THE RETURN OF MR. BEVERLEY STOKES!

THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 2D

"Stop him! It's Sinclair—he's gone mad!"
The car sped towards the main gates like a live thing, swerving giddily into the lane.

LOYALTY WINS!

An exceptionally fine story of the Boys of St. Frank's, giving a full account of the vindication of Mr. Beverley Stokes, the Master of the West House.

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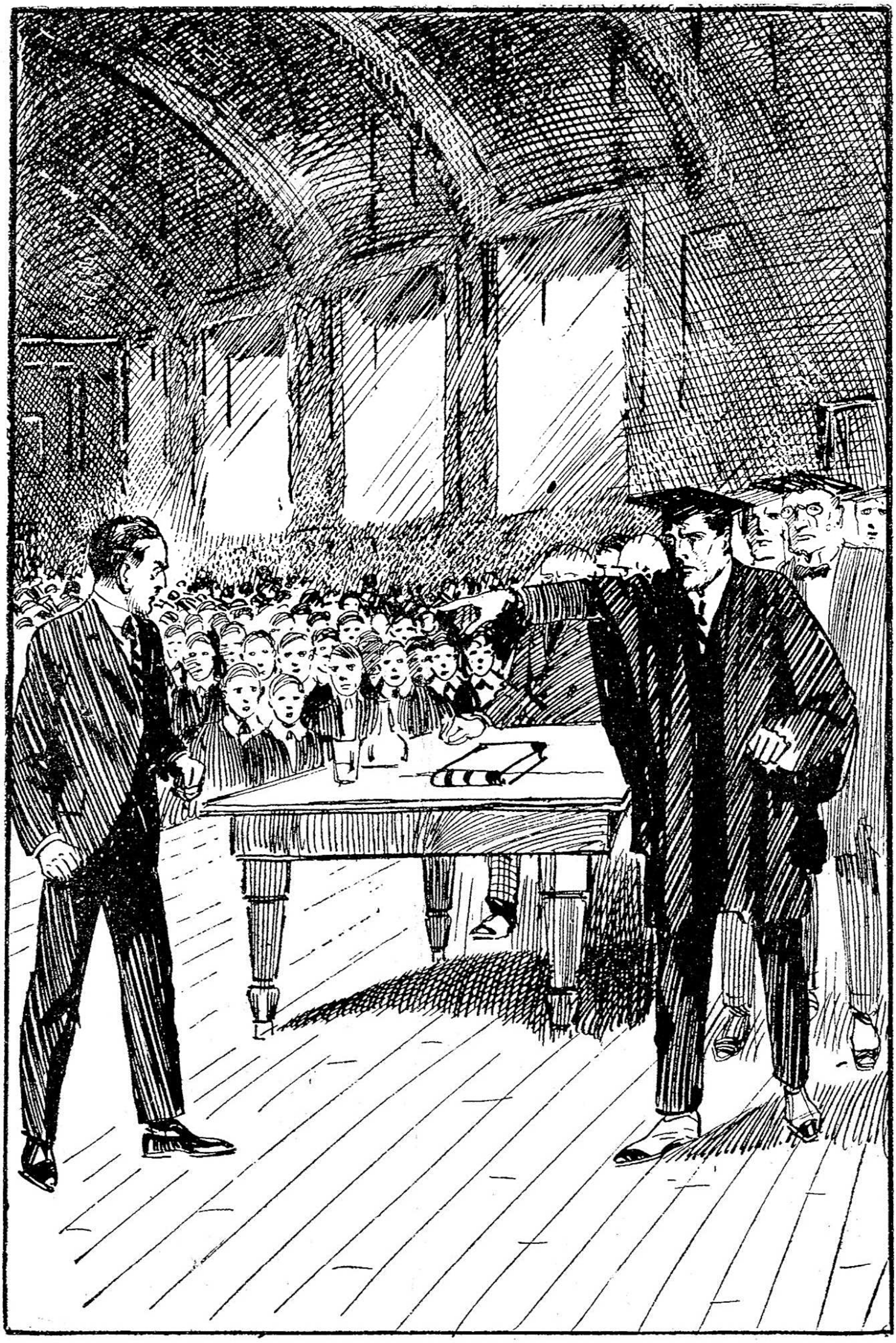


Mr. Stokes leapt forward.
"You infernal young hound!" he shouted. "I have put up with your jeers and taunts long enough! Be silent, or——"

LOYALTY WINS!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The great rebellion at St. Frank's has come to an end, and the man who had restored order was Mr. Beverley Stokes, master of the West House, who a short while ago was compelled to resign his post. His lips had been sealed by a promise to shield another, or the misfortune that befell the West House would never have occurred. In this week's story, it will be related how Mr. Stokes vindicates himself in the course of a full enquiry in Big Hall before the whole school, and how Guy Sinclair is at last called to book and punished for all the wrongs he had inflicted upon his schoolfellows and his Housemaster. Towards the end of the story, Mr. Brooks introduces an interesting new character in the person of Mr. Noggs. I think I may tell you that we are likely to hear a great deal about Mr. Noggs next week, when another fine series will be starting.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST adjusted his pince-nez, and his eyes opened wide with amazement.

"Begad!" he said blankly.

"Anything wrong, Montie, old son?" asked Dick Hamilton, with a yawn.

"Begad!" repeated Sir Montie.

He was standing at the window of the little dormitory, but he wasn't looking out into the West Square. Instead, he was staring at something in his hand. He continued to give it his full attention.

Tommy Watson, the third occupant of the dormitory, sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes. The rising-bell had clanged out a few minutes earlier, and St. Frank's was awakening for the day.

It was going to be rather a special day, too, according to all the rumours. For Sir John Brent, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, had set this day aside for a full and rigid inquiry into the recent rebellion.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"What's the matter with the ass?" asked Watson, glaring.

"No good asking me," grinned Dick Hamilton—better known as Nipper. "All he can do is to stand there and say 'Begad!' I've heard quite common parrots who can do a lot better than that. Montie, old man, won't you let us into the secret?"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West dazedly.

"You—you babbling idiot!" roared Watson, leaping out of bed. "You'll drive us dotty with that fatheaded repetition! What have you got there? Let's have a look."

