestowed upon the other fellows. She recognised Nipper at once, although she had never been actually introduced to him. Being an Ancient House fellow, he was naturally outside her uncle's circle.

Browne realised the situation in a flash.

"Let me do the honours," he suggested promptly, "Miss Mary Summers—Mr. Richard Hamilton. In case you are unaware of the fact, Miss Mary, our friend readily answers to the name of Nipper. He is locally known as the World's Youngest Sleuth. In addition to these accomplishments, he is the champion centre-forward of the Junior School, the holder of the running and swimming championships, and in the boxing ring he is second to none. Even the redoubtable Brother Lawrence fails to sing in his bath after an encounter with Brother Nipper. In a word, the Marvel of the Age."

Nipper turned red.

"You funny ass!" he snorted. "What's the idea of talking rot like that?"

"But it's true, isn't it?" asked Mary.

"Of course it isn't, Miss Mary!" growled Nipper.

Browne reeled back in horror.

"Alack!" he groaned. "The famous Browne veracity is doubted."

"Nothing of the sort," said Mary. "It's only Nipper's modesty. It's no good, Dick Hamilton," she went on, regarding him sternly, "I've heard all about your fame from the West House fellows. It's a wonder to me you don't get swelled head."

"It's a wonder to me the chaps can't find something better to talk about!" said Dick, frowning. "Awfully sorry, Miss Mary, but I wish you wouldn't chip a fellow like that. Besides, I can't beat Lawrence. He's the school's champion boxer among the juniors. Any chance of carrying anything home for you?"

"Well, I've promised Handforth——"

"Oh, yes, I saw him waiting outside!" nodded Nipper. "Well, I shall have to get that kettle, or I'll be late. Tommy Watson left our old one on the ring this morning and burnt the bottom out of it."

Browne made his excuses and departed. When he got to the door he found a face peering through the glass at him, a face with a flattened nose. Browne started back.

"You must forgive my hesitation, Brother Handforth," he said, opening the door. "Under normal conditions your face is vaguely recognisable as a human accessory, but when pushed against a glass door——"

"You leave my face alone!" hissed Handforth. "What's Nipper doing in there? I knew it. By George! Talking to Mary. And I'm stuck out here in the cold——"

He was about to push past, but Browne held him back.

"A fatal step, Brother Ted!" he said firmly. "Indeed, a disastrous one. The slightest revelation of jealousy, and you will undoubtedly be undone. In these trying circumstances your only hope lies in assumed indifference."

Handforth paused.

"But that bounder is talking to her!" he breathed.

"Do nothing for the moment," urged Browne. "Later we will acquaint Scotland Yard of the fact, but we must have the evidence. Such crimes as these are difficult to bring home to the criminal."

He closed the door, and Handforth had a last glimpse of Mary talking animatedly to Nipper. Both were leaning against the counter, inspecting sundry kettles, and were getting on famously.

"They're as thick as thieves!" muttered Handforth huskily.

"Further evidence that Scotland Yard will be needed," nodded Browne. "Heed the words of an expert, however, and assume an air of careless ease. Girls, Brother Handforth, are strange creatures. One gleam of anger in your eagle eye, one glimpse of the green-eyed monster, and you are in the soup."

"Who's a green-eyed monster?" roared Handforth.

But Browne, with a benevolent nod, had passed on down the High Street. His words sank into Edward Oswald's brain. Perhaps he was right. Mary would only misunderstand if he—Handforth—charged into the shop and knocked Nipper out with one blow. She wouldn't appreciate the justice of it at all. So Handforth waited.

Within the shop Nipper selected his kettle, and it was wrapped up. This was the first time he had actually spoken to Mary, and he was learning something which several of the other fellows had discovered. Somehow she was different from other girls. Not only was she charming, but her voice was too sweet for words. And she seemed so frank and friendly, too.

Nipper had often been chipped because he took no interest in any particular girl. But judging by the way he took to Mary Summers, there was every chance that his indifference would soon be a thing of the past. And Mary told herself quite candidly that she liked Nipper better than any of the others. She had thought Reggie Pitt

an exceptional fellow, but Reggie now took a back seat.

As for Handforth he was fairly left standing.

CHAPTER VIII.

NIPPER'S DILEMMA.

IN fact, he was still standing when Dick Hamilton and Mary came out of Mr. Sharpe's establishment. There was an expression of bottled-up impatience on his face, and his eyes smouldered with jealousy.

The punch landed squarely on Sinclair's nose, and the prefect reeled over backwards, tripped, and crashed headlong.

"We shall have to buck up," Nipper was saying. "I'm afraid we can't do it——"

"That's all right," interrupted Mary. "I'll have a word with Uncle Barry about it, and he'll put your Form-master in good temper. Oh, here you are!" she added to Edward Oswald. "Thanks awfully for waiting. It was too bad of me to——"

"Not at all!" burst out Handforth. "I haven't noticed the wait at all. It seems that you haven't been gone more than a minute. More parcels? Good! Hand 'em over!"

"That's all right," smiled Nipper. "I'll carry these."

"No you won't!" roared Handforth. "Miss Mary asked me to carry her parcels——"

"Oh, but why should you take them all?" asked the girl. "Let me have the hat-box, and you take this kettle. Dick can carry the cage."

"Dick!" repeated Handforth in a hollow voice.

It was a stunning blow to him. She had always addressed him by his surname. And yet she was addressing Nipper in the most intimate fashion after a few minutes' chat.

"Oh, he doesn't mind!" said Mary.

"Not a bit," agreed Nipper. "In fact, I like it."

"My name's Ted!" roared Handforth.

"Then I'll call you Ted," laughed the girl. "We don't want any jealousy, do we? Now about these parcels——"

"I'm going to take them all," insisted Handforth. "It's not likely I'm going to let this fathead butt in——"

"My dear chap, I wouldn't dream of it," grinned Nipper. "You can take the lot, and welcome. It's no good, Miss Mary. He's an awfully keen chap on carrying parcels, you know. Better give way."

"If he really likes it——"

"He loves it. It's his favourite hobby."

Handforth was triumphant. All the parcels were given to him.

"But you mustn't call me 'Miss Mary,'" said the girl. "It's absurd, when you come to think of it. We're all friends, aren't we? But let's hurry back as fast as we can."

She and Nipper started off down the High Street, and Handforth dimly suspected that his victory wasn't so overwhelming, after all. He was literally overwhelmed with packages, even including Nipper's kettle. Fortunately he didn't know it was Nipper's, or it would have been in the gutter in two seconds.

They weren't particularly heavy, but they were very awkward. It happened that Handforth was very awkward, too. An uneventful journey was too much to be hoped for. After about five yards, the birdcage came unhitched, and half dropped.

With a wild dive Handforth attempted to save it, and the hat-box fell. At the same moment he lost his balance, and sat down with a crash on the pavement. He vanished beneath the mountain of parcels.

Curiously enough neither Mary nor Nippper noticed the disaster. They were walking on quite unconcernedly.

"Hi!" howled Handforth. "You rotter! Gimme a hand——"

He pulled himself up with a jerk. It wouldn't do to let Mary hear him talking in that way. Not that Mary heard anything. She was still walking on, talking enthusiastically about the forthcoming match with Bannington Grammar School.

Handforth picked himself up, took a step or two after the others, and paused. He couldn't very well leave the parcels on the pavement. But hang it, they were getting further away all the time. And he had deliberately asked for the parcels.

Something was decidedly wrong. In a vague sort of way Handforth realised that he was nothing more nor less than a makeshift. Why, she wasn't even thinking about him. Nipper had pushed him into the background. For the first time in his life Handforth's feelings towards Nipper were ones of deep and overwhelming hatred.

At the end of the High Street there was a short pause. Nipper and Mary encountered the four Moor View girls. And Irene Manners breathed very hard to herself, but said nothing. She greeted Mary with much cheeriness. So Willy had been fooling her. It wasn't Handforth at all, but Nipper!

A few minutes later, however, Irene & Co. came upon the unfortunate Edward Oswald far in the rear. He was almost invisible behind the barricade of packages.

"Great pip!" he groaned, as he ran full tilt into them.

"Just a little shopping, Ted?" asked Irene smoothly.

"Only a few parcels," replied Handforth, trying to speak carelessly. "Can't stop now—late already. Awfully sorry, Irene, but——"

"That's all right," interrupted Irene. "I wouldn't dream of delaying you."

Just for a second Handforth felt warmed towards her. After seeing Mary go off with Nipper he realised that Irene was a jolly nice sort of girl, after all. But the iciness in her tone chilled him. He staggered on, moody and depressed.

Nipper, in the meantime, was talking to Mary in a very serious vein. He was discussing the afternoon's match. And Mary's interest in football was so keen that he found himself talking in the same way as he would have talked to Boots or Christine, or any of the other fellows.

There was every reason for gravity, too. Owing to the tyranny of Sinclair, two of the Junior Eleven's most valued players would not be able to figure in the match, and Nipper was sorely troubled as to the substitutes he would play.

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were the two wing forwards—outside-left and outside-right respectively. They both belonged to the West House, and were both included in Sinclair's ban. They were confined within doors. Even an important football fixture made no difference to Sinclair. Dick Hamilton had argued with him in vain.

Mary was greatly indignant, and promised to speak to her uncle about it. But Nipper advised her not to. There was no reason why Mr. Stokes should be worried. Besides, Pitt and Grey had virtually decided to slip off at the last minute and risk the consequences.

"Sinclair can't actually chain them down, you know," explained Nipper. "And he can't lock them up in a cell."

"But what about when they come back?" asked the girl.

"Well, they'll face the music, that's all," replied Nipper. "Sinclair can't do much worse than give them a swishing, and they've both prepared for that. The game will be worth it."

"But it's so outrageous!" protested Mary indignantly. "I can't understand why uncle allows that awful boy to be head prefect. He is a dreadful person. I loathe him!"

"You're not the only one, then," said Nipper grimly. "Unless things change very quickly, Mary, there's going to be something approaching rebellion in the West House."

"That'll be exciting," she declared keenly.

"That's the worst of it—it's your House, you know."

"The worst of it?" she echoed. "I think it's the best of it. I'd just love to be mixed up in a rebellion or a barring-out, or something jolly of that sort. I'd help, too."

"By Jove, I believe you would!" smiled Nipper. "Well, there's no telling. Perhaps they'll need some help. Of course, if it comes to a crisis, we Ancient House fellows will back them up to the limit. It's not exactly our affair, but we all belong to the Remove. And we're all down on despotism."

Mary's eyes gleamed.

"And do you really think it will come to a barring-out?" she asked breathlessly.

"Well, quite privately, just between ourselves, I do," replied Nipper. "I don't see any other solution. Sinclair's dug himself in. He's an established dictator. The longer he rules, the stronger he gets. But he's only got to arouse the fellows to a certain pitch, and they'll turn him out neck and crop!"

"But that wouldn't mean a barring-out, would it?"

"When the juniors of a House pitch their head prefect out, it's a pretty serious state of affairs," replied Nipper. "It means expulsion for the ringleaders, and floggings all round for the others, unless they go the whole hog, and defy authority completely. If I know anything about Reggie Pitt, he'll go the limit."

"I believe he will, too," said Mary tensely.

"It's the only safe way," nodded Dick. "You see, it'll mean a big flare-up—an inquiry by the Head, and an exposure of all the tyranny. And if the fellows can prove that they were justified, Sinclair will get the sack, and everything else will carry on as usual. So when the flare-up comes, it's pretty certain to be a big one."

They had reached the gates by this time, and were so engrossed in their conversation that the last lingering thought of Handforth had left their minds. Nipper hurried off to the School House, morning lessons having already commenced, and Mary Summers thoughtfully wended her way to the West House.

It wasn't until she was actually indoors that she remembered her parcels. She came to a halt, startled and alarmed; then, running out, she found Handforth wearily plodding across the Triangle.

"Oh," she exclaimed, running up—"oh, Ted, I'm so sorry!"

All Handforth's misery vanished in a flash. Her tone was so contrite that Handforth's heart jumped wildly.

"Sorry?" he said cheerfully. "What about?"

"You've carried these parcels all this way!"

"A pleasure, I assure you," interrupted Handforth eagerly. "Anyhow, I dished Nipper out of his share, didn't I? Like his nerve to push forward! Where do you want all these things?"

"If you'll put them on the West House steps, I'll get the page-boy——"

"Not likely!" interrupted Edward Oswald. "I'll take 'em right indoors for you. No trouble at all! An honour."

Ten minutes later he dashed into the School House, late, but happy. There was no new kettle in Study C that day. Mary had certainly instructed Handforth to retain that particular parcel, and to hand it over to the right quarter.

But Handforth must have made a mistake. For some strange reason, he took the right quarter to be a ditch. It made little difference, anyhow, since the kettle was a mere chunk of battered tin. Even the most serviceable kettle is inclined to give up the struggle when a fellow of Handforth's weight jumps upon it four times in rapid succession.

CHAPTER IX.

SINCLAIR'S LATEST.

DICKY JONES, of the Third, put his head into Study N, in the Remove passage of the West House. Morning lessons were over, and the Hon. Douglas Singleton was at home.

"Sinclair wants you, Singleton," said Dicky.

"Let him want!" retorted the Hon. Douglas gruffly.

"I say, you'd better go," protested the fag. "It doesn't do to defy that beast! He'll only drop on you."

"He's not an emperor, to command his giddy subjects to appear before him just when he pleases," growled the Hon. Douglas. "I'm busy. Anybody might think we were living in the times of ancient Rome, and that Sinclair was the head of a tribunal!"

"More like the Spanish Inquisition!" said Dicky Jones, with a confidential air. "The man's an awful brute! Young Button and I haven't had a minute's peace for days! Our lives are haunted. Button wakes up in bed at night, and sees Sinclair's face."

"Are you two his fags?"

"Yes—worse luck!"

"Poor kids!" said the Hon. Douglas sympathetically. "It's a wonder you don't put poison in his tea, or something. Why not try a few bombs under the study table?"

"It's no good—we're slaves!" said Dicky. "He works us to the bone. We haven't had a minute of spare time for ages. But look here, you know, he's waiting for you!" he added anxiously. "I shall get the blame if you don't turn up. Be a sport, Singleton!"

"Oh, in that case I'll dodge along," said the Hon. Douglas. "If you see Hussi Khan in the Common-room, tell him I'll be out in two jiffs. He's expecting me, I believe."

Singleton went off to the Sixth Form passage, and entered the head prefect's study. He wondered what particular crime he had

committed, for he concluded that he was about to be placed on the carpet.

Guy Sinclair, however, was looking very pleasant when the Removite walked in.

"Oh, here you are, Singleton!" said the head prefect genially. "That's right—shut the door. Sit down. I just wanted to have a little private chat with you. Cigarette?"

Sinclair was smoking, and he offered the Hon. Douglas his box. But the junior shook his head and glared. He wasn't deceived by this display of assumed good-nature.

"Take your rotten cigarettes away!" he retorted. "What's the idea, Sinclair? What's the meaning of this treacly business? You're as sweet as honey to-day. You can't spoof me."

Sinclair frowned.

"That's enough of that!" he growled. "Even when I try to be pleasant, you show your infernal nerve! No wonder you Remove fellows are always getting it in the neck! You're gated for a week, aren't you?"

"Gated isn't the word," said Singleton bitterly. "What about it? I suppose you're going to double it or something?"

"No, I'm not," said the head prefect. "The detention doesn't end until next Thursday—that's about five days. Well, I thought perhaps you'd like your freedom straight away."

The Hon. Douglas raised his eyebrows.

"What on earth put that idea into your head?" he asked, in surprise. "I thought you knew that we juniors are just crazy about this detention. Freedom? Who wants more freedom than we've got in the West House?"

Singleton's ironic tone caused the senior to leap to his feet with a savage exclamation. The sarcasm was a deliberate affront, as, indeed, Singleton had intended it to be. But the Sixth-Former pulled himself up.

"Very funny, aren't you?" he snapped. "Confound you, Singleton! There's no need to adopt that injured attitude. I want to know if you'd like complete freedom for the rest of your detention?"

"Why ask unnecessary questions?" growled the Hon. Douglas.

"Well, you can bail yourself out if you like."

"Bail myself out?" repeated Singleton, staring.

"That's what I said."

"But I don't understand!"

"Nothing much to understand, is there?" asked Sinclair impatiently. "As head prefect, I've got the power to deal with you juniors as I think fit. Well, I don't want to be too harsh, so I'm inclined to give you a chance. I've fixed your bail at five pounds. Hand over that sum, and the detention ends."

The audacity of the suggestion nearly took Singleton's breath away. The head prefect had altered the scheme slightly. He had thought it over since Kenmore had first mooted the suggestion, and he had concluded that "bail" sounded better than "fine." The junior sat there and stared.

"Bail?" he repeated. "What do you think we are—prisoners?"

"Don't be a young ass——"

"Is this a police-court, or something?" went on Singleton.

"You don't understand," growled Sinclair. "As a matter of discipline, I've got to maintain a punishment once it's been set. But some of you fellows might like to take advantage of a loophole. Five quid bail will set you free."

"You'll make a nice little fortune at this rate, won't you?" asked the Hon. Douglas.

"You young fool!" snorted Sinclair. "The money isn't for me. It's just a way of raising funds for the Senior Sports Club. Besides, there's no guarantee that I can retain the money."

"How's that?"

"Well, I've worked out a graduated system," replied the West House skipper. "Five days—five pounds. If you like to surrender on Monday, you get three quid back. Or you can bail yourself out now and surrender this evening, and you'll have the whole fiver again. Or, to put it more clearly, I shall hold your money as a guarantee of good conduct."

"It sounds rather good," nodded Singleton slowly.

"Good!" echoed the prefect. "You ought to be jolly thankful I'm so lenient! I've got to safeguard myself, of course. And, by accepting bail, I shall make certain that you'll behave yourselves."

"And you'll be the judge, I suppose?" asked the Hon. Douglas dryly. "Supposing I hand you five quid bail now, and surrender to-night, where's my guarantee that you won't pinch half of it for supposed bad conduct? You're in such a position that you can fake up any old charge you like. You can't kid me, Sinclair! There's a catch in it!"

Sinclair frowned.

"You're under no obligation to take advantage of the bail!" he snapped. "There's no compulsion about it. You ungrateful young rotter! You can get out of this study as soon as you like!"

"Then you don't want my fiver?"

"I don't want your nerve!" retorted Sinclair sourly.

He was rather startled by the Hon. Douglas' shrewdness. Both the junior and the senior understood one another perfectly, and it was this which irritated Sinclair. He had been expecting to hoodwink his intended victims.

Once they paid the money over, he would take good care that they never saw the colour of it again. From his point of view it was a beautiful scheme. They would pay him bail, and secure their freedom from detention. But if they surrendered themselves at any time, he could easily repudiate the liability by faking up a false charge of bad conduct. And he was in such a strong position that he feared nobody.

Even if the fellows talked, it would make no difference. The matter wasn't likely to

get beyond the Housemaster, and Guy Sinclair was so sure of his safety that he was contemptuous of Mr. Stokes. If the affair reached the Head's ears by a roundabout route—well, he could easily make out that there wasn't a word of truth in it. Nobody would have any actual proof. And the Head would never accept the word of a junior against that of a prefect.

Singleton was not deluded. He knew that this talk of bail was a kind of bluff. He believed that he would gain his liberty by paying over five pounds, but he was under no delusion regarding the recovery of the money. All the same, he decided that it was worth it. Singleton had so much spare cash that a fiver was scarcely noticed. The cunning prefect could not have chosen a better dupe to start with.

"Well," he asked at length, "are you going to get out, or do you want to take advantage of this chance?"

"This fiver will bail me out completely?"

"Of course it will."

"Until the end of the detention?"

"Until next Thursday," nodded Sinclair.

"And then, I suppose, you'll detain me for another week, and allow me to bail myself out for another fiver?"

"You infernal young——"

"Keep your hair on!" grinned Singleton. "Here's your money. But I'd just like you to know that I'm not a mug. This makes me safe, doesn't it? I can go out of the House, and roam just where I please?"

Sinclair picked up the fiver and pocketed it.

"You can go to the deuce!" he retorted. "But remember the good conduct clause. Any funny business, my lad, and this bail is forfeited. You'll be in detention again in two ticks!"

"I'll be careful," said the junior. "Thanks awfully, Sinclair. By Jove, it'll be a bit of a change to get out into the open again."

He nodded, strolled to the door, and departed.

CHAPTER X.

BAILED OUT.

REGGIE PITT shook his head warningly.

"That's a bit risky, Duggy!" he said, wagging his finger. "You'll have Sinclair down on you like a ton of bricks. You mustn't go roaming about the Triangle as though you were a free agent! We West House chaps are serfs of the feudal lord. I shouldn't be surprised if he gave you the lash."

Singleton grinned.

"It's all right," he explained. "I've bailed myself out."

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey stared. They were standing in the doorway of the West House, and the Hon. Douglas had just come in.

"Bailed yourself out?" repeated Pitt. "I'm frightfully dull this morning. My brain refuses to work. What, exactly, is the idea?"

"Haven't you heard of people being bailed out?"

"He's kidding us!" growled Jack. "Chuck it, Singleton!"

"My dear asses, it's easy," smiled the Hon. Douglas. "Sinclair set my bail at five pounds, and I paid up. I'm not in detention now—I'm as free as the air. A horrible swindle, of course, and Sinclair's a direct descendant of Jack Sheppard. But it's fine to be free again."

The junior skipper looked grim.

"Are you serious?" he asked. "Are you standing there and truthfully telling me that you've bailed yourself out of detention for five quid?"

Singleton nodded.

"Bare-faced burglary, isn't it?" he grinned. "Of course, I've been using Sinclair's terms. All that piffle about bail is just a cloak. To put it bluntly, he's rooked me of five quid in return for my liberty. But we bloated millionaires can afford it. I've never known money to be so handy."

The Hon. Douglas was speaking earnestly, too. The West House fellows had been under Sinclair's tyranny for so long—at least, it seemed an age to them—that it was a perfectly wonderful experience to wander in the Triangle, unfearful of a curt summons to a little cane-party in Sinclair's study.

And there were other glories in prospect, too. The match that afternoon. Singleton would now be able to go over to Bannington with the team. The other West House fellows were all sending up a kind of unanimous groan over that football match.

"I say, this is a bit steep," declared Pitt, when he had heard the details. "By Jove, what a cunning fox! He's got the nerve to call it bail, too! Contributions to the Senior Sports Club! Ye gods and little haddocks! Did you ever hear of such a nerve?"

"It's certainly the limit," agreed Singleton. "But you don't blame me, do you?"

"My hat, no!" replied Pitt. "With a pocket-book full of fivers, you couldn't very well resist the temptation. But Jack and I aren't padded with the stuff like you. I doubt if we could rake up ten bob between us. So what chance do we stand?"

"I've only got sevenpence-halfpenny!" said Jack Grey gloomily. "I've got a big remittance in prospect—it ought to be here tomorrow. But that's no good for this afternoon's match, is it?"

Singleton started.

"This afternoon's match, eh?" he said, with a whistle. "By gad, and you two fellows are in our regular forward line!"

"We shall lose without Reggie being in the team," grunted Jack. "I'm not so important—but Reggie's the chief man in the

team! Even Nipper admits that. Couldn't we rake up enough to bail Reggie out?"

"Nothing easier," said Singleton promptly, pulling out his wallet.

"Rats!" grunted Pitt. "Awfully decent of you, Duggy; but nothing doing!"

"My dear chap—a mere fiver——"

"I can't afford to owe you five quid," said Pitt, shaking his head.

"But it's only bail," insisted Singleton. "If you surrender yourself after the match we shall get the fiver back."

"That's a different story to the one you told two minutes ago," grinned Pitt. "It's no good, old man. You know as well as I do that once the cash has passed into the Clutching Hand, we shall never see it again. And I can't owe you a fiver. I shouldn't sleep at night."

The Hon. Douglas gave it up.

"Chaps like you ought to be forced!" he growled. "I'll tell Nipper about this, and see what can be done. And if he bails you out—well, you'll have to play in that match. You can't ignore your skipper's orders."

"You silly ass; if you start anything——"

Reggie Pitt broke off, frowning. The Hon. Douglas was already down the steps, and hurrying towards the Ancient House. And Pitt couldn't very well follow, because Kenmore was in sight.

"I say, you chaps—something important!" exclaimed Singleton, as he hurried up to a group of Ancient House fellows near Big Arch. "Do you want Pitt and Grey to play this afternoon?"

The group consisted of Dick Hamilton, Tommy Watson, and Handforth & Co. As it happened, they were in the midst of a discussion concerning the match. And Nipper had arrived at no solution to the problem.

"Want them to play?" he repeated. "They're about our only chance of winning! Of course, we shall be fairly strong without them, but the Grammar School is fiery hot this term. We need every ounce of strength to beat them on their own ground."

"For ten quid you can have both Pitt and Grey," said the Hon. Douglas.

He proceeded to explain the situation, and the Ancient House fellows listened with growing astonishment. Handforth, indeed, became very excited.

"Why, it's robbery—it's a swindle!" he roared. "Have you paid that beast five quid——"

"No need to yell, old man," interrupted Singleton. "You'd have done just the same in my position. It's only a temporary affair, anyhow. We shan't stick Sinclair for long—he's riding for a fall all the time. But when there's a chance of buying a little liberty——"

"By George," breathed Handforth, "it's about the nerviest thing I ever heard of!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie Glenthorne, who had joined the group. "I mean to say, good gad! The foul blighter looks upon himself as a sort of emperor, or something of that sort. He'll start taxing things next, what?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," nodded Singleton. "But that's not the point. You fellows need Pitt and Grey pretty badly, and a tenner will bail them out. Why not chance it? I'll stand the racket."

"Absolutely not!" put in Archie. "Leave it to me, laddie——"

"I'm a West House chap, and it's my privilege," interrupted Singleton. "What do you say, Hamilton? Shall we go and see Sinclair?"

Nipper considered for a few moments. He hated the thought of surrendering to this iniquitous proposition—but he badly wanted Reggie Pitt's services. And Jack Grey was a wonderful wing forward, too. There wasn't anybody who could really fill his place. And with Nipper it was sport first, and other considerations afterwards.

"Hang it all, we'll try it!" he said. "Perhaps we can turn the tables on the bounder. The main thing is to get those chaps bailed out. After the match we'll settle the account."

"By George—rather!" agreed Handforth grimly. "If Sinclair won't produce the bail-money, we'll go through his beastly pockets! Why not defy him, anyway?"

"It'll be a lot better to do it this way," replied Nipper. "Defiance is a pretty costly business in the West House. We can't afford to take any risks. Come on, Singleton—let's go and interview the rajah."

"Good man!" said the Hon. Douglas heartily.

Handforth wanted to go, too, but he was persuaded to stay behind. Before they reached Sinclair's study, Nipper was convinced that he was doing the right thing. If there was any possible way of obtaining the services of Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, he was justified in taking it. And it was far better to gain the end by peaceful methods.

Guy Sinclair was still alone in his study when they walked in. He looked rather astonished when he saw the Ancient House junior captain.

"What are you doing in this House?" he asked sharply.

"We've come to bail out two more of your prisoners," said Singleton, before Nipper could reply. "Here's your ten quid. Pitt and Grey are now at liberty, I take it?"

Sinclair pushed the money away.

"You'd better think again," he said coolly. "That money's no good to me. I've set Pitt's bail at fifty pounds, and Grey's bail at twenty-five. They're the ringleaders of mischief in this House, and I can't take any risks."

The two juniors stared in startled astonishment.

"Seventy-five pounds!" echoed Nipper. "Why, you grasping rotter, it's nothing but sheer robbery——"

"Robbery be hanged!" roared Sinclair. "It's bail—just a sum of money deposited in

my keeping. If they surrender at the time I fix, you'll get the money back. You'd better be careful what you say, Hamilton!"

"What's the time you set, anyhow?" asked Nipper grimly.

"I'm not a fool—I know why you want those two!" said the head prefect. "The match starts at two-thirty. All right. Bring Pitt and Grey to the West House by five o'clock, and surrender them, and you'll have your bail-money back intact."

CHAPTER XI.

ARCHIE RALLIES ROUND.

THE HON. DOUGLAS SINGLETON glared.

"What's this — a joke?" he demanded hotly

"You can laugh at it if you like," replied Sinclair. "But before Pitt and Grey have my permission to leave this House, I shall want seventy-five pounds deposited as bail. That's plain English, isn't it?"