"Really, Tommy boy!" protested Sir Montie, as Watson pushed him sideways for a full yard. "There is no necessity to become violent! I am startled. In fact, I'm dumbfounded—I am, really!"

"You look it, too!" snorted Watson.

"Well, give the chap a chance," chuckled Nipper. "He's learnt to say something more

than 'Begad!' He's getting on nicely. A few more lessons, and he'll be able to ask for a piece of sugar!"

Sir Montie frowned.

"Really, Nipper, old boy, this is hardly the time for feeble jokes!" he said frigidly.

"I consider myself duly sat upon," said Nipper, with a humble sigh.

"You are only makin' matters worse by that ridiculous pretence!" snorted Sir Montie. "There is somethin' here that will absolutely stagger you. It is no laughin' matter, either. Be good enough to prepare yourselves for a most frightful shock. It takes a lot to destroy my calmness, dear old boy, but I'm all in a fever."

"The poor chap's sickening for 'flu, or something," said Watson, with a snort. "If you're in a fever, Montie, you'd better report for the sanny! What's that thing in your hand, anyhow? Why can't you let me have a look? It's only a photograph."

"Exactly, old boy—a photograph."

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it?"

"You found it?"

"On the floor, havin' evidently been pushed under the door," said Sir Montie. "I noticed it as soon as ever I jumped out of bed. Begad! It's a frightfully disturbin' affair, you know."

"Only some ass kidding us, I suppose," said Nipper, as he joined the others. "Let's have a look at it. Why, what's this?" he added, as he craned over Montie's shoulder. "Looks like a flashlight touch. I thought it was going to be a fair damsel of some sort."

"Pray, don't rot, Nipper boy!" frowned Sir Montie.

"I can't quite see—— Why, what the——" Nipper broke off, and peered closer. "It seems to be the interior of a cabaret, or night-club, or something. And there's somebody——"

"Old Stokes!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Yes, it looks like old Stokes, right enough," said Nipper, becoming grave. "I say, this seems fishy! Look here! Stokes is all ruffled, and he seems to be having a fight with somebody. What a ghastly position to be in! Who on earth could have pushed this under the door?"

"It's an absolute mystery," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head.

"There's not much mystery about the motive," said Nipper grimly. "It's been done on purpose to get old Stokes into bad odour. There's that inquiry to-day, don't forget—and his fate rests upon it, more or less. He's been on duty since the rebellion, but everybody knows that the inquiry will settle the issue."

Tommy Watson whistled.

"There's no question about the bad odour!" he said, with a significant stare. "This snapshot is awful! A St. Frank's Housemaster snapped in a place like this—and half-drunk!"

"Don't jump to conclusions," said Nipper grimly. "That's what most people do—and I'm always trying to train you chaps to keep an open mind. There's no proof that Stokes was half-drunk when this snap was taken."

"But look——"

"Looking won't make any difference," growled Nipper. "When will you learn to judge by facts, and not by appearances? I'll guarantee that ninety-nine people out of a hundred would look at that photograph and jump to the conclusion that Stokes was drunk at the time. But where's the evidence? A photograph isn't anything like so conclusive as most people think."

"But you can't get away from the camera!"

"No, but the camera can snap somebody in a certain pose that looks guilty, but which is really perfectly innocent," replied Nipper. "Photographs can be faked, too. I don't think this one is," he added, looking at it closely. "He was actually in the place at the time. And this other fellow seems to have thrown a glass of wine into his face. I wonder where it is?"

"The Smugglers' Lair, dear old boy," said Sir Montie.

"Rats!" said Nipper. "That's ridiculous!"

"What's the Smugglers' Lair, anyhow?" asked Watson.

"Why, it's the worst night-club in London," said Dick. "It's got an awful reputation—and no decent man would be seen there. It's a place where a lot of these drug fiends congregate. What on earth gave you such an idea, Montie?"

"Look on the back," said Sir Montie quietly.

Nipper turned the photograph over, and stared. Some words were printed there—not with pen and ink—but by means of an amateur printing set—obviously to avoid any chance of the author being traced. The words were these:

"BEVERLEY STOKES, THE HUMBUG!

"This is how he spends his New Year's Eve! Observe his drunken condition! This snap was taken in the small hours, in the Smugglers' Lair—London's rottenest night-club!

"N.B.—This snap can be verified at the club, where it will also be learned that Stokes was kicked out.

"YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM FACTS!"

Nipper was looking very grave after he had read those words, and he examined the snapshot with even greater attention.

"Yes, by Jove, this has been pushed under the door, on purpose to discredit old Stokes," he said grimly. "I'll bet there are heaps of others distributed, too. What a filthy hound the chap must be!"

"Who, Stokes?" gasped Watson.

"No, you ass—the cad who put this under the door!" said Nipper. "I don't

take any notice of it—but I'm afraid lots of other fellows will. I don't believe anonymous scandal, on principle. It's a jolly good indication that it's false. The scurrilous rotter daren't come out with it straight from the shoulder."

"But—but this snap, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "It's frightfully clear, you know—it couldn't have been faked. And they wouldn't dare say it was taken in the Smugglers' Lair if it wasn't. Anybody could bowl the whole thing out by sendin' it to that night-club."

"Yes, it seems to be genuine," agreed Nipper. "But do you honestly think that Stokes is a man of this kind? My only hat! Look at him! One of the cleanest sportsmen you ever met—with one of the nicest wives imaginable! I simply don't believe this filth!"

His chums were impressed by his indignation.

"You're right!" growled Watson. "We know old Stokes better than that, don't we? He's not our Housemaster—but he's clean to the core! Look at the way he handled the school the other day, in the middle of those riots! Why, he took complete command while all the masters were away, and had the school under control within half an hour! It was a marvellous piece of work."

Tommy Watson was referring to the recent rebellion, when the whole school had revolted, and when seventy-five per cent. of the fellows had completely lost control of themselves. They had become a mere mob, bent upon destruction and revolution.

Mr. Beverley Stokes—then virtually dismissed for allowing the West House to hold a barring-out—had brought the school to its senses single-handed. St. Frank's was likely to remember that evening for years to come.