"But it's outrageous!" said Nipper. "You can't be serious, Sinclair——"

"My dear kid, you don't seem to realise the responsibility I'm taking," interrupted the Sixth-Former. "Those two juniors have caused more trouble in this House than everybody else put together. If I release them from detention I want the best possible security that they'll surrender at the end of the time. Fifty pounds for Pitt—twenty-five pounds for Grey. Bring them back before five, and your bail is returned."

"But—but we can't afford all that!" roared Singleton, in exasperation. "Hang it all, I consider myself pretty flush, but I couldn't raise more than thirty at the most!"

"Better go and ask Pippy."

"Yes, by Jove!" ejaculated Singleton. "He's the chap——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" growled Nipper. "We're not going to fall into this swindling trap. Do you think you'll get that money back, anyhow? Come on—we'll get out of this den."

"But the match——"

"It won't be a calamity if we lose it," said Nipper grimly. "And there's just a chance that we shall win. Anyhow, I'll have nothing to do with this get-rich-quick stunt!"

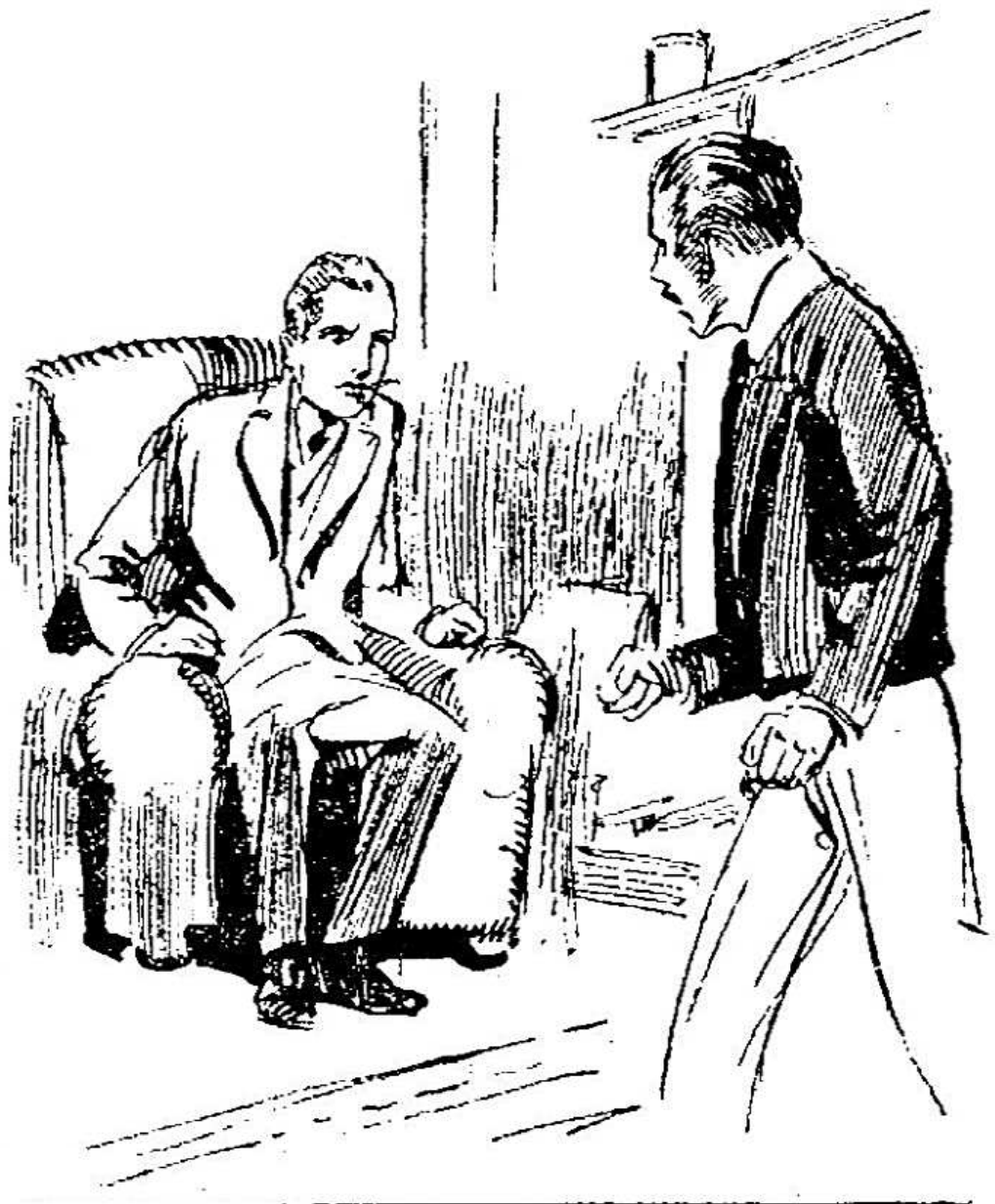
They both went to the door, and Sinclair rose hastily to his feet.

"Hold on!" he said. "I'm not unreasonable——"

Slam!

"Confound it!" snapped the prefect harshly. "I thought that fool of a Singleton would bite! It was Nipper's fault for butting in. That young cub isn't under my control, though!" he added, frowning.

Outside, Singleton and Nipper were boiling.



Sinclair frowned.
"That's enough of that!" he growled. "Even when I try to be pleasant, you show your infernal nerve! No wonder you Remove fellows are always getting it in the neck!"

"Seventy-five pounds!" exclaimed the Hon. Douglas, as they went down the corridor. "Why, it's madness! Fifty pounds bail for Pitt and twenty-five for Grey! What kind of a head prefect have we got?"

"Anything the matter?"

Turning the corner, they came face to face with Mary Summers. Quite unintentionally, she had heard Singleton's words, and the expressions on the faces of the two juniors told her enough. She gave Nipper a look of keen concern.

"Won't you be able to play Pitt, after all?" she asked.

"Sinclair won't release him from detention," said Nipper gruffly.

"That's not all!" she declared. "You were saying that he wants fifty pounds bail! Why, it's terrible! I shall go straight to Uncle Barry and tell him Sinclair ought to be sacked from the school!"

Dick Hamilton looked rather awkward.

"No doubt about that," he agreed; "but we can't very well take the law into our own hands, Mary. In any case, it's not my affair. Don't go to Mr. Stokes. These fellows want to deal with the matter themselves—in their own way."

She gave him a glance of understanding.

"Yes, you told me that," she nodded. "But it's a shame that Pitt can't play. I've heard about that bail—some of the fellows told me. But I'd no idea that Sin-

clair was demanding such impossible sums!"

They went out, discussing the matter, and Handforth even forgot Mary when he heard the result of the interview. He wanted to rush straight into the West House, seize Sinclair by the neck, and jump on him. It took Church and McClure three solid minutes to calm him down—at the cost of one thick ear, two severe body bruises, and a puffy nose.

In the meantime, Nipper was discussing matters with Pitt and Grey, and all agreed that the motto should be—"Nothing Doing." Singleton was prepared to risk ten pounds, but when it came to a matter of seventy-five, caution was necessary.

"Sinclair's an absolute crook!" Nipper was saying. "He's always been unscrupulous—and he's as cunning as a monkey. If you fellows pay that money to him—even supposing you could scrape it together—he'd find some way of hoodwinking you in the end."

"The match isn't worth it," said Pitt promptly. "I won't deny that I'm dying to play for the school this afternoon—but there's a limit. Let's hope you win, Dick, old man. Don't worry about us. We'll get our own back on Sinclair one of these days. There's something coming to him before long—and it won't be roses."

Archie Glenthorne was talking with Mary, and for once the aristocratic features of the dandified Removite were animated with acute intelligence. When Archie really liked, he could be quite brainy. He was very different from Lord Pippinton—who was simply a chump, a plain chump, and nothing but a chump.

"I mean to say, absolutely!" Archie was insisting. "This is positively one of those cheery occasions when Archibald must rally round. A juicy opportunity, what?"

"But you can't do it, Archie," said Mary, with concern. "Seventy-five pounds——"

"A frightful figure, of course, but the old wallet is fairly bulging with the pieces of eight at the moment," interrupted Archie. "Odds guineas and dubloons! I received a batch of the stuff this morning. And it won't be lost, dear old girl. This Sinclair Blot will return the bail when the lads come home, loaded with goals."

"But will he?" asked Mary doubtfully. "I am so afraid he'll break his word. I hate the fellow! He's tricky and dishonest."

"What-ho!" agreed Archie. "I mean to say, I've absolutely got to agree with that remark, with the addition of sundry knobs. In fact, this foul plague spot can't be trusted a bally inch. The chappie exudes crime from his dashed pores! But what's a lad to do? I mean, you want Pitt to play, what?"

"I'd love to see him play!" replied Mary.

"Good gad! I mean, you'd absolutely love it?" said Archie. "Then there's only one thing for the Pride of the Glenthornes to do. Mum, I mean, is the dashed word. Oysters, and all that sort of stuff! Remain here, fair maiden, and Archibald will stagger off and do the deed."

For once Archie moved swiftly. Before Mary could stop him, he was dashing into the West House, and he didn't stop until he reached Guy Sinclair's study. He had a feeling that some of the other fellows would shoot up, and drag him back. And it was impossible to let a lady down! Archie wasn't exactly "smitten," but when it came to a matter of chivalry, there was only one course to take. He would have acted just the same if Mary Jane, the housemaid, had made the request. A lady, after all, was a lady.

"What-ho!" he panted, bursting into Sinclair's study. "Bail, you foul chunk of fungus! I mean, what about it?"

Sinclair leapt to his feet, and nearly swallowed his cigarette.

"Get out of here!" he choked furiously.

"Eh?" gasped Archie. "What? That is, which? I mean, aren't you the inquisitor chappie? Aren't you the blighter who signs all the death warrants?"

"What the thunder do you mean?" snorted Sinclair.

"Dash it!" protested Archie. "The lad doesn't even know his own frightful character! Seventy-five quid, what? Some of the wise men of the East have truthfully observed that money talks. What about it?"

Archie's remark was quite to the point.

"Have you brought seventy-five pounds?" demanded Sinclair.

"Absolutely!" nodded Archie, producing his wallet and counting out the notes. "Bail, you bally highwayman. This means that Pitt and Grey can play in the good old football match, what? Freed from the dungeons, and all that."

Sinclair was so pleased at the sight of the money that his temper died away. It was real money, too. He picked it up genially.

"Yes, this bail is all I need," he observed. "But those two fellows must be back in the West House by five o'clock. That's plain enough, isn't it? If they're not here, the money is confiscated for the Senior Sports Club."

"But they'll be all serene if they roll up by five?"

"Yes—I'll be particularly generous," nodded Sinclair. "I won't deduct a cent. Deliver them up at the right time, and you'll find that I'm a man of my word."

Archie didn't wait to hear any more. He felt like saying all sorts of things, but there wasn't time—the luncheon gong was sounding already. He dashed out, and met Mary and a crowd of juniors in the lobby.

"What have you been up to, Archie?" demanded Pitt.

"Absolutely nothing," said Archie promptly. "That is, of course, absolutely something. The jolly old bail, and all that sort of thing. You grasp the scheme?"

"Have you paid seventy-five quid?" gasped Jack Grey.

"Only a temporary affair——"

"Go and get it back!" exclaimed Mary, in alarm. "I've got a terrible feeling that Sinclair will rob you. He's bad enough for anything!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Archie. "I say! Might as well take advantage of the chance now, what? As long as we deliver up the chappies before five o'clock it'll be safe."

Reggie Pitt shook his head.

"Thanks awfully, Archie—I shan't forget this," he said quietly. "You can bet we shan't be late back! And if Sinclair tries to wriggle out of the compact, we'll grab that money by force! And if it leads to a rebellion on the spot, we'll be ready for it."

In the meantime, Sinclair was no longer alone. There were five other fellows in the study—Grayson and Shaw of the Fifth, and Forrest, Gulliver and Bell of the Remove.

"Now, it's up to you," Sinclair was saying. "I fixed the bail at thirty pounds and twenty pounds——"

"I wonder you had the nerve!" exclaimed Grayson admiringly.

Sinclair smiled. He had an even greater nerve in telling these fellows such a fabrication. But he had a good reason for understating the exact amount of the bail.

"There are five of you, and if you'd like a fiver each, you know what to do," he went on. "Halves, see? But I've done the brain work—and it's up to you to see about the rest."

"By gad, a fiver each!" said Bernard Forrest keenly. "You can leave it to us, Sinclair—we'll do the trick."

"You bet we will!" echoed the others.

"Good!" said Guy Sinclair coolly. "But be jolly careful—there mustn't be a scrap of evidence. I'm pretty safe here, but I'm only holding the job because I take no risks."

Grayson chuckled.

"We shall be taking the risks, but I don't think we mind them much," he grinned. "We'll trouble you for a fiver each at tea-time, Sinclair."

CHAPTER XII.

BROWNE IS QUITE AGREEABLE.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE looked grave.

"A singularly scaly affair, Brother Horace," he observed. "Without exception, this is the murkiest piece of dirty work I have ever encountered. I trust you agree?"

Stevens, of the Fifth, grunted.

"It's a mystery to me how the fellow does such things without being dropped on," he growled. "Imagine it! Detaining those kids like a lot of prisoners—and then letting 'em out on bail! It'll get to the Head's ears soon. I'm amazed that Sinclair risks it."

"It is to be feared, Brother Horace, that your knowledge of the world is sadly limited," said Browne, with a sigh. "Do you really think that Brother Sinclair cares a couple of raps? Or even one rap? One is apt to feel secure within the concrete entrenchments of a head-prefectship."

"You mean he's not afraid of this gossip?"

"Singularly enough, you have grasped the situation," said the Fifth Form skipper. "At times, Brother Horace, I have nopes for you. I was ever an optimist——"

"You funny ass——"

"Brother Sinclair fears nothing," went on Browne. "What do you suppose he will do if the Head hears of this bail business? He will calmly explain that the whole story is trumped up and preposterous? He will, in fact, give the Head a highly-coloured account of his own remarkable honesty, and dismiss the affair with a laugh. And, being a head prefect, he will be believed. Such is life, Brother Horace. It is a wicked world."

The two Fifth-Formers were sitting in Browne's smart Morris-Oxford saloon, and the car was standing within the Bannington Grammar School grounds. It was, in fact, two-thirty—time for the kick-off. The St. Frank's Junior Eleven was about to battle with the Grammarian stars. Although there was a senior match on at St. Frank's, Browne had preferred to come afield to watch the juniors. He stated it as his opinion that the junior football, while being less polished, was certainly more entertaining from a spectacular point of view. He had a slightly twisted knee—not sufficient to inconvenience him much—but bad enough to prevent his own appearance on the field.

They had been discussing the West House sensation. For, of course, the story of "Sinclair's latest" had rapidly gone the rounds. Lots of fellows in the other Houses laughed at it, believing that there had been exaggeration. The seniors dismissed the yarn with scarcely a thought. There were always these stories going about—and ninety-nine per cent. of them were without the slightest atom of foundation.

Sinclair, of course, had counted upon this. He felt certain that if any of the masters heard the rumours, they would take no further notice. Furthermore, his hold over Mr. Beverley Stokes was such that he considered himself immune from any kind of suspicion.

Dick Hamilton was pleased at the turn of events. For he did not deny that Pitt and Grey would make a good deal of difference to the chance of a win. Pitt, alone, was a tower of strength. He and Fullwood, on the wing, were an ideal couple, and were capable of penetrating almost any defence.

So all worries were left until after the game. It wasn't any good brooding over the bail money just when the match was

about to start. The fellows needed all their energies.

But a certain amount of anxiety was cropping up.

The Grammarian centre-forward had failed to turn out with the other members of the team. The Grammarian goalie was also conspicuous by his absence. Neither of them had been seen for an hour.

"It's just past the half-hour already," said Nipper anxiously. "Have we got to wait until these fellows turn up?"

The Grammar School Junior captain—who played centre-half—gave a worried nod.

"We can't very well start without them," he replied. "There's no substitute I can play in goal. I'm hanged if I know what's happened to the idiots! Somebody saw them going into the town——"

"But they promised to be back by two o'clock," put in one of the other Grammarians. "And there hasn't been a sign of them since. I suppose you'll give 'em until a quarter to, won't you?"

"We shall have to wait, anyhow," said the skipper.

Nipper gave Reggie Pitt a significant glance. There was something remarkably unfortunate in this delay. Little did the Grammarians realise that the sum of seventy-five pounds depended on the match! For if Pitt and Grey were late in getting back, Sinclair would certainly commandeer the bail money. And the juniors wouldn't be able to protest—for they had agreed to the arrangement. Archie admitted that he had promised to get the pair back by five, or forfeit the bail.

And here was this unusual delay!

At other times, perhaps, the footballers wouldn't have thought much about it. School matches did not start to the very minute, as in the case of League fixtures. There was always a certain amount of elasticity.

But when time was so precious, every minute seemed to be an hour.

"We shall have to chuck up playing unless we make a start," muttered Grey. "We can't let Archie lose that money, you know. It'll take us a good half-hour to get back, after the match——"

"We'll do it if we start by a quarter to," said Pitt.

But when the clock reached a quarter to three, there was still no sign of the missing Grammarians. And the skipper, with very black looks, decided to play a couple of reserves. He was particularly exasperated, because he had been certain of a win. His team was at the top of its form just at present.

When the St. Frank's team had arrived, too, a shock had awaited him. He had been given to understand that Reggie Pitt was detained, and would not play. And Pitt, the lightning winger, was the most feared forward in the St. Frank's Junior Eleven. Yet Pitt had turned up, as bold as brass!

Even so, the Grammarians had been confident of victory. But with their goal-scoring centre-forward missing, they would stand little or no chance. For there was no adequate substitute.

"We'll just do it," said Nipper, as the teams took the field. "It's only ten to three. The game will be over by half-past four. It'll be a bit of a rush, but ——"

"Here they are!"

A roar went up from crowds of the Grammarians. Two figures were running across the field—both of them, however, in ordinary clothing. They came up, panting, dishevelled, and war-worn.

"Sorry, Ward, we were kept!" panted one of the new arrivals.

The Grammarian skipper was overjoyed at the appearance of his missing men—but he didn't forget his duties as a captain.

"What on earth have you fellows been up to?" he asked sharply. "Don't you know we ought to have started at half-past two? It's nearly three now! And you're not even changed!"

"We couldn't help it!" said one of them. "We were set upon by some of those beastly St. Frank's rotters—— Ahem! Sorry!" he added hastily, as he remembered the visitors. "All the same, they were a crowd of cads!"

"Who were they?" asked Nipper keenly.

"I don't know—although I recognised two of 'em as Gulliver and Bell, of the Remove," said the Grammarian. "They pounced on us as we were coming out of a shop, and pushed us down an alley, and kept us there ——"

"Don't jaw now—it was only a rag," interrupted Ward. "Buzz in and change—we shan't have enough daylight unless you look sharp."

"Thank goodness you haven't started!" said the other. "We thought we should find the giddy match half over. Awfully decent of you to wait, you St. Frank's chaps. It sort of makes up for the other."

"Get indoors and change!" roared Ward.

There was another delay—not only exasperating to the visitors, but positively alarming. Yet it wouldn't do to reveal their agitation. They could scarcely explain to the Grammarians that two members of their team were out on bail!

"Five past three!" groaned Handforth, as he looked at the school clock. "Why, it's impossible! Even if we start now, we shan't get done until a quarter to five—counting ten minutes for an interval!"

"It's pretty hopeless," muttered Pitt. "Look here, the best thing we can do is to stand down before the game starts, Nipper. You've got two reserves here——"

"By Jove!" interrupted Nipper softly. "Old Browne!"

"Eh?"

"He's over there with his car," continued Dick. "Hold on a minute."

He ran across to the ropes just as the tardy Grammarians were emerging from the pavilion, now in their shorts and jerseys.

"I say, Browne, old man," panted Nipper, running up to the Fifth-Former's car, "can you do us a favour?"

Browne, who was polishing one of the door-handles with Stevens's fur gloves, turned and beamed.

"A favour?" he repeated. "Have the Brownes ever been known to fail in these little matters of courtesy? State your wish, Brother Hamilton, and be assured that——"

"Can't wait, old son!" interrupted Nipper. "You're here to see the match, aren't you?"

"That, I believe, was the general scheme of things."

"And you'll still be here when it's over?"

"A palmist once told me that I should die young, but I scarcely imagine the statement to be true," replied Browne. "And surely the most promising young life in the British Empire will not be snuffed out in the middle of a mere football match?"

"You long-winded ass!" howled Nipper. "They're waiting for me! You know about Sinclair's beastly bail, don't you?"

"Alas, I am only too well acquainted with the murky story."

"We've got to get Pitt and Grey back to the West House before five," said Nipper grimly. "The match won't be over until twenty to, at the earliest. Will you drive 'em back in your car? And can you do it in time?"

"In reply to your first inquiry, I am honoured," replied William Napoleon smoothly. "Your second query is little short of an insult—not only to the car, but to my prowess as a driver."

"Can you do it?" repeated Nipper urgently.

"I can not only do it—but I will do it," replied Browne, beaming. "Have no fear, Brother Hamilton—dash into the fray with cheerful heart. Brother Sinclair will have no leg to stand on when we surrender his prisoners before the curfew rings."

CHAPTER XIII.

SAINTS VERSUS GRAMMARIANS.

"OH, well saved!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Splendid, Ted—splendid!"

"Keep 'em out, Handy!"

Edward Oswald Handforth was glowing with the satisfaction of healthy exercise and triumphant agility. Twice in succession he had saved the St. Frank's goal from falling. But he really only heard one voice, and he was nearly delirious with happiness.

Mary Summers was quite near the goal-line, and she had encouraged him with more than one cry of enthusiasm. None of the Moor View girls were present, however, for they had some sports of their own on the bill for this afternoon.

Mary was enjoying the game exceedingly. It was twenty minutes old, and no goals had been scored. But by this time both the sides had settled down to a hard game, and a certain raggedness—painfully apparent at the start—was vanishing. The teams were beginning to understand one another.

Fullwood was playing exceptionally well, too—accepting Pitt's brainy passes with delightful skill and accuracy. Time after time they swept up the field, but the defence was keen, and none of these attacks materialised.

Indeed, much of the play had been in the St. Frank's half of the field, and Handforth had been called upon no less than three times. He seemed like a fellow possessed this afternoon. Church and McClure guessed the reason, but none of the others did.

"My hat, he's a giddy marvel!" Church was saying. "We shall have to ask old Stokes' niece to come along to every match! She acts like a charm! I didn't think Handy had it in him!"

"That last save was a corker!" acknowledged McClure.

"Hallo! There goes Pitt!" shouted Clive Russell. "Get ready to cheer, boys! This is where we let something fly, I guess!"

The Canadian boy had taken to football as a duck takes to water—he hadn't played much of it before coming to England. But he was already a member of his Junior House team, and was longing for the day when he would play in a big match.

He flushed with excitement as he saw his own special chum—Fullwood—streaking up the field with Reggie Pitt. Again and again they hoodwinked the defence.

At the last moment Pitt cut in, the back completely beaten, and sent across a perfectly timed centre. Fullwood was just a shade out of position, and the leather shot past him.

But Nipper was there. He made no mistake. Meeting the ball before it touched the ground, he sent in a first-timer which gave the Grammarian goalie no atom of chance. It was a low, deadly shot, which swerved into the net with fearful speed.

"Goal!"

"Hurrah!"

The crowds of Saints yelled their enthusiasm.

"He was off-side!" roared one of the Grammarians.

"Rats!"

The referee was pointing to the centre of the field, and St. Frank's were one up. It was the very fatality which Ward had feared. His team was not unlike many another team. If it scored first, it would forge ahead to greater victories. But if it received a set-back, a deadly slackness set in.

"Good old Nipper!"

"Let's have another one like that, Dick!"

Handforth, standing in the goal-mouth with a grim, cold light in his eye, had just noticed something. Mary Summers was clapping vigorously. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were shining with double enthusiasm. She was even waving to Nipper in her glee. Nipper waved back—and the girl re-doubled her salute.

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth blankly.

She hadn't waved to him like that! It was not only startling, but disconcerting in the extreme. And after the match restarted Mary scarcely gave Handforth a look. He knew this for certain, for he gave more attention to the girl than the game—nearly at the expense of a goal. Only the united yells of Church and McClure brought him to his senses in the nick of time.

He effected a remarkable save, but was compelled to turn the ball round the post, conceding a corner. However, the kick was badly taken, and the danger was averted. But it was a narrow shave, and Handforth paid more attention to the play after that.

But one thing had forced itself upon him—one fact of paramount importance. Mary Summers had no eyes for anybody except Dick Hamilton! It was a terrible blow to the leader of Study D. He had told himself that she had come only to see him play! And she scarcely seemed to notice him!

Five minutes before half-time, the Grammarians equalised. But this time Handforth was not at fault. Doyle, the Remove left-back, accidentally handled in the dread area, and a penalty kick was awarded. It was a piece of pure ill-luck, and many spectators declared that the referee was several kinds of a rotter for inflicting the penalty.

Ward, who took the kick, made no mistake. Handforth had no chance to save. It was a high shot—whizzing into the net, just at the far top corner. The Grammarians had equalised, and it was nearly half-time.

But as soon as the whistle blew for the re-start, the Saints were away. It was a thrilling and unexpected burst. Nipper went clean through on his own, and for a moment it seemed as though he would score another goal. His effort was a little masterpiece. Perhaps he, too, was influenced because of two dark, sparkling eyes.

At the last moment he passed out to Pitt, who was well on-side. Reggie accepted the pass with that skill of his which had made him celebrated. Without any pause in his stride, he swept on.

But this time he ran right in, steadied, himself, and shot.

It was a fine piece of work—and the home goalie had no chance. The leather spun right across the mouth of the goal, and seemed to be wide. But it swerved in, struck the inside of the post, and rebounded into the net.

"Oh, good shot!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Reggie!"

It was half-time, and the Saints were ahead again.

CHAPTER XIV.

POOR OLD TED!

MARY SUMMERS ran forward impulsively as the players came off the field.

Handforth glowed with joy, for it seemed to him that she was making straight in his direction. But his feelings suddenly changed when she caught hold of Nipper's hand, and shook it vigorously.

"What a splendid goal that was!" she said enthusiastically.

"That one of Reggie's?" said Nipper. "Rather! One of his specials. He's deadly when he sends them across at that angle."

"It was a wonderful goal—but I meant the other," smiled Mary. "You scored, too, Dick. I'd no idea the game would be so exciting."

Handforth stood there with a look of dull misery in his eyes. She hadn't once looked in his direction—she hadn't said a word to him! And it wasn't as though he were too small to be seen. Indeed, he walked up and down once or twice to catch her eye. But she was apparently afflicted with sudden blindness.

"Jolly good, Handy!" exclaimed Church, running up, and grabbing his arm. "We're one up! With any luck, we ought to beat these bounders hands down. Keep it up, old SOH!"

"Go away!" said Handforth thickly.

"Eh?"

"Don't bother me—— My only hat!" groaned Edward Oswald. "Look there! I'm blessed if she hasn't walked off—— I mean, what's that? Win? Of course we'll win! Don't be such a fathead!"

He kicked savagely at a tuft of turf, and gave Church a glare that told its own story. But, wisely, Church pretended not to notice it. Even McClure seemed to see nothing different. They tactfully agreed that it would be better to discuss some general topic.

"We ought to be safe about Pitt and Grey, you know," said McClure. "Old Browne's going to take them back in his car. He's a sportsman. There won't be much time to spare at the end of the game, but he says he'll manage it easily."

"She's talking to Pitt now!" muttered Handforth.

"That car's a smart one, you know," said Church.

"Talking to Pitt, and laughing and larking about!" went on Handforth glumly. "And

I wasn't even noticed! What the dickens is the matter with her?"

"I shouldn't worry, if I were you," said Church soothingly. "You know what these girls are. Why not think of Irene a bit more? I didn't mean to say anything, but, hang it all, you look absolutely mooney! You'll have everybody staring at you!"

"I don't wonder at them staring!" said Handforth dreamily. "Prettiest girl I ever saw!"

"I said staring at you!" roared Church.

"Me? But I'm not pretty!" exclaimed Handforth, with a start.

"We've known that for ages," agreed McClure. "Can't you give the girl a rest for a bit? Haven't you got sense enough to see that Nipper's collared her? I thought better things of him! Nipper—of all chaps! It only shows you!" he added sadly.

Handforth's eyes gleamed with acute jealousy.

"It's impossible!" he muttered. "What the dickens can she see in Nipper? He's not even handsome! After looking at me, how can she see anything in him? It's an absolute mystery!"