Even now, Mr. Stokes was under a cloud. He had been reinstated temporarily, in consideration of his service to the school. But an inquiry was to be held into the West House revolt. The juniors blamed Guy Sinclair, of the Sixth, for all the irregularities, and had refused to surrender unless Sinclair was deposed from the Head Prefectship.

But Mr. Stokes had persuaded the boys to trust in him. He had assured them that all would be well if they returned to the normal. And the coming inquiry was the net result. Sinclair, for the time being, was not deposed, but temporarily suspended from duty.

St. Frank's was now completely peaceful. But this morning, in particular, a feeling of subdued excitement was evident. An enormous amount of interest was displayed in the inquiry—not only by the West House, but by the entire school.

It was felt that there would be some sensational disclosures, and all the fellows were agog to follow the developments.

"As for this photograph, I'm not taking any notice of it," said Nipper firmly. "At a random guess, I should say that Sinclair knows more about it than he'd like to admit."

"Begad!"

"But that's merely conjecture—so don't take any notice of it," growled Nipper. "Take my advice, my sons, and forget the photograph and these rotten lines on the back of it."

CHAPTER II.

THE SCANDAL RAG.

"HEARD the latest?" asked Teddy Long eagerly.

"Go away, you little tittle-tattle!" snorted Handforth, with a glare. "We don't want to hear any of your rotten scandal——"

"It isn't scandal!" roared Teddy. "It's about the Head!"

"The Head?" repeated Church. "We haven't got one. Sir John Brent's here, but he's one of the governors——"

"Why take any notice of the young bounder?" said Edward Oswald Handforth. "If he doesn't clear off, I'll lend him one of my specials!"

"I don't think he's in a borrowing mood this morning!" grinned McClure.

"You—you fatheads!" said Teddy. "I'm talking about Dr. Stafford—the Head! He's back, you know."

"Rot!"

"Don't you believe me?" hooted Teddy Long.

"No, we don't!"

"There's a notice on the board——"

"Yes, he's right for once," said Fullwood, strolling up. "It's quite true—the Head's back. Jolly good thing, too! We shall feel more settled now."

Dr. Malcolm Stafford had been seized with a kind of minor stroke some little time earlier, when the West House had commenced its recent revolt. At first the doctors had thought that complications were possible, and the Head had gone away for a rest. But the notice on the board this morning indicated that he was fit for duty again.

He had made a rapid recovery, and had returned a week earlier, so that he could personally conduct the inquiry into the cause of the revolt. After all, it was far better for the Head to be present, for he had been in full control at the time of the barring-out.

The notice was quite brief, and stated that the proceedings would commence at two p.m., and that they would be private. There was a further intimation that any boy might be called upon to give evidence, irrespective of what House he belonged to.

"I expect they'll take days over it," said Reggie Pitt, as he discussed the news with

Fullwood and Clive Russell. "You know what these inquiries are. But we West House chaps won't have Sinclair back at any price. That's absolutely settled."

"By the West House?" grinned Clive.

"Yes."

"But Sinclair is still your head prefect," put in Fullwood.

"That's only a fiction," said Reggie Pitt. "He may be our head prefect—but he's suspended from duty, and Morrow is carrying on. To all intents and purposes, we're just the same as we were last term. We wouldn't let things drift back into the same rut for worlds!"

Fullwood nodded.

"The very fact that Stokes is on duty looks pretty healthy," he said. "And it's pretty certain that Sinclair won't last long, either. You West House chaps have won your battle hands down."

"You wait until this inquiry gets going!" put in Jack Grey, who had joined the group. "You can bet we'll give evidence! And when all the facts come out about Sinclair he'll be sacked! He won't have a leg to stand on. If the Governors had only held this inquiry earlier, there wouldn't have been any trouble at all."

The Hon. Douglas Singleton came running up, flushed and excited.

"I say, have you seen this?" he asked breathlessly.

"Seen what?"

"This photograph!" said the Hon. Douglas. "One of our chaps found it shoved under his door! There are lots of others about, too—some in every House, I understand. They've been distributed everywhere!"

"Great Scott! Old Stokes!" breathed Pitt.

"I say, this is tough!" ejaculated Russell, as he looked at the snapshot. "It's Stokes, I guess. But what is he doing in this joint? Some rotter has deliberately put these snaps into circulation to discredit him."

"I don't believe a word of it!" said Pitt indignantly. "The whole thing's a put-up job."

"A frame-up," nodded Clive.

"Stokes can rise above this sort of scandal!" growled Pitt. "My hat! Look at the way he twisted all the chaps round his little finger the other day! He's not the kind of man to visit these dens!"

Unfortunately, there were plenty of fellows who were ready to believe the worst. They were not all so fair-minded as Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt. By breakfast-time the mysterious photographs were the main topic of conversation. They had been found, apparently, in every House—quite a number in all sorts of odd corners. But nobody could trace their source. Certain fellows were suspected—notably Guy Sinclair—but there was no trace of evidence against them.

And immediately after breakfast there was another sensation. Somebody had found a copy of a smart-looking Society journal, called "In the Limelight." It mostly dealt with the movements and pastimes of famous sociey people and stage celebrities. It was an expensive production, and this issue was the current one—published only that very morning.

Not many of the St. Frank's fellows had seen this journal before, and they mistook it for a respectable weekly magazine of high quality.

But, as a matter of fact, it was a "scandal rag" of the most vicious description. It was notorious for its scurrilous attacks upon famous people—the majority of them being so veiled that the publishers were safe from any law suit. And yet, in almost every case, the identity of the victim was obvious.

Now and again, "In the Limelight" had made a blunder and had paid heavy damages. But they could afford these occasional failures, for they evidently obtained a large revenue from interested people.

It happened that a certain page was turned back in this particular copy. Somebody had found it in the Ancient House lobby. Several fellows had been there three minutes earlier, and had seen nothing of it. Then Archie Glenthorne had picked it up.

"There's something rummy about this," Fullwood was saying, when Nipper & Co. came up. "Just look at this paragraph here, and tell me what you make of it. It's got these blue pencilled crosses against it."