He was speaking more to himself than to his chums, but they didn't dream of telling him the painful truth. If he liked to labour under these delusions, it was his own doing. But when it came to a matter of good looks, Edward Oswald could scarcely lay claim to the honour of being a second Valentino.

"Don't bother about these trifles," said McClure. "We were telling you that Browne's promised to take Pitt and Grey home in his car. They'll just about do the trick, and get there before five——"

"I don't care about Browne!" roared Handforth, with loud exasperation. "He can take Pitt and Grey to Timbuctoo, for all I care! And what does five o'clock matter to us, anyhow? Go away! I don't like the look of you!"

"By gad!" muttered Bernard Forrest, with a start.

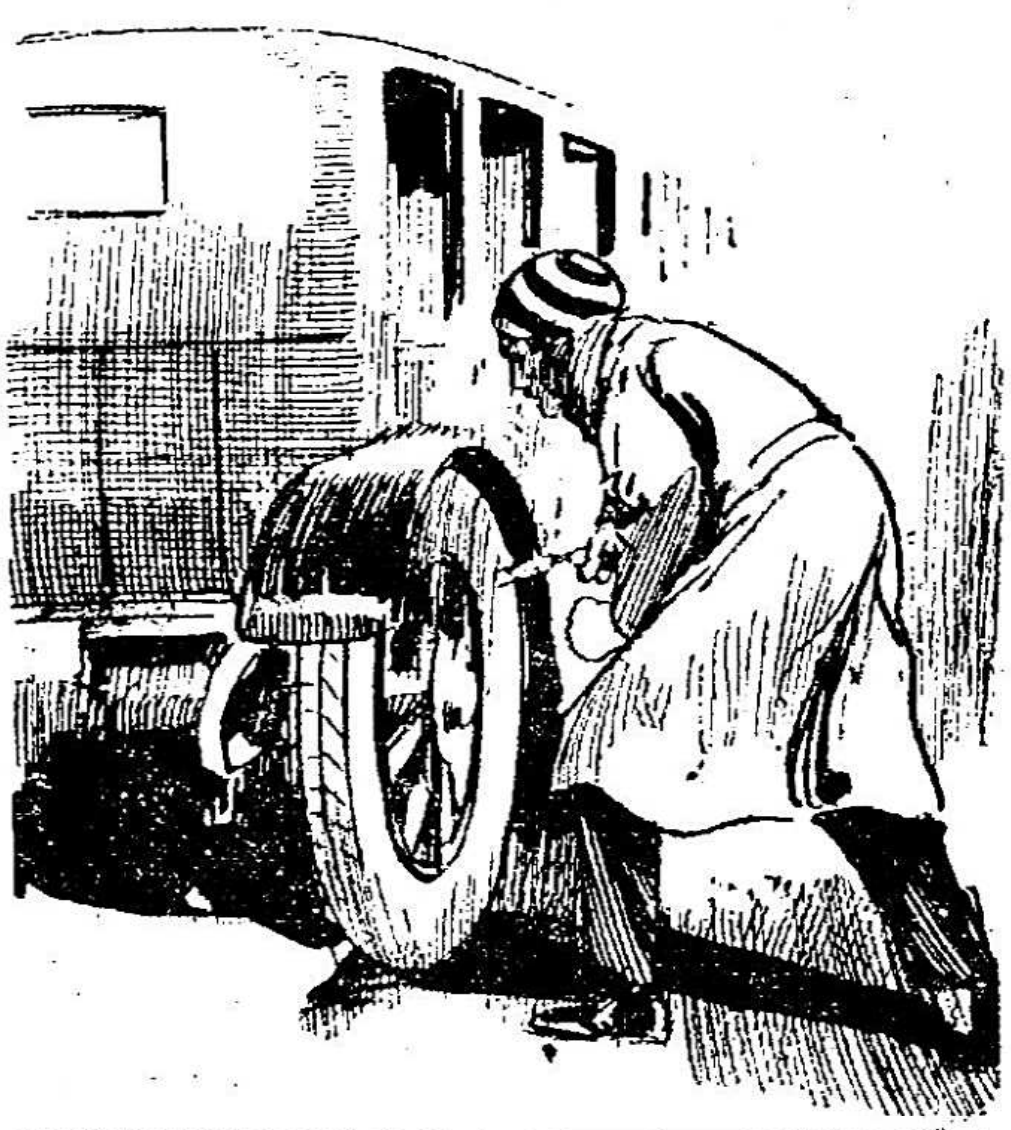
He and his chums were lounging near the ropes quite close at hand—and they had had no difficulty in hearing Handforth's shouted words. The chums of Study D were veering off now.

"Did you hear that?" asked Forrest, as he gazed after the trio. "Browne's going to take Pitt and Grey back to St. Frank's in his car! It's a dodge! It's a wheeze! They mean to get those chaps back before five!"

"But it can't be done!" said Gulliver, in alarm. "I thought we'd settled the whole business——"

"We didn't reckon on Browne and his infernal car," snorted Forrest. "Where's Grayson? We shall have to tell him about this——"

"But they can't do it, I tell you," put in Gulliver.



For, while all the occupants had gathered round Gulliver, a figure had dodged out from the opposite hedge—behind the deserted car. Grayson, of the Fifth, had performed his work well.

"Of course they can't," agreed Bell. "It's nearly four o'clock now. Three-quarters of an hour for the second half—that means a quarter to five when the final whistle goes. It's over three miles."

"Nearly four from here," said Gulliver.

Bernard Forrest compressed his lips.

"Supposing it is four?" he snapped. "Don't you think Browne's car can do four miles in ten minutes? It's practically a clear road—it only takes a couple of minutes to get through the town. Can't you see the dodge? He'll have the engine running, they'll shoot in, and be off in ten seconds. They'll get back to the West House with two or three minutes to spare!"

"My hat!" said Gulliver blankly.

The rascals of the Remove became suddenly active, and went off in search of Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth—two more of Guy Sinclair's myrmidons. Nobody took any notice of them, for the teams were lining up for the re-start.

The beginning of the second half was sensational.

The Grammarians broke away, cut through the visitors' defence, and before Handforth knew what was happening, he was beaten. He seemed different. He had gone all to pieces. Instead of acting with his usual forceful directness, he was hesitant and nervous. And almost before he could look round, the ball was past him.

The Grammarians had equalised again—within the first minute! It was a shock for the Saints, but a bigger shock for Handforth. He knew that he had blundered—that he had made an ass of himself. And Mary was looking on all the time! That was the worst feature of the whole affair.

The effect was electrical, however. He pulled himself together to such good purpose that a second assault on the St. Frank's goal stood no chance. For again the home forwards swept down. The centre shot grandly, a hot, deadly kick.

With all his old confidence, Handforth kicked it back—taking a chance which few goalkeepers would risk, but which he performed with impunity. Again it came in. But Handy flung himself full length, reached out, and tipped the leather to one of his backs, who cleared with a swift drive.

"Well played, Handy!"

"By jingo, that was marvellous!"

Handforth was himself again. And after that, rather to his sorrow, the play transferred itself to the other half of the field. He was never happier than when his charge was being constantly assailed. He didn't consider it a game at all if he wasn't called upon to make a few desperate saves.

Nipper scored the goal which sent the Saints ahead again—a well-timed header which had the goalie guessing all the way. And after that the game developed into a ding-dong struggle for supremacy—for the home team was grimly determined to get on even terms.

The Grammarians were certainly in fine form. Nipper did not remember any more exciting meeting than this. Ward was a new skipper, for the previous one had left the school. Ward, contrary to general anticipations, had not only proved a worthy successor, but a brilliant leader. As pivot, he generalled his whole team with great skill—helping his backs when necessary, and feeding his forwards with excellently timed passes.

He haunted Nipper like a shadow—but, unhappily, Nipper did not seem to be particularly troubled. Ward bothered him now and again, but in the main, the St. Frank's skipper managed to play his usual game without being bought. Clever as Ward was, he found Dick Hamilton one too many for him.

Indeed, to anybody who knew football, it was Nipper who won the match. For his constant raids so distracted the Grammarian pivot from his usual play that his other men were left at sea. Only occasionally did the Grammarian machine work perfectly—

and then, indeed, they showed the crowd what they could do.

But they could not fight against fate. Within a minute of time, they looked certain of scoring, but Handforth again performed the impossible, and kept the leather out.

The whistle went at last, and the match was over—won chiefly owing to the presence of Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey. Nipper had taken advantage of the passes to shoot the goals, but without the wingers he would never have had the opportunity.

"Good man!" panted Dick, as he ran up to Reggie. "My hat! I'm jolly glad you were able to come! You won the match for us!"

"Don't be an ass——"

"You and Grey, anyhow——"

"You hopeless idiot! It was you who scored the goals!" snorted Pitt. "That one I got was a fluke——"

"We can't stop to argue," rapped out Nipper. "Look at the clock! Eighteen minutes to five! I wonder if old Browne can do it? If we don't get you into the West House before the clock strikes, Sinclair won't disgorge a penny!"

CHAPTER XV.

VERY FISHY.

"ODDS rush and tear!" said Archie Glenthorne, in alarm. "Dash it all, I done, laddies! We're too pessimistic, but it can't be don't wish to be frightfully dashed late!"

"Too late!" echoed Pitt, as he and Grey and Nipper ran up to the car. "I was afraid——"

"One moment!" interrupted William Napoleon Browne coldly. "What is this childish prattling? Brother Glenthorne, be good enough to remove your painfully absurd ideas to a more fitting sphere."

"But, good gad!" protested Archie. "I mean, seventeen minutes to five, old horse! It absolutely can't be done!"

"I will agree that it can't be done if we stand here listening to your painful remarks," said Browne, leaping into the driving seat. "But there is no need for alarm. Disport yourselves within the chariot, brothers, and we will make our spectacular dash. Let me assure you that there is no necessity for worry or concern."

The passengers, however, did not share this optimistic view. After the elapse of a couple of minutes they were convinced that Browne was driving at sufficient speed to get into the school with heaps of time to spare. But it was a doubtful problem, whether they would get to the school or not.

Under Browne's hand, the car shot through Bannington like a projectile. He certainly eased up slightly when passing the policeman on point duty in the centre of the town. But after that he opened out, and the Morris fairly hammed.

"Steady!" growled Nipper. "No need for this break-neck speed, Browne, old man. We must be doing forty."

"Forty-four, to be exact," nodded Browne.

"Laddies, I trust you will instruct Phipps to dispose of my belongings in a fitting manner," murmured Archie, as he clung to the door grip. That is, dash it, if any of you survive! Odds grease and skids! The road's in a frightful condish——"

"Don't you kids worry—Browne's all right," said Stevens, with a grin. "He looks reckless—but he's a jolly good driver. Besides, what are you grumbling about, anyway? He's doing it for your benefit."

"Alas, Brother Horace, one seldom reaps the reward for one's kindly acts in this ungracious world," said Browne sorrowfully. "I have undertaken to deliver these youths before the hour of five——"

"Hallo! What's that up there?" interrupted Nipper, pointing.

He was in the front seat with Browne, and he was peering keenly ahead, into the gathering dusk. Being an expert driver himself, Nipper was rather more anxious than the others. Through the influence of Nelson Lee, he had been granted a special driving licence—although, nowadays, he seldom had any use for it. But although he had perfect confidence in Browne, he experienced that uneasy sensation which attacks all drivers who ride with another at the wheel.

"Look out!" he added sharply. "There's something on the road!"

"Grateful as I am for the information, I must, at the same time, point out that my eagle eye had already observed it," said Browne, as he removed his foot from the accelerator, and applied it to the brake pedal. "What do we see? I may be wrong, but this savours suspiciously of dirty work."

The car pulled up quickly, and just in front a figure could be seen which aroused the juniors to excited animation. They even forgot the urgency of their own case.

Just ahead of the car, a little to the side of the road, a human figure lay motionless. The road was quite deserted at this spot, and the dusk was gathering thickly.

Near the prostrate figure lay a bicycle, and none of the new arrivals needed any telling what had happened. Nipper opened his door, and leapt out.

"It's one of our chaps!" he shouted, in alarm.

He had just caught sight of the school cap, and he bent down, and lifted the limp figure from the road. One glance told him that the fellow was Gulliver, of the Remove. The others crowded round quickly.

"Is he hurt?" asked Pitt. "Better put him in the car——"

"What's—what's happened?" mumbled Gulliver dazedly.

He sat up with a vague expression of fear in his eyes. He was muddy, his hair was matted and disordered, and he looked very much a wreck. Curiously enough, however, there was no visible injury. His bicycle, too, was intact.

"That's what we want to know," said Nipper. "Were you knocked down by something, or——"

"I—I don't remember," muttered Gulliver. "I was biking home, you know——"

"Alone?"

"Yes, I was alone," replied Gulliver quickly. "I left the other chaps in Bannington. A huge car came along, and swerved; I don't seem to remember exactly——"

His voice trailed away.

"A remarkable exhibition of histrionic art, but it quite fails to get across the footlights," said Browne firmly. "Much as I admire Brother Gulliver's effects, I strongly suspect a murky plot. The minutes are slipping by, brothers. Brother Gulliver's bicycle is intact, and Brother Gulliver himself is also intact. Let me remind you that this rising young Bill Sykes is one of Brother Sinclair's most cherished serfs. In later years he will rise to the top of his profession, and will undoubtedly spend many peaceful æons within the sheltering walls of Dartmoor."

Reggie Pitt started.

"You're right!" he snapped. "What a set of asses we were to be deceived. It's a trick. We shall be too late!"

"Not while Mr. Morris and Mr. Oxford are at our command," declared Browne. "They are even now straining at the leash, eager to carry us onwards. Come, let us away; but I beg of you to be careful with the varnish, not to mention the upholstery."

They piled into the car, unmindful of Gulliver's indignant protests. Common humanity had impelled them to stop, but it only took them a moment to realise the truth. And they were furious. Although there was no actual proof of conspiracy, they all understood that this was one of Sinclair's dodges. He had deliberately planned to delay the two prisoners, so that they would be compelled to forfeit the bail.

It was a piece of utter knavery, but there was no proof of it. There was still less proof of an even worse piece of knavery.

For while all the car occupants had gathered round Gulliver, a figure had dodged out from the opposite hedge, behind the deserted car. Grayson, of the Fifth, had performed his work well.

In the space of ten seconds the thing was done. Concealed by the body of the car, to say nothing of the dusk, he had jabbed a chisel with all his strength into the wall of the back tyre. It was a balloon tyre, and with a sharp wood-chisel the task was easy.

When Browne and his passengers re-entered the car they had no suspicion of the truth, and heard nothing. But that brief stoppage had been enough. The plotters had done their worst.

Browne slipped his gears in, released his clutch pedal, and the car shot off. But only for a few yards. He pulled it up with a jerk, and there was a startled expression in his usually calm eyes.

"This is not merely dirty work, but dastardly cunning of the worst type!" he announced. "Brothers, I fear we are undone. Much as I hate to say it, we have come unstuck!"

"But what——"

"We are punctured!" declared Browne. "And when? While attending to the misguided youth on the road, I suspect that another lurker performed certain heinous acts upon our tyres. But let us make certain."

Now thoroughly dismayed they emptied out, and saw that one of the rear tyres was flat on the rim. It was enough. With scarcely any margin of time, all chances of reaching St. Frank's in time was now hopeless.

The plotters had won the day, in spite of all.

CHAPTER XVI.

GUY SINCLAIR'S COUP.

REGGIE PITT'S eyes glittered.

"I say, this is too thick!" he protested. "It's absolutely crooked! Where's that cad Gulliver? We'll drag the truth out of him——"

"You will do better to drag the jack out of the tool-box," interrupted Browne. "Hope is not entirely lost, brothers. With expert assistance we may yet change the wheel and arrive ere the knell. In this life one must never be discouraged by rebuffs. Onwards—onwards is the watchword. The more difficult the path the greater the effort."

"But it's no good!" protested Jack Grey.

"Alas, how many of our failures are created by the constant use of that expression!" said Browne. "Never give up, Brother Grey. Even when you know there is no hope—still hope. There is always one chance in a thousand that our watches may be fast. Spanners—quick!"

The Fifth-Former certainly proved himself to be a fellow of action. Although he kept up a continuous run of talk he didn't waste a second. He was working all the time. And Nipper helped him. In an extraordinary short period the wheel was off and the spare wheel fitted in place. And Browne's optimism inspired the others.

They had indeed been calculating the time according to the Grammar School clock. And Browne knew that it was seven minutes fast. So there was still a faint chance that the trick would be done.

Being in football togs the juniors carried no watches, and relied upon Browne solely for the accurate time. The Fifth-Former leapt into the driving seat at last, and jerked out his watch.

"Can my eyes believe what they see?" he asked mildly. "Four minutes to five. There is still a shred of hope."

"Four minutes to five!" echoed Nipper. "You must be wrong——"

"The Brownes are never wrong," interrupted William Napoleon coldly. "All in? Good! I entreat you to hold tight. Brother Grey, I fail to appreciate the necessity of standing on the seats."

They were all excited now. They had never believed it possible to defeat Sinclair's cunning. But St. Frank's was less than a mile and a half distant, and there were four minutes to cover the distance in. With a fast car this is not a particularly difficult feat.

The car fairly shot along the roads. Fortunately no other traffic was met. The village of Bellton heard a kind of roar along the High Street. It came out to see what had happened, and saw nothing. Not that Browne was a road-hog. He was, in fact, a particularly careful driver. But when seventy-five pounds were at stake he rather let himself go.

Practically on two wheels the car sped through the gateway of St. Frank's, and drew up with a shriek of brakes against the West House steps.

"Phew!" whistled Grey. "I thought we were over——"

"Listen!" gasped Archie. "Good gad! I mean, the good old clock, what? Laddies, we're in time!"

"Great Scott! So we are!" ejaculated Pitt. "Come on!"

Five o'clock was only just starting to chime out, and even Sinclair could not truthfully say that the prisoners were late unless they arrived after the hour. On the stroke of the hour would be sufficient.

Pitt and Grey were the first in, with Nipper and Archie close behind. The two Fifth-Formers remained in the car, Browne quietly satisfied in one way, but furious in another. Practically a brand-new tyre was ruined, and he was determined to have compensation, sooner or later.

The four juniors arrived at the door of Sinclair's study just as the last stroke of the hour was booming out. They burst in, and came to a sudden halt. The head prefect's study was empty.

"He's not here!" panted Grey.

"That makes no difference, we're back in time," said Pitt. "By Jove, Browne's a wonder! I never thought——"

"Hallo! What's all this?"

Simon Kenmore, of the Sixth, opened the door of the adjoining-study, and looked out. He frowned heavily at the Removites.

"Clear out of this passage!" he commanded. "It's like your nerve to come here, making all this din. If you don't sheer off I'll give you a hundred lines each!"

"We want Sinclair!" retorted Pitt.

"Well, I'm not far off," said Guy Sinclair, emerging from Kenmore's study. "So you've got back, eh? Shan't be long, Kenmore; I'll just attend to this affair. Come inside, kids."

He entered his own study, and the juniors followed. Sinclair shut the door and looked at his visitors with an inquiring eye.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "What about it, you—you blighter? Seventy-five of the best are required, dash you!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Sinclair.

"Oh, chuck it!" growled Pitt. "It's no good pretending to be innocent, Sinclair. Glenthorne deposited seventy-five pound bail for Grey and me, and it's up to you to pay it back."

Sinclair laughed heartily.

"You're crazy," he said, yawning.

"Aren't you going to pay it?" demanded Pitt.

"Of course I'm not going to pay it!" retorted the prefect. "That money's confiscated. Glenthorne knew the conditions, and if he didn't tell you that's his fault. You two had to surrender yourselves by five o'clock."

"So we did!" shouted Grey.

"Don't talk nonsense——"

"Five o'clock was striking as we came in!" exclaimed Pitt fiercely. "You can't deny it, Sinclair. You'd better hand over that money to Glenthorne or there'll be trouble——"

"Another word and I'll cane you, you young hound!" roared Sinclair. "Any more insolence——"

"Do you mean to say, Sinclair, that you're not going to refund that bail?" asked Nipper quietly. "Seventy-five pounds is a pretty big sum, and even Glenthorne can't

lose it without feeling the pinch. Besides, the whole thing's an absolute swindle."

"That's about enough from you!" snarled Sinclair.

"You paid your assistants to delay the match at Bannington, and then to damage Browne's car," went on Nipper hotly. "It may seem clever to you, Sinclair, but it's the filthiest piece of work I've ever seen!"

The head prefect went crimson.

"Where's your proof?" he shouted thickly. "You can't come here and make these wild accusations——"

"Wild or not, they seem to have hit you on a raw spot!" interrupted Nipper curtly. "Take my advice, Sinclair, and pay up. The less said about this affair the better."

Sinclair strode to the door and flung it open.

"Get out!" he said.

"Look here——"

"GET OUT!" thundered the senior.

"It's no good, Nipper, old man—we'd better go!" said Pitt quietly. "I'm awfully sorry, Archie——"

"Odds life! Not a word, dear old chappie!" protested Archie. "This foul specimen of the reptilian age has pinched my cash, and for the moment we've absolutely got to stick it. But it won't last for long. Dash it all, he can't dash on at this speed for many more days."

They were practically pushed out of the study and made no attempt to get back. Farther down the passage they paused, and looked at one another grimly.

"Aren't you going to do anything, Reggie?" asked Nipper.

"Yes, I am," replied Pitt, with a fierce light in his eye. "This is just about the last straw. We West House chaps have already hinted at a barring-out—but it seems to be coming sooner than we expected!"

"Good gad! You don't mean——"

"Yes, I do, Archie," interrupted Reggie. "Affairs have reached such a head that we simply can't stand it any longer. Sinclair's brought off a pretty big coup this time, but he'll soon find that he's reared a monster that he can't control. There are going to be squalls in the West House soon, and they'll soon become a cyclone!"

And Guy Sinclair sat in his study, gloating over the triumph he had achieved. These juniors were like putty in his fingers. He little dreamed of the storm that was now brewing in every junior study of the West House.

THE END.

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CHAPTER I.

I MEET JIM AYLMER—WE GO IVORY-HUNTING—THE FIRST HINT OF DANGER—THE SPIES AND THEIR FATE.

THERE is no doubt whatever about it that the expedition was out for looting—bare-faced looting; no other word meets the case.

Two years previously I had shaken the dust of a London office from my feet, after three months' trial in a subordinate position, and had come out to South Africa to make my fortune.

Needless to say, I did nothing of the kind. I was, comparatively speaking, raw from school, where I had learnt more of the noble art of self-defence and the duties of centre half-back than anything else, and though the first of these achievements had proved pretty useful, neither of them could, strictly speaking, be called lucrative.

As a consequence, having tried my hardest to get a billet and failed conspicuously—for just then Cape Town, Johannesburg, and all the other big centres were crowded with men much better qualified than myself howling for a job, I was soon on my beam-ends.

It was the last day of March when, having dined sumptuously on the proceeds of my one remaining spare suit, I fell in, as luck would have it, with Jim Aylmer. He also was on the rocks, but he had a good inside knowledge of up-country life, and bore his misfortunes philosophically.

He was a cheery, bronze-faced, raw-boned chap of twenty-five or so, close on six years my senior, and we took to one another at first sight. Whether it was the effect of having a good square meal under my belt for once, or whether it was the mere sight of his ugly, cheerful figure-head, I don't know; anyway, I forgot my woes for the time being, and we yarned extensively.

The result was that nothing would suit my book but a run up north, and a try for better things.

Ivory was what he suggested—ivory, and plenty of it.

"But," said I, "I thought elephant-hunting was pretty well played out nowadays. A man told me not long ago——"

Jim laughed.

"Elephants be blowed!" said he. "The word I used was ivory, not elephants. Ivory, my son! We don't want to start a bloomin' menagerie, do we? Anyway, I've got no use for elephants; they can't sing, and you can't put 'em in nice little gilded wire cages, and sell 'em off at a dollar a time to elderly ladies to hang in the sitting-room window. I want the tusks—not the bushes they grow on! Tusks—tusks—heap big tusks! Do you understand? And when we've got 'em, we'll just waltz in and sell 'em off to the dealers, and spread ourselves in boiled shirts, and have a good time. That's the size of my trouble. Now, will you chip in? I think I know a man who will put up the preliminary and needful cash."

Well, naturally, I jumped at the chance. I was sick—sick to death—of the dusty city, with its stocks and shares and swindles, and I dearly wanted to break fresh ground.

The upshot of it was that three months later Jim and I were a week's trek north of the big forest-belt with a well-equipped outfit, a wagon full of brass rods, beads, and calico for trade, and a handful of sturdy boys on whom we could rely, and who could handle a Colt rifle above the average.

It was a gorgeous life, free, open, and healthy, save for a risk of fever in the swamp belt, and we were both of us as hard as nails.

The trip was vaguely supposed to last a year or eighteen months, and we were bound on a round of visits to all the larger native kraals, to trade our Brummagen stuffs against tusks, of which there were known to be large hoards in the holding of the petty chiefs, buried for the most part, and most uncommonly carefully hidden.

We had had our ups and downs, of course. For instance, we had lost half our oxen and a fine mule team a bit to the north of the Limpopo. One wagon had come to unmitigated grief in the forests, and we had been obliged to abandon it. However, we had roped in a fair quantity of ivory—enough to pay handsomely, and still had three parts of our trade untouched.

Still, as I said before, we were out for loot, and—well, once a man gets into Central African regions his methods are apt to be crude, and it may be that now and again when a local head man was disinclined to do a deal, we "perwailed on him." Not that we ever failed to pay him fair price according to current rates, and perhaps dash him a couple of dozen brass rods or a hand-

ful of beads over and above; but until the ivory was forthcoming out of the family strong-room we—well, we made things uncomfortable.

So, on the whole, things had prospered most amazingly; nevertheless, we were not easy in our minds.

We had arrived at a great, undulating stretch of country, with good feeding, easy going, and free from lung sickness, well to the northward of the great forest belt, and to the best of my belief virgin country, unexplored—that is, by other white men. But for days past our boys had shown signs of uneasiness.

Only that very morning an old, wizened, scarred tracker, whom we used to call Bob, acting as spokesman for the rest, had come up to us whilst we were having an early breakfast and, after saluting, had squatted patiently on his heels, waiting for us to speak.

As I dare say you know, it never does to take any particular notice of a native, or to seem in a hurry to open a palaver. He isn't used to it, and thinks it undignified.

Consequently Jim and I finished our meal leisurely, and lit up our pipes before condescending to seem aware of his presence.

"Well," said Jim at last, "what is it? You have my leave to speak."

Bob rose to his feet. He was a dignified person in his way, and one of the finest trackers I have ever come across.

"Koom Baas," said he gravely, "the night wind has brought me a tale—a true tale, dealing with heavy matters. My heart and the heart of those low men yonder"—waving his sticks towards the fire, where the rest of the boys were squatting—"is like water, for they have heard strange noises in the night, the thundering of feet as though the earth shook beneath the rush of a charging impi, the clash of steel, the rattling of the shafts on the ox-skin shields, and the war-cry of the Unglani. To-day we are here, lone men in a lone land; the night wind may rise again, and poof!"—he waved his outstretched hand in the air—"tomorrow we are scattered and laid low as the grass-seed. Baas, is it that we go northward yet?"

Jim frowned, and sucked at his pipe.

"Who art thou," he asked fiercely, "that thou darest question who and why and wherefore? Does the master tell the dog the councils of his mind, or the reasons of his comings and goings, or listen to his whimpering? Does he not rather speak with the whiplash? Silence! We inspan an hour and the half an hour from now. You have my leave to go."

Bob drew himself up very straight, saluted, and went back to his corner by the other fire; but Jim remained staring at his unfinished cup of sugarless coffee, and pulled meditatively at his pipe, now and again blowing rings of blue smoke in the still morning air.

"Young 'un," said he presently, "I don't half like that talk of old Bob. The man is as straight as a die, and as plucky as a bull-terrier. I've seen him stand up single-handed to the charge of a wounded buffalo, and a man who can do that, knowing his danger, has got sand. The truth is, we are condemned fools to have risked coming so far north as this. I have heard tales from other chaps who have been near here, but not one of them has ever ventured so far.

"We are on the borders of the Unglani country, and by all reports those same gentlemen are a pretty tough proposition. They are an offshoot of the Zulu tribes—one of the many. They trekked north goodness knows how many years ago—about three generations, I fancy, and by all reports they are a well-built, powerful race, fighting men every one, and apt to be a bit autocratic; in fact, I believe they consistently obliterate every stranger who presumes to venture on to their hunting-grounds.