He indicated a short paragraph in one of the columns, and the other juniors read the words:

> "We are still wondering what became of a certain prominent schoolmaster who revelled not wisely but too well on New Year's Eve. It will be remembered that this learned gentleman was involved in a brawl in a well-known West End night club, and was afterwards thrown out. We trust he has discovered another lair, and that he has succeeded in laying low. We have an idea that he is quite comfortable at a spot not many miles from the Sussex coast. How do these scholastic gentlemen get away with it?"

"Rummy!" echoed Nipper. "I should think it is rummy! The confounded scandalmongers! This is a rotten attack on old Stokes!"

"But we can't be sure," began Tommy Watson.

"We couldn't be sure without that photograph—but the two in conjunction are too significant to be ignored," said Nipper grimly. "A schoolmaster revelling on New Year's Eve! The same night, you see. And then there's that reference to a lair—rather weak subtlety, but it's clear enough. Then that bit about the Sussex coast. We're only three miles away, remember."

"Begad, how absolutely shockin'!" said Sir Montie, scandalised

"It's too rotten for words!" snorted Nipper. "By Jove, I'd like to trail down the author of these tricks! This paper was left about on purpose. It was only published this morning, you see."

"I'll bet we should have had those photographs distributed days ago if it hadn't been for this paragraph," said Fullwood shrewdly. "The beggar has been waiting for it to appear in print, so that the two could be read at the same time. The fellows might not believe the snapshot alone—but when they see it printed in this classy-looking journal, it'll have fifty times the weight."

"But can't old Stokes prosecute them for libel?" asked Watson indignantly.

"How can he?" asked Nipper. "His name isn't mentioned—he couldn't prove a thing. It wouldn't be any good bringing that photograph up—it wasn't published by this rag. No, the fellow who did this is cunning, and the paper is as safe as houses!"

"But it looks awfully bad against Stokes," growled Fullwood.

"You don't believe——"

"No, I don't!" said Fullwood promptly. "But there are plenty of fellows who will!"

The truth of this was painfully obvious before the morning was two hours older. Other copies of "In the Limelight" had been discovered—and every one was turned back at that particular page, with the fateful paragraph marked in blue crosses.

There was obviously somebody in the school who was bent upon wrecking Mr. Beverley Stokes' character in advance of the inquiry. And there were scores of fellows who were prepared to believe the worst.

They admitted that Barry Stokes had done wonders with the school when he had quelled the rebellion—but that made no difference to his moral character. Obviously, he had let himself go on New Year's Eve, and his indiscretions had found him out.

"The man's done for, of course!" was the comment which could be heard on all sides. "He'll never recover from this exposure. He might as well pack his bag and clear out this morning!"

And in the East House the author of the exposure was gloating.

CHAPTER III.

A SURPRISE FOR THE SCHOOL.

SIMON KENMORE, of the Sixth, grinned.

"It's worked like a dream!" he said pleasantly. "Sinclair, old man, I've got to admit you're pretty cute when it comes to low-down tricks!"

Guy Sinclair frowned.

"Is that a compliment, or an insult?" he snapped.

"My dear ass, no need to get huffy," chuckled Kenmore. "If this attack on Stokes isn't a low-down trick, what is it? But I'm with you, heart and soul, old man—so we shan't quarrel. If we can kill that beggar's reputation, I shall be the first to kiss my hand to him when he leaves."

The two seniors were in Kenmore's study in the East House. Since the trouble, Kenmore had gone back to Goole's—his original dwelling. The West House was rather too hot for him just now They were getting particular over there.

And Sinclair, of course, being suspended from duty, was naturally boarding in another House until the inquiry was over. He had requested that he should share Kenmore's quarters.

"This thing's going to smash him up for good," said Sinclair viciously. "I could have circulated these photographs weeks ago—but I didn't choose to. It's a lot better to wait until the day of this inquiry, in any case—and there's the rag, too. That paragraph will clinch the thing."

"It's clinched it already," said Kenmore coolly. "The fellows are talking about Stokes with bated breath. They've swallowed the yarn whole."

Sinclair frowned.

"You speak as though it's only a fake!" he said. "It's not, you ass! I saw Stokes in that rotten night club with my own eyes! He didn't know it, but I was actually in the place."

"But I don't think it would be wise to mention that at the inquiry," said Kenmore drily.

Sinclair grunted, and lit a cigarette. During the last day or two he had told Kenmore everything about his association with Mr. Beverley Stokes—how he had forced the latter to make him head prefect—and how he had ruled the West House without any fear of interference from the Housemaster.

Owing to his knowledge, he had held Barry Stokes in the hollow of his hand, and Stokes had been discredited in consequence. He had been compelled to resign, owing to his weak control over his boys.

But Mr. Stokes' great triumph when the rebellion had reached its height had completely upset Sinclair's programme. So he had thought of this fresh plan—and the Housemaster was now the subject of all school talk. His reputation was being torn to shreds in junior studies, senior studies, and in common-rooms.

"I don't care a fig about this inquiry," said Sinclair. "Stokes will be so discredited that everybody will be against him. The Head won't accept a word from him in face of all these rumours. For you can be jolly sure that the Head will know all about them. I shall simply get up at that inquiry, and tell my own yarn in my own way. And I'll win, too!"

"There's nothing like optimism," said Kenmore.

"Optimism be hanged!" snapped Sinclair. "There's no other way to think. When a man's discredited, his word is nothing else

but mud. I shall be able to whitewash myself beautifully. I've got it all mapped out."

"You cunning beggar!" said Kenmore, staring. "I wonder you've got the nerve to sit there and boast about it! I'll admit I'm pretty tough, but I haven't sunk to your level yet!"

He went out, and Sinclair glared at the closed door.

In the meantime, a little conference was in progress in Study D, in the Ancient House. Handforth was presiding, and the others were Nipper, William Napoleon Browne, and Fenton, of the Sixth—and even Willy Handforth, of the Third.

"We've got to do something about this rotten libel," Handforth was saying. "We all know that it's a dirty fake Don't forget what I told you the other night! You can't get away from that!"

"We haven't forgotten," replied Nipper grimly. "And we happen to know more about Stokes than any of the other fellows——"

"I found it out, mind," interrupted Handforth.

"All right, Ted—nobody's trying to pinch your credit," said Willy impatiently. "We're here to discuss the plan of action, not to go over the whole ground. I vote we offer ourselves as witnesses at the inquiry, and tell everything we know."

"A distinctly good suggestion, Brother William, but not what I would call brilliant," remarked Browne. "For example, why the necessity of five witnesses when one will do? I have sufficient confidence in Brother Edward to be convinced that he will require no assistance."

Edward Oswald beamed.

"Browne's right!" he said promptly. "Why the dickens should you chaps butt in? I was the one who heard Stokes and Sinclair talking that night, and I only told you about it afterwards. Your evidence would only be a repetition of mine."

"But we should corroborate it," pointed out Nipper. "That's an important point. Without us to prove the truth of the thing it might be thought that you were just trotting out a yarn."

"It might be risky to speak at all," said Fenton slowly.

"Risky?"

"Well, you were listening to a private conversation, you know."

"Here, hang it!" snorted Handforth, flushing. "I couldn't help that. I was dodging behind one of those buttresses in the dark, waiting for Stokes to go by. And after Sinclair came up I couldn't possibly get away. I was forced to listen. I'm not a spy, Fenton, you rotter!"

Edgar Fenton grinned,

"No need to get excited," he said grimly. "We all know you, Handforth. And the Head knows you, too. There's no fear of the school setting you down as an eavesdropper. But I was just wondering if it would be good policy. Evidence of that sort might not carry much weight."

"You're wrong there," said Nipper. "It'll carry enormous weight. Here we have the situation. Some anonymous cad has circulated these photographs through the school——"

"Anonymous be blowed!" said Handforth. "It's Sinclair's work!"

"We all know that, but we can't prove it, therefore he remains anonymous," said Nipper. "Mr. Stokes' character is already being trampled on, and by this afternoon, when the inquiry gets into full swing, the Head and Sir John Brent will have had their minds poisoned. In other words, they'll be so prejudiced against Stokes that Sinclair's cunning dodge will probably succeed."

"And then we shall come in?" said Willy.

"Yes, we shall, or Handforth will," agreed Nipper. "He will repeat what he heard that night, how Sinclair threatened to ruin Stokes unless Stokes agreed to take all the blame for the West House mismanagement."

Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"We're the only chaps who know that Sinclair's been blackmailing Stokes ever since the beginning of term," he said tensely. "He forced Stokes to appoint him head prefect, and Stokes could not do a thing because he was held by a promise. He went to that night club to fetch somebody away, a perfectly innocent visit, and gave his word of honour that he wouldn't breathe a sound. So he was compelled to hold his tongue while Sinclair had the run of the whole House. By George! Stokes is such an honourable chap that he suffered that cad's blackmail sooner than break his promise!"

"Yes, that'll tell in his favour tremendously," said Fenton, nodding. "In fact, it'll probably clear him completely. Didn't Sinclair threaten to have something published in that Society rag, too?"

"Of course he did," replied Handforth. "Why, the ghastly thing is edited by one of Sinclair's cousins. That's significant in itself. I shan't hesitate to tell everything I heard."

"The worst of it is, we shall be at lessons," growled Nipper. "Perhaps we'd better give our names in as witnesses directly after lunch——"

The door opened with a crash, and Church and McClure burst in. Handforth gave them one of his fiercest glares.

"Clear out!" he roared. "Of all the nerve——"

"Haven't you seen the notice?" gasped Church.

"What notice?"

"The new one on the board!"

"We are quivering with curiosity, Brother Church," said Browne. "Let us hear this item of paramount import. Our ears are positively twitching."

"Why, it's about the inquiry," said Church excitedly. "The Head's going to hold the inquiry in public."

"In public?" shouted the occupants of Study D.

"Yes," put in McClure. "The Head says there are so many rumours flying about that he's not going to have any more of 'em. That's this scandal about Stokes, of course. He says there might be another crop if the inquiry is private, so he means to have the whole school in the affair."

"By George!" breathed Handforth. "Then—then I can give my evidence——"

"I can't believe it!" growled Fenton. "Let's go and have a look at that notice. A public inquiry? Why, there's never been such a thing at St. Frank's."

But he and the others were soon convinced. The notice was surrounded by a yelling crowd, and there could be no doubt of its tremendous import. The whole school was ordered to muster in Big Hall at two o'clock sharp. The inquiry would then be held in public.

"This, brother, distinctly proves that the Head is far more brainy than we ever gave him credit for," said Browne. "Indeed, I can safely say that the scheme verges upon genius. The whole truth will be revealed, and I have no hesitation in venturing that Brother Sinclair is already swishing about in the oxtail!"

He dodged along, parallel with the junior wing of the School House, and ran faster than he had run since his junior days. He simply bolted. And behind him streamed the yelling crowd of Fourth-Formers.

CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH DOES IT AT LAST.

MORNING school was an absolute farce. Nobody took the slightest notice of lessons, and even the Form-masters gave up all hope of controlling their boys. Everybody was talking about the coming inquiry. Everybody was discussing the possible outcome. The whole school was making the wildest conjectures. It seemed to be generally accepted that Mr. Beverley Stokes was about to meet his Waterloo. Sinclair of the Sixth would never survive the inquiry, either. They would both go under.

There had been so much talk about Mr. Stokes at the night club that the majority of the fellows were fully satisfied that the Housemaster had gone beyond the limit. He was a good sort, and his influence in the school was big, but he couldn't possibly survive the inquiry. Most of the boys were sorry, for Barry Stokes was a favourite. It was a pity that his indiscretions should have found him out.

After all, decided the school, Mr. Stokes' actions on New Year's Eve were his own concern. But the school also feared that Dr. Stafford and Sir John Brent would take a different view. They would come to the conclusion that Mr. Stokes was not the type of man to hold a responsible position.

Of course, Nipper and Handforth and a few others were aware that the inquiry would be rather sensational. Stokes, in their opinion, would admit his presence in the night club, but would be unable to give any explanation. Handforth felt that his own evidence would make all the difference, and he was consequently in the best of humours when lessons were at last over.

He sallied out of the School House with Church and McClure, but refused to give any reason for his high spirits. His chums questioned him in vain.