"Do you see that range over there, dim and blue in the distance? Well, as far as I can make out, that's their stronghold. Between us and those mountains lies an undulating plain, well watered, and presumably full of game; and on the far side, I am told, is a district particularly rich in hoarded tusk—the untouched accumulation of Heaven knows how long. Now, when I heard that, I hankered to have the fingering of those hoards. If half the accounts be true, we should be able to get enough to make us both rich men. But in between lie those infernal Unglani. The boys evidently know more than they say. The question is, should we risk it or not?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" said I, with all the rashness of a youngster who hasn't yet learnt to come in when it rains.

Jim nodded.

"I'm of your way of thinking myself, Tommy Dodd"—which was a nickname he had given me—"but I'm hanged if old Bob's croaking hasn't made me feel a bit uneasy. At any rate, we can but try, and if things look nasty, we'll cut and run."

And with that he knocked out the ashes of his pipe on his boot-heel, and sauntered off to inspect the process of inspanning.

All that day we travelled north, with a trifle of resting, by the compass, over that fertile, trackless plain. Jim and I, trudging now ahead of the column and now half a mile or so in the rear, would lose sight of the wagons for minutes at a time as they topped a rise and became hidden in the enclosing hollow, apparently swallowed up by the earth. Then suddenly first one white-hooded "veldt schooner" and then another would come into range again as they crawled slowly up the opposite ridge.

At sundown we outspanned, having covered about eighteen miles, and busied ourselves preparing a frugal meal, which, I remember, was added to on that particular evening by a brace of small, snipe-like birds which I had shot early in the day.

It was a gorgeous night, and as the moon rose her silver light bathed the country far and wide in a soft, white light, broken only here and there by dense black shadows, where an isolated jut of rock, or the deep-cut banks of a watercourse, disturbed the level serenity of the scene. We had, as a personal attendant, a Matabele named Mgazi, an enormously powerful Keshla, or ringed man, a full-grown warrior, who had fought against us in both the first and second war with distinction. Brave as a lion beyond all question; indeed, considerably braver, for a lion will generally bolt for dear life if he has half a chance—a silent man of rather morose disposition, but absolutely trustworthy, and a born fighter.

Our four wagons had been drawn up in laager, for Jim had been uneasy in his mind all day, and he and I had both swept the horizon from time to time with our field-glasses.

We were sitting chatting drowsily before the fire, preparatory to turning in, both of us feeling that delicate sensation of medium fatigue after a heavy day's exercise in the fresh open air, when suddenly I noticed Mgazi, who was seated near us, cleaning the lock of Jim's riffe, throw up his head and sniff eagerly, his nostrils dilated, and his face turned up wind.

"What is it?" I asked in a low voice, reaching for my Colt, for I imagined that he had detected the presence of some large animal, and I was never too tired for a stray shot.

"Hist!" said he warningly, and crouched forward, peering under the wagon nearest him.

For fully three minutes he lay like that, motionless as a bronze statue, whilst Jim and I watched him intently.

Presently he crawled back, keeping, I noticed, well out of the circle of the fire-light.

"Unglani!" he whispered in his low, soft, guttural accents, and thrust out three fingers to signify their number.

"The deuce!" cried Jim. "Young 'un, we're in for trouble!" And would have sprung to his feet had not second thoughts prevailed, for where he sat he was in the full glare of the fire, and any sudden movement might have given the alarm.

"Where?" he asked curtly.

Mgazi pointed.

"By the shadow of the great rock; two spear casts and the half of a cast."

"We must nab those fellows!" said Jim to me in a low voice. "They're spies, or part of a hunting party. If they get away, we shall have the whole hornets' nest about our ears before we know where we are! I'm beginning to wish I had taken Bob's advice."

"I think we could manage to pick off a couple of 'em at that range," said I, peering in my turn. "It's no distance, and it's a fair shooting light."

Jim shook his head.

"The sound of a rifle would do their work equally well," he said. "No; if there's anything to be done, it must be with cold steel. Meanwhile, we must make such preparations as we can to give the brutes a hot reception."

Mgazi, meanwhile, had calmly resumed his occupation of fitting together Jim's rifle. Having wiped it over with a greased rag and filled the magazine, he brought it forward and laid it across his master's knees. A minute later he appeared with the huge stabbing spear, which he rarely laid aside—a terrible, shovel-like instrument with a short haft not more than four feet long, and a keen edge blade of a good eighteen inches and the span of a man's hand at its broadest part.

Grasping the haft just below the middle, he gave it a preliminary shake, which made it quiver throughout its length, whilst in his left hand he held a long, light wand, also grasped about the centre. This was used for purposes of defence rather than offence; anything in the shape of a shield he disdained as beneath his dignity. Indeed, it was not necessary, for I knew with what wonderful dexterity he could wield that slender stick. It would have puzzled a first-class fencer to "touch" him, so marvellously quick were his lightning parries.

Jim glanced at him.

"Mgazi is right," he said, "that's our only chance. But it's three to one, and the Unglani are trained fighters."

By way of answer, I slipped out my long, heavy hunting-knife, laid it by my side, and began fastening the thongs of my veldt-schoons—soft rawhide shoes in which one can move as noiselessly as with bare feet.

"I'm going, too," said I. "I gave the casting vote which has got us into this mess, and I intend to do my best to help put matters straight."

"Oh, but hang it all," cried Jim, "you can't! Anyway, where you go, I go!"

"Not a bit of it," said I firmly, for my mind was made up. "You've got to stay where you are, and organise the boys for repelling an attack. You're the boss of the show. It would never do for you to go. I guess I can manage an Unglani. Lend me that spare coat to wrap round my left arm. So! That's it!"

Mgazi watched my preparations with approval. I could move and crawl pretty nearly as noiselessly as he. I hadn't had months of game stalking without learning something.

"I don't half like this, Tommy," said Jim. "Look here, I'll go, and you stop in camp!"

"Don't be an ass!" said I. "You know you couldn't cover fifty yards without their spotting you!" Which was true, for Jim was a clumsy mover. "So-long, old man!"

We gripped hands in silence, and the next moment Mgazi and I had crept out of the laager on the far side.

I don't deny that my pulse was a bit above the normal as we left the wagons

behind. I had never seen a man killed—save once in a mining-camp scrap—and I had most certainly never attempted anything of the sort myself. Still, it was the lives of those three, or every man jack of us would run poor risk of seeing the sun rise twice, and you can't tell what you can do till your back's against a wall, so to speak.

Mgazi took the lead, and we crawled steadily along through the short grass in a wide curve, so as to come up behind them.

It was like some horribly vivid nightmare. Hours and hours it seemed, and yet I suppose the whole distance to be covered was under a quarter of a mile.

We could see the three men now in profile, their faces eagerly, wolfishly turned on our camp. Another long, painful stretch of wriggling, and we were behind them.

Closer—closer yet. Twenty yards, fifteen, ten. Already Mgazi was crouching for a rush and a spring; and then, as luck would have it, my hand rested on a small, loose stone, which slipped under the pressure and went rattling down the incline.

One of the men turned sharply, and the next instant we came at them with a crash.

Mgazi caught the fellow who turned, slashed him across the face with his stick, dazing him, and at the same moment drove home that awful stabbing spear. The man dropped with a grunt, and the Matabele, releasing his weapon with a quick jerk, rushed at his second adversary.

The third man, spear uplifted, came for me. I saw him silhouetted up against the moonlight—a gigantic, towering figure, beautiful in its massive symmetry—saw the quick gleam of steel, and almost involuntarily threw up my left arm. The wrappings of the coat caught the blade. I gave a wrench which snapped the haft off short, though I felt as though my fore-arm was broken by the force of the blow, and, stooping, I struck upwards with all my force at the bare brown chest as the rush of his charge hurled him at me. I felt the knife drive home, and the next moment I was down on my back, with my adversary on top of me, his huge limbs working convulsively in the death agony.

I tore myself clear just in time to see Mgazi deftly turn an ugly thrust with his stick, and drive his great spear in with such terrific force that it tore through muscle and flesh and sinew till it stood out a clear finger's length beyond the man's back.

The Unglani threw up his arms, tottered, and fell back, but even as his spirit passed he sent out into the still night a long, shrill cry.

Mgazi stood surveying the body, and wiping his spear, whilst he hummed a little war chant under his breath.

I touched him on the shoulder.

"Come," I said, "we must get back. The baas grows impatient."

He threw up his hands with a gesture of disdain.

"What need of haste?" he said. "See, the dog is dead, and as a dog I killed him; yet dying he polluted the night air with his howlings, and his fellows will take up the strain. Hist! Listen, Isandhlu"—the name the boys had given me—"listen, and ye shall hear the pattering of their feet as they run. There is blood in the air. Wait! There shall be food for the vultures ere to-morrow's sun tops the ridge crest yonder. Listen how they run!"

From far off through the stillness of the night I could hear a faint, drumming sound, which seemed to be drawing rapidly nearer. It was the sound made by hundreds of bare feet running at high speed. I needed no other warning. Without a word, I turned and scampered straight for the laager, Mgazi trotting behind me and chanting as he went, under his breath.

"Jim—Jim," I panted as I broke my way in, "in Heaven's name be quick, man! The Unglani—hundreds of them! They will be on to us; inside ten minutes!"

CHAPTER II.

THE LAAGER ATTACKED BY UNGLANI—THE DEATH OF BOB THE TRACKER—I AM BOWLED OVER.

CRACK, crack, crack, crack! Steadily and methodically the volleys rattled. Jim and I, walking up and down to reassure the boys, and occasionally taking snap-shots at the leaders, while Mgazi, who was a villainous shot, contented himself with brandishing his spear and shouting words of derision and contempt at the enemy.

"Steady there, boys! Steady!" cried Jim. "Don't hurry! Don't wast your ammunition, and fire low. Here, Tommy, they're gathering for a rush on this side! Hurry up, lad, and pump it into them!"

There was a feeling of the coming dawn in the air, and that peculiar freshness which accompanies it was distinguishable even above the reek of burnt powder.

All around us on every side were dense masses of Unglani warriors. So far, none of our men were down, but it was clear that it was only a matter of time before the enemy got amongst us. Their first rush had been met with a point-blank volley, causing such fearful havoc that they had drawn off in momentary dismay; but they were brave to the verge of fanaticism, and each successive charge left a line of dead and dying so many yards nearer our doomed laager.

It was impossible to estimate their numbers in the uncertain light, but our own boys only totalled thirty all told, and though we had repeating rifles and a plentiful stock of ammunition, to say nothing of the advantage of fighting behind cover, sheer numbers were bound to tell in the long run.

Presently the sky to the eastward began to assume a pale grey hue, and we could better judge the terrific losses inflicted by our rifles.

Huddled heaps of motionless forms showed

where the fire had been hottest and the serried ranks densest.

Most of them lay where they had fallen, but a few, mortally wounded though they were, game to the last, had struggled painfully onwards towards the wagons in the hopes of squaring accounts.

Their courage was magnificent beyond all question. One man—an officer I took him to be by the rich leopard skin across his broad shoulders—shot through the lungs, and had actually made his way to the wheels of a wagon, and there had dropped in the very act of hurling his spear.

Another, a heavy throwing-knife between his teeth, his leg shattered by a bullet from an elephant gun, was worming his way towards us, dragging himself on by clutching the tufts of grass. Even as I looked, a bullet more merciful than the last pierced his brain, and he fell forward motionless.

Jim, who had his back to the stake, his face blanched with horror, was exerting every ounce of strength in him to hold back with his two hands that terrible head.

Our men's rifles were heating badly from the quick firing, and the enemy, taking advantage of the momentary slackening, stole up so close at more than one point that their throwing-spears began to flash amongst us.

Within five minutes three of the boys were hit, two badly, and before another five had passed poor old Bob, prince of trackers, was gasping out his life by the remnants of the camp-fire.

I collected some blankets and did what I could to ease him, but there was no hope. He was dying, and he knew it. Twice he drank feverishly of the water I held to his lips in a pannikin; then suddenly drawing himself up, he made a feeble effort to salute, and fell back.

By this time there was hardly one of us left without damage of some sort, and, as though by mutual consent, there came a lull.

The Unglani had drawn off for their final rush.

Jim, blacked and begrimed, but cool and alert as ever, his rifle over the crook of his arm, stood up in the centre of the tiny enclosure, and bared his head.

"Men," said he in the soft, guttural Zulu tongue, "as men ye have fought. It is a good fight, and brave things have ye done. Yet now it is the end, and the end also is good, for surely it is better to die quickly—a man's death—than to linger, toothless and cowering, seeking the sunny side of the kraals, waiting day by day and year by year for the touch of the long fingers which must come to all sooner or later. Had ye lived to return, there would have been wealth and wives, oxen, and the soft skins to lie upon. Yet it is fated otherwise, and now pass on to the land of shadows, whither we two white men will lead the way; and lest ye need slaves, take with you such of these dogs of the Unglani as ye may! I have spoken."

It was hardly an orthodox speech, I suppose, nor such a one as the vicar of my native Hampshire village would have approved of; but in strange lands men are apt to do strange things, and adopt strange manners and methods of speech.

It was hardly Christian, I should say—especially that bit about the slaves; but it was well meant, which in my poor opinion

is half the battle, and it certainly had a satisfactory effect.

"Now let's show the beggars we're not afraid!" said Jim to me.

And, with our rifles gripped ready, we stood up side by side, and began to sing "God Save the King!"

It was woefully out of tune, I fear. I never had more voice than a frog, and both of us were hoarse from shouting orders. Still, we sang it, and the boys caught up the tune; for we had had many a sing-song over the camp-fire, and they had got to know the lilt of it.

The Unglani held off till we struck up the last verse, and then they came at us with an irresistible rush.

The rifles spat and heated till they blistered our hands, and finally we got on to the wagons, firing as long as we could, and then using the butts.

I saw old Mgazi brandishing his spear, which was now dripping redly for half its length; caught a glimpse of Jim standing astride one of our boys, lashing out in a half-despairing effort, and then a knot of half a dozen Unglani launched themselves straight at me.

I emptied my revolver into the crowd of them; hurled the useless weapon straight into the nearest fierce, set face, and prepared for the crash.

Something took me in the shoulder; there was a thud and a moment's sickening pain. I was whirled off my feet with the rush, and then came a blank. I remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE HANDS OF THE UNGLANI—A FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

WHEN I recovered my senses it was broad daylight, and the first thing that I became conscious of was an excruciating pain in my left shoulder, and a feeling of general soreness all over, rather as if I had been passed through a mangle and hadn't come out quite right.