"Not likely!" he said firmly. "The whole thing's a secret, and I'm not going to breathe a word. You're too jolly inquisitive, my lads. Wait until the inquiry."

"I'll bet it's nothing, anyhow!" growled Church. "You always make a song over nothing. One of your weaknesses, Handy."

But Edward Oswald shook his head.

"It's no good; you can't work that dodge this time," he said, with a sniff. "I'm not going to be drawn into an argument. It's no good pestering my minor, either. He's had orders from me not to speak."

Willy was just coming up, and Church and McClure snorted.

"You can both go and eat coke!" said Church tartly. "Who wants to know your blessed secrets, anyhow?"

They walked off in a huff, and Handforth frowned.

"No need for the asses to get ratty!" he said gruffly. "Just when I was feeling good, too. You can clear off, Willy!" he added, with a wave of his hand. "I don't want any rot with you, my lad. And keep quiet about that secret or I'll tan you!"

"There'll be a fat lot of secret left if you shout like that," said Willy tartly. "As a matter of fact, I came up to do you a favour. But I'd forgotten. You're not interested in Irene now, are you?"

He walked off, whistling, and Handforth started.

"Hi!" he shouted, running after his minor.

"What's up?" asked Willy, pausing. "You'll probably find Mary through Big Arch. She often takes a walk in the Inner Court——"

"Blow Mary!" roared Handforth. "I—I mean, we weren't talking about her at all. What's that you were saying about Irene?"

"But I thought you'd finished with her?" asked Willy in surprise. "According to all the latest gossip, Irene Manners is gradually wilting away to a shadow, and Mary Summers has given you the icy shoulder. She's very partial to Nipper, though. They're just about as thick as thieves."

His major flushed.

"Mary's a jolly nice girl, but I'm not interested in her a bit!" he said tartly. "And I don't want any of your sauce, my son. What's that favour you were going to do me? I suppose it was only your cheek——"

"Oh, it's nothing much!" interrupted Willy casually. "I happened to meet Irene at the gate just now. She's taking a stroll to the village."

"Oh!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath.

"Alone!" added Willy carelessly.

"By George!" breathed Handforth, with a start. "Alone?"

"Absolutely!" nodded his minor. "If you're looking for a chance to do a bit of spooning——"

"You babbling young fathead!" roared Handforth. "Do you think I care tuppence about girls? Huh! I've got something more important to do than bother with 'em. Why should I care whether Irene's alone or not?"

He stalked off hastily, and Willy grinned. It was rather significant that his major should make a beeline for the main gates. His loud talk was apparently insincere. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon appeared, and joined their young leader.

"My sons, this ought to be interesting," said Willy calmly. "My major's just gone down the lane to overtake Irene. I rather think the lane calls us. How are we off for cash?"

"Broke!" said Chubby sadly.

"I've got sixpence," admitted Juicy.

"That makes one-and-two between the three of us—with my eightpence," said Willy thoughtfully. "It's a serious state of affairs. Come with me, my lads, and I shouldn't be surprised if we return with considerable wealth."

In the meantime, Handforth was hurrying down the lane at the double, his heart beating rapidly. At first he had thought that Willy had been spoofing, but a glimpse of a trim figure near the bend reassured him. He was even more overjoyed when he observed the road was otherwise deserted.

During the last few weeks he had displayed a complete indifference to the many charms of Irene Manners, of the Moor View School. Her bobbed hair had failed to attract him. Her blue eyes had left him cold. Her dimples had made no impression.

Previous to this term, however, Handforth had always been ready to rave about Irene's charms. His recent attitude was accounted for by the fact that Mary Summers had come to St. Frank's. She was merely a visitor—the niece of Mr. and Mrs. Stokes. Mary had temporarily turned Handforth's susceptible head, but at last he had realised that Dick Hamilton was Mary's favourite.

And with this realisation came another. She was a jolly nice girl, but not half so ripping as he had really supposed. In fact, she couldn't hold a candle to Irene. He must have been off his rocker to ever think such a thing. Why, Irene was absolutely a fairy compared to other girls. He was beginning to realise it more strongly every day.

And he was aware of a feeling of guilt, too. He had deserted her, left her in the cold without a thought. And as he hurried down the lane he grew more and more nervous. His greatest wish was to resume the old relations, and look upon himself as Irene's special chum. But it was going to be a tricky business.

Irene was walking quite slowly—in fact, so slowly that any other fellow but Handforth might have guessed things. She was apparently unaware of his approach, for she didn't once look round. Indeed, when Handforth was within ten yards—and more nervous than ever—she accidentally dropped her bag.

Handforth pulled up, his eyes gleaming.

"By George!" he muttered. "What a bit of luck!"

The girl was walking along unconcernedly. Perhaps she had developed deafness, for the bag had made a distinct chink as it fell. And yet she hadn't taken the slightest bit of notice!

Handforth grabbed it, and ran on.

"I—I say!" he panted. "Just a minute, Irene! You've dropped something."

Irene Manners halted, and feigned a look of surprise.

"My bag!" she exclaimed. "Oh, thanks awfully, Ted! How dreadfully careless of me."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth, pulling his cap off, and offering it to her. "Anybody's liable to drop a bag, you know."

He was so confused that he almost put the bag on his head—and then realised that his cap was no earthly use to Irene. She stood watching him with her most frigid expression—and she was capable of looking very cold at times. But he might have been re-assured by the twinkle in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said, as she took the bag at last. "Well, I don't want to detain you, Ted. Give my love to Mary, when you see her, won't you?"

She turned as if to go, but Handforth gulped, and grabbed her by the arm—only to back away in confusion.

"Mary?" he panted. "I—I don't suppose I shall see her——"

"But I thought you were very fond of Mary?" asked Irene, in surprise.

"I don't care a snap about her!" retorted Handforth indignantly. "If she likes anybody at all, it's Nipper. He's welcome to her, too!"

Irene shook her head.

"You can't tell me those yarns!" she said firmly. "Do you think I haven't seen the signs? You've been dancing attendance on Mary for weeks!"

Handforth became frantic.

"I haven't!" he gasped. "At least, I—I don't think so! I mean, she's all right, but you're a thousand times—— That is, I've been a silly fathead to drop you—— To—to neglect you, I mean—— That is to say, she's a ripping girl, but—— Oh, my hat!"

He paused, the beads of perspiration growing on his rugged countenance. Irene's icy look remained unchanged

"Well?" she asked, in a voice that had icicles on it.

"Eh?" said Handforth desperately. "You—you see, I've been so jolly busy—I mean, what with this revolt, and other things—football, you know, and all that—I've been so jolly busy! But, really, I haven't spent a peaceful moment for days—— Eh? Why, what——"

Irene was only human, and she found it impossible to control herself any longer. She suddenly exploded into a shout of laughter, and stood there, her whole attitude changed. She laughed so much that Handforth lost the thread of his explanation—what little thread there was—and regarded her speechlessly.

"Oh, Ted!" she gurgled, at last. "What a scream you are!"

"Scream?" said Handforth dazedly.

"I haven't laughed so much for years!" chuckled Irene, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You're the biggest duffer I've ever seen! Oh, dear! My sides are aching so much I can hardly stand!"

Handforth gave a kind of gulp.

"But—but aren't you cross?" he asked blankly.

"Why should I be cross, you silly?"

"About—about Mary—— I mean——"

"Why, Mary's one of my chums," laughed Irene breathlessly. "Oh, you've almost exhausted me, Ted! You silly cuckoo, I've only been kidding you! You're terribly fickle—but I like you just as much!"

Handforth felt his heart give a veritable leap.

"Then—then it's all right?" he breathed happily. "I mean, you're not cross, or jealous, or anything? Everything's all serene?"

Irene held her sides.

"You'll kill me before you've done!" she confessed. "Of course everything's all serene, you hopeless chump! It's been all serene all the time—only you didn't seem to realise it!"

"By George!" said Handforth happily. "I—I say, that's awfully decent of you, Irene—— I—I thought——"

He broke off, and stared at her dazedly. She was standing there, laughing all over her pretty face. And the next second Handforth grabbed her, and kissed her from sheer happiness.

CHAPTER V

WILLY, THE OPPORTUNIST.

IT was a real kiss, too. Not merely a peck, but a downright honest hug. Irene was so surprised that she remained in Handforth's arms without even protesting. But he suddenly backed away, and went pale.

"Oh, my—my hat!" he breathed, aghast.

That hug had been purely impulsive. A fraction of a second before it had happened he had had no idea that he would kiss her. Edward Oswald was always a fellow of impulses, but this was the first time he had

ever plucked up enough courage to hug a girl.

And it startled him—it scared him out of his wits. Speech was impossible—to remain in the vicinity was equally impossible. He just turned on his heel, and fled. He fled as though demons were after him.

"Well I'm blessed!" breathed Irene softly.

She stood there, watching his running figure, and hardly knew what had happened. At any rate, she didn't seem at all annoyed. Judging from her expression, she didn't seem to mind in the least. In fact, her eyes twinkled more than ever, and she burst into another shout of laughter.

"I was right!" she panted. "He IS a scream! I bet he'll avoid me for weeks after this! Oh, the hopeless duffer!"

In the meantime, Handforth's flight developed into a panic. As he ran, he realised the enormity of his action to the full. He had kissed her! Not under mistletoe, or in a parlour game—but under the open sky, when there was nobody else about! He was so scared that he didn't see what lay ahead of him. He only knew that he daren't see her again as long as ever he lived! But somebody else had seen!

"You needn't be in such a hurry, Ted!" said a voice from somewhere. "She's not chasing you, you ass! In fact, she's probably disappointed because you didn't carry on!"

Handforth pulled up short, quivering in every limb. One of those demons had overtaken him! He saw the little beggar distinctly—standing squarely in front of him, with an evil grin on his face. He was a kind of goblin, with pointed toes and long ears—— And then, suddenly, Handforth came to earth, and found that it was only Willy.

"Eh?" he gasped helplessly.

"Good for you, Ted," said Willy, with approval. "I've always had faith in you! I knew you'd come up to the scratch one of these days. I shall have to collect Owen minor's white mouse!"

"White mouse?" repeated Handforth, with a gulp.

"We had a little wager a week or two ago," explained Willy. "He bet me his white mouse that you'd never pluck up enough courage to kiss Irene——"

"You—you young rotter!" ejaculated Handforth, with a violent start. "I haven't kissed her! I—I mean—— Did—did you see?"

"Everything!" said Willy, with a nod.

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Well, my dear old chap, if you WILL kiss her in the open lane, what can you expect?" asked Willy indignantly. "Personally, I should choose a more secluded spot—the wood, for example. But there's no accounting for some people. You didn't make any mistake about it, did you?" he added thoughtfully. "I've seen a few kisses in my time, but——"

"Don't breathe a word!" said Handforth frantically. "You—you young bounder! If you tell anybody I'll skin you alive!"

Willy shrugged his shoulders.

"You speak as though you've done something big!" he said, with a sniff. "There's nothing in kissing a girl, you ass! It's about time you plucked up courage, on the quiet! But I won't say anything—unless the yarn's already been spread. You can trust me, old man."

"Good!" breathed Handforth.

Unfortunately, he was ignorant of the fact that Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were at that very moment recounting the entire incident with much gusto to an appreciative audience in the Triangle. Willy considered it quite unnecessary to mention the fact that his chums had witnessed the kiss, too. Here was a chance in a thousand.

"Five bob!" he said calmly.

"Eh?"

"Ten bob!" said Willy.

"Just now you said five——"

"I thought you'd gone deaf!" explained Willy. "It's too late now, Ted—nothing under ten! You ought to have heard me better the first time. Besides, it's worth ten bob, isn't it? You can't expect me to keep your guilty secrets for less!"

"It's blackmail!" hooted his major.

"Rats! I've only got eightpence—and you can't expect me to go about like a pauper, I suppose?" asked Willy indignantly. "I want ten bob! I should have asked you five in any case. Come on—don't make a fuss!"

"You—you——"

"Blessed if I can understand you!" went on Willy, with a snort. "After kissing Irene like that, you ought to be bubbling with happiness. That's what I've read in stories, anyhow! Anybody might think you'd committed burglary, by your expression! You needn't worry, you ass—the police aren't after you!"