This feeling was by no means mitigated by a sort of jolting process which I was undergoing, and for which in a dazed kind of way I was utterly at a loss to find a reason.

My brain was dizzy, and my head felt as if it would split in the effort of thinking. Gradually, however, it dawned on me that I was being carried along at a good round pace in a species of litter, and that the pain in my shoulder was due to the blood from a cut congealing and sticking the skin to the shirt.

I set my teeth against the pain, and with a sharp wrench tore it away. It bled a little more, but in the end I felt easier, and raising my head cautiously I peered round.

I was in a shell-like litter made of raw-hide, in the midst of a band of Unglani, who were covering the ground at a brisk trot.

I could see the rippling muscles on the broad backs of my carriers, and the fierce, bronze faces of those around me, half hidden under their nodding war-plumes.

A fine race of men they were. Hardly one of them under six foot, and in the pink of training; finely disciplined, too, as I had reason to know from the way in which the attack on the laager had been executed.

I noticed two other litters being borne along close to mine, and from the hand hanging over the edge of the nearest I could see that Jim was the occupant, though whether alive or dead I had no means of telling.

Hour after hour slipped by, and still that steady, swinging trot was kept up. Now and again fresh bearers would take up my litter during a brief halt, and then on once more towards the mountain range, now drawing closer and closer.

Before the sun had sunk appreciably we were already amongst the foothills and ascending rapidly.

I was recovering my strength and my wits, and was able by this time to sit up and look about me.

About five miles away, on a smooth, wide plateau, I could see an enormous kraal, line upon line of orderly wattle huts, cattle moving over the fertile plain, and in the centre of all an enormous enclosure, containing a series of some half-dozen huts much larger than the others, evidently the kraal of some chief of importance.

It was a veritable town, and prosperous-looking at that; far different to the squalid, filthy villages which we had passed through in the forest belt.

All our followers apparently had been killed, for though I looked about me in all directions, not a trace of them could I see.

When we reached the town itself it was almost dark. Runners announcing the return of the war-party had evidently been sent on ahead, for the litter-bearers wheeled out from the main body, and bore us to an isolated hut not far from the Royal enclosure, which seemed to have been prepared for our arrival.

Into this we were conducted, and having been given some skins and a large bowl of curdled milk, the bearers withdrew, and guards were mounted at the entrance.

When I say we, I mean Jim, myself, and Mgazi, who proved to have been the occupant of the third litter.

We were all so done up that after a few mutual congratulations we rolled over on to

the skins, and dropped off to sleep. Personally, I slept like a top, and can remember nothing more till I woke in broad daylight, to find Jim standing over me and stirring me up by the application of his foot to my ribs.

"Wake up, young 'un," he said, "and pull yourself together. There's no end of a palaver going on outside, to judge from the row, and I expect we shall be in request soon."

I struggled up and shook myself. I was stiff and sore, but the long rest had done me a power of good, and the cut on my shoulder, which was only a clean flesh-wound, had pretty well closed up.

Mgazi was still lying on his heap of skins, breathing heavily. He had a deep chest-wound and an ugly cut on the thigh. It didn't need a second glance to show that the poor chap was in a bad way.

We were not kept long in suspense, for a few minutes later there was a great trampling of feet and rattling of shields, as company after company of men thundered past our hut to the Royal enclosure.

Then we heard a great noise of shouting, and the Royal salute, "Bayate! Bayate!" rang out three times in a hoarse roar. Later there came the clink of steel, the low doorway of the hut was darkened, and a guard of six stalwart Unglani filed in.

They took up their positions one on either side of each of us; and we were marched out into the sunlight.

It was a strange scene which opened out before us. At the upper end of the great enclosure a group of men were seated in a semi-circle, evidently the chiefs and leaders of the tribe; whilst all the rest of the space was filled with serried ranks of warriors leaning on their shields, staring eagerly down the narrow lane which had been left open for our approach.

In the centre of the semi-circle was an old man of gigantic stature, with a flowing beard of almost white hair. He was covered in a fine skin robe, and held a short stabbing-spear in his hand.

At his feet were piled three great heaps of tusks, the spoils of our expedition, and over all lay the glaring sunlight.

We were marched up and brought to a halt ten paces from him, and then ensued a long silence, he, with true native diplomacy, feigning ignorance of our presence, and we, in turn, preserving as unconcerned an appearance as we could.

Presently the fierce-looking old man, whose name I gathered was Matulu, raised his spear. Instantly every soldier in the enclosure sprang to attention.

Then dropping the point slowly, he levelled it at Mgazi's chest. I saw the Matabele draw himself up and answer the gesture with a glance quite as haughty as Matulu's own.

A soldier stepped from the ranks, apparently in answer to some preconcerted signal, and advanced towards the doomed man with spear upraised.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Drawing on Heaven knows what source of latent vitality, Mgazi, whom both Jim and I had thought to be in a dying state, wrenched himself free from his guards, snatched the spear from one of them, and brandishing it aloft, began slowly swaying on his feet, chanting the while the rhythmical death-song of his tribe.

The executioner was a man of enormous size, a warrior in the very prime of life, and seeing the Matabele staggering towards him with a half-contemptuous smile, he thrust out his spear; but he little reckoned on what he had to deal with.

Mgazi answered the thrust with a lightning parry, and then began one of the most brilliant displays of skill that it has ever been my lot to witness. Faint from loss of blood, staggering on his feet, partially disabled by the wound in his thigh, Mgazi simply played with the Unglani. Never a thrust could the latter get in through that impenetrable guard, whilst his own skin was scratched and bleeding in a dozen places where Mgazi had touched him, disdaining to thrust more deeply. Even the king himself and the circle of chiefs so far forgot their reserve as to move from their seats and watch.

Suddenly Mgazi gave a great cry, like the cry of some wounded king of the forest, drew himself up to his full height, and drove his spear straight through the other's chest. The man fell like a poleaxed horse. Mgazi threw up his hands, wheeled sharply, and with another cry fell prone across his adversary's body, both men must have been dead ere they touched the ground.

A murmur of admiration rippled through the ranks. The death of their comrade was nothing—he had died fighting, as they all hoped to do when their turn came—but the wonderful endurance of the Matabele had called forth their admiration.

"Wau, but that was a man!" muttered my guard to his fellow.

And the other grunted assent.

Matulu resumed his seat, and waved for us to be brought nearer, and sat glowering at us for a space.

"White men," said he, "ye are strangers and prisoners in a strange land. Your followers are scattered and killed; your hoards of ivory lie here at my feet; the blood of our young men cries for atonement. Ye have lifted your hands against the Unglani, and by their laws ye must abide. I have spoken. Within the hour you shall be taken hence to the place of death. It is enough!"

There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done, save to meet the inevitable as well

as we could. And in silence, but with heads erect, we were marched back down the narrow lane between the soldiers.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PLACE OF DEATH.

"IT'S all up, old man," said Jim. "I'm hanged if I could have said another word to that old scoundrel for the life of me. I wonder what it will be like? Ugh! I hope it will be over quickly, anyhow!"

We were being hurried across the borders of the tableland towards a big, gloomy-looking cleft in the mountain side—a horrible sinister ravine, with great boulders piled up high on all sides. As we passed out of the sunlight into its dense shadows I could hardly repress a shudder. The change was so abrupt, so sudden, it seemed symbolical of that greater change which was so soon to follow. It was aptly named, indeed, the "place of death."

Our guards closed in on us, and I noticed that as we penetrated farther and farther into the deep shadows they themselves began to glance around them apprehensively, as though the fear of some unknown evil was breaking down their usual stoicism.

The narrow rocky walls narrowed overhead until only a mere streak of sky was visible. Strange, horrible lizards and uncouth creatures darted from cranny to cranny.

The silence was overwhelming, the bare feet of the Unglani and our own veldt schoons making no sound on the hard rocks.

Presently the leader, a fine-looking man with a leopard skin, signifying high rank, slung over one shoulder, caused a sudden halt by raising his spear.

We had by this time arrived at a kind of cupshaped arena, the beetling cliffs almost meeting overhead but sloping away from one another towards the base, leaving a large, clear floor space, roughly circular in form, at one end of which was the passage by which we had entered, at the other a deep, narrow tunnel, the black mouth of which filled me with loathing.

The leader beckoned for us to be brought forwards towards the centre, right opposite to the entrance of the black tunnel mouth.

I now noticed for the first time, my eyes having got more accustomed to the gloom, that two stout stakes, about ten feet apart, had been firmly driven into the ground. At the foot of each of these were attached two strong iron anklets of great strength, and higher up again chains fixed to a staple with rings for the wrists. The Unglani are cunning ironworkers, considering their primitive appliances.

In less time than it takes to write, Jim and I were held in position and the iron rings clamped round us. The fastenings were cunningly devised, and would have defied a European locksmith short of filing them open.

Secured in this manner, whilst our ankles were braced tightly to the stakes, we were yet able to move the upper parts of our bodies and our arms, within the limits of the chains.

At another signal from the leader, and rather to my surprise, two soldiers came running forward with roughly made baskets containing food and pitchers of water. These were set within easy reach of us.

The men then fell back and formed up in a row, the chief alone remaining in his place.

He raised his spear in a mock salute, and addressed us in the tongue of the Unglani, which is sufficiently akin to Zulu for us to easily understand.

"Behold, O white men! The sun is yet high in the heavens, yet yonder"—and he pointed to the tunnel mouth—"yonder lies the spirit of death, which creeps abroad in the darkness. Slowly, surely, shall he come, and none can resist him. Ye may struggle and cry out and call upon your gods, yet his stroke is very sure and his embrace is the embrace of death.

"Nevertheless, this much am I bidden to tell you by Matulu, Elephant of Elephants, Eagle of War, whose breath is as the destroying fires of the heavens. Bold words have ye given him, and brave men have ye shown yourselves in battle. Therefore this much is granted: Three times shall the sun sink and rise, and at this hour on the third day we who await without shall come again.

"If it so happen that ye still live, and your spirits have not passed into the bodies of those who creep along the earth* then the order runs that ye shall be released and taken back with honour; your ivory and your guns restored, and ye shall be escorted whithersoever ye will. If otherwise, then what need of further words, for ye shall be even as these who have passed the road before."

And he kicked with his foot a bleached bone lying amongst the sand.

"It is the order of Matulu. I have spoken."

"So be it," retorted Jim, raising his voice.

Then we were alone.

Very cautiously I set to work, and at length, with a good deal of severe pain and

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*Zulu tribes believe that spirits of the dead pass into the bodies of snakes.

the loss of a lot of skin, I worked one hand free. The next was easier. And the foot-irons being less carefully made, and allowing more play, were a matter of minutes only.

"Jim," I called softly, "I am free. Hang on a bit, old chap, till I can lay hands on a lump of rock or something, and I'll get your irons off, too."

As I was groping about over the sandy surface my eye caught sight of something glinting faintly a step or two away. I sprang towards it, and seized it with a cry of delight. It was the blade of a broad stabbing spear, broken off two-thirds of the way down the haft.

I rushed over to Jim and began working away at his ankle-rings with the stout blade, he aiding me all he could. The moon was just topping the rocks above me as I managed to snap the fastening of the first, and I attacked the other with a better chance of success as the light was now fairly good.

We were both bending down, so engrossed in our task that we hardly noticed a faint, dry, rustling sound coming from the tunnel.

Suddenly an awful shout from Jim made me turn.

"Merciful Heaven!" he cried. "Look—look!"

I glanced over my shoulder in the direction in which he was pointing, with distended eyes.

Crawling slowly from the tunnel, unwreathing coil upon coil, was an enormous snake—a python—the largest of its kind I have ever seen or heard of.

I felt Jim shudder and give a faint moan of horror, and with a last, despairing effort I wrenched away the remaining leg-iron. His hands, however, were still fastened.

"Run, lad—run for your life, and leave me!" he gasped.

I drew myself up, and held the spear-head ready to slash.

The great python caught sight of us, wavered for an instant, its head raised some three feet from the ground, swaying from side to side with a slow, rhythmical motion which had a curiously paralysing effect, and then it shot forward like a flash.

The blow, backed as it was by the terrific muscular force and the weight of the massive body, knocked me breathless and dazed a clear eight feet away, and by the time I could pick myself up two deadly coils had already enveloped Jim, who with his back to the stake, his face blanched with horror, was exerting every ounce of strength in him to hold back with his two hands that terrible head.

He had gripped it by the neck and by a gigantic effort was just maintaining it outstretched at arm's length.

The brute's tail was lashing round wildly in search of a purchase which would enable it to close down the coils and crush its victim's life out.

Even as I watched it reached the other stake, and like lightning wrapped itself round the base. The memory of some tale of travel I had read flashed into my mind. I threw myself forward and hacked savagely.

I heard a sobbing groan from Jim as the pressure began to force his ribs inward, and at the third blow the lower end of the great body parted.

That was the most terrible moment of all, for convulsed with pain, it literally constricted, and every moment I expected to hear Jim's chest give. I yelled to him to encourage him. Poor chap, it was easy to see that it would be all over in a second, and that he was on the verge of strangulation.

Without pausing to think of the risk of hitting his hands, and putting all the force I could into the blow, I made a sweeping cut at the head. It dropped, the python's coils relaxed, and poor Jim fell to his knees, his body bowed forward, suspended only by the chains on his wrists. For the first few moments I thought he was dead, but he had only fainted from the extreme tension and the pain.

After repeated drenchings with water from the pool he opened his eyes and moaned, and in a little while he was able to stand up with the support of the post, though his arms were strained and useless, and his body one vast, terrible bruise.

It was nearly dawn before I worked him free of his wrist-irons, and then both of us, thoroughly exhausted, fell as we were and slept.

Later that day we ate some of the food and drank the water; then we skinned our terrible enemy. As near as we could judge he measured thirty-four feet, including the portion of the tail which I had slashed away.

All through the next day and the next we waited, recovering from our trials, eating and sleeping—the body of the python we had buried in the tunnel—and on the third day they came again, cautiously and in doubt.

Jim and I met them, carrying the skin between us.

. . . . . .

Oh, yes! After that Matulu kept his word. I think they regarded us as more than human—we said nothing about the spear-head. They gave us our guns, our ivory, and an escort to the borders of their hunting-ground. Three months later we were back to Beira, on the coast, with a large sum of money to our credit. But I wouldn't go through it all again for twice the amount.

THE END.

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