Handforth controlled himself with an effort. This encounter with Willy was good in one respect—for it enabled him to collect his wits. And he was enormously thankful that there had been no other witnesses.

"Look here, my lad!" he said thickly. "I'll give you ten bob, but only on condition that you keep mum. Of course, there's nothing in it—kissing a girl is a mere trifle, anyhow! Why make a lot of fuss over it?"

"Why?" asked Willy, in surprise.

"The best thing is to forget it!" went on Handforth, recovering some of his usual calmness. "Forget all about it, my son, and say nothing! Here's your ten bob—and if you remain cautious, there'll be another one like it at the end of the week."

"Good man!" said Willy, as he pocketed the note. "Thanks, Ted! But I'm not so sure about that other one. I'll bet you'll change your mind before the end of the

week. You're a bit of a weather-cock, you know!"

He walked off, and left his major to follow at leisure. And Handforth didn't hurry himself. Now that he was cooler, he reviewed the incident in a different light. Of course, he couldn't see Irene again for a long time—but he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had given her a jolly good kiss. She couldn't be under any delusions regarding his friendliness now!

He wandered into the Triangle so abstractedly that he failed to notice the grins on every face. He didn't even hear the yells of laughter. But when he reached the vicinity of the West House steps his attention was claimed by an incident of the utmost significance.

Reggie Pitt was standing there with Jack Grey. And Reggie made a sudden dramatic gesture, flinging his arms wide.

"My darling!" he said, in a throbbing voice.

With an impulsive movement, he flung himself at Jack, and kissed him. Handforth stood there, stock still, staring dazedly. And Jack Grey gave a gasping moan, and sank upon the steps in a dead faint.

"Sweetheart!" shouted Pitt, in desperation.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The whole Triangle yelled. Handforth started so violently that he jumped. Everybody was howling at him. Everybody knew the truth!

"Don't blame me, Ted!" said Willy. "I forgot to mention that Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon saw you kissing——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth went a sickly kind of green, gazed round like a hunted animal, and then fled into the Ancient House in dire panic. He locked himself in Study D, and listened with helpless rage as the sounds of exaggerated kissing floated in from the corridor.

He refused to be drawn—and even when the luncheon-gong sounded, he still remained locked up. The lure of food was nothing compared to his sensitive fear of ridicule. Besides, he wasn't hungry. That kiss would easily last him until tea-time!

CHAPTER VI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE INQUIRY.

ST. FRANK'S bubbled with excitement.

The entire school mustered in Big Hall, and there was a feeling of electrical tension in the air. Not a single fellow was missing from this all-important gathering.

An inquiry was generally a dry sort of affair, and most of the boys would have given a week's pocket-money to escape it. But this one was different. It was an absolute novelty.

In the first place, the whole school was present, and that made it an unprecedented occasion. And, secondly, the truth of the West House revolt would be revealed—and Mr. Stokes would either vindicate himself or sink deeper into the mire.

The West House fellows were, of course, the most interested section of the school. Their own fate depended upon this inquiry. They had revolted, and the known ring-leaders had received no punishment. If the judges decided that they had been unjustified in rebelling, these known ring-leaders—Arthur Morrow and Reggie Pitt—would undoubtedly receive the only possible punishment—expulsion from the school.

On the other hand, if the judges were satisfied that the revolt was justified, then Guy Sinclair would be deposed. The West House was solid in the belief that Sinclair's day of fate had come. He could never outlive the overwhelming evidence of tyranny and despotism.

Mr. Stokes' position remained uncertain. Even the West House couldn't decide how things would go. He would either fall with Sinclair, or scrape out of the mess by the skin of his teeth. Nobody deemed it possible that he could emerge triumphantly. And, after the circulation of that significant photograph, there seemed no loophole. That incident in his private life would undoubtedly affect the whole situation.

Dr. Malcolm Stafford received a cheer as he advanced towards the edge of the platform. Behind him were seated an imposing array of gentlemen—Sir John Prent, the Chairman of the Governors, and all the St. Frank's Housemasters, including Mr. Stokes. Professor Tucker was there, too, and some others. The Form-masters were in the body of the Hall, with their respective boys.

"It is quite unnecessary for me to explain why we are all here," commenced the Head gravely. "I am inclined, however, to say a few words regarding the publicity of this inquiry. Our school has recently passed through some trying moments, and it is the object of this inquiry to root out the complete truth. If possible, we are determined to expose the full story of the West House rebellion."

"Good old West House!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I am just as anxious as the rest of you that the West House should emerge unsullied from this investigation," said the Head quietly. "Let me make it thoroughly understood that the inquiry will deal with Mr. Stokes' House, and nothing else. The more recent riot—which I was thankfully spared from witnessing—is in no way connected with the West House, and needs no examination.

"That regrettable incident, as you are all aware, was caused by the misplaced sense of duty of Captain Boom, who thought he could deputise for his superior—Commander Sampson Rudd. You know that Commander Rudd was to have taken

control of the school, in order to quell the revolt—you know that the egregious Captain Boom came to the school to report the commander's accident, when the latter fell down on his own front steps. And you know that Captain Boom upset the whole school with his wind-jammer methods. That is now a closed episode, and need not be re-opened."

"But the West House is on duty again through it, sir!"

"Mr. Stokes did the trick, sir!"

"I am well aware that Mr. Stokes rendered the school an unforgettable service on that eventful day," agreed the Head. "Indeed, it is really impossible to form any true estimate of his extraordinary achievement——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Barry!"

These and more shouts came from the West House—but they were mingled with more than one growl from some of the other boys. Except with his own flock, Mr. Stokes was none too popular. The photograph had done immense harm. Fellows who had praised him yesterday were scorning him to-day.

"Again, however, let me remind you that Mr. Stokes' work on the day of the riot is in no way connected with this inquiry," continued Dr. Stafford. "We are going back further—to the root cause of the West House revolt. Mr. Stokes gave his boys a solemn promise that a full and complete investigation would be made. That is one of the reasons for to-day's unusual proceedings. I am holding the inquiry in public, so that there can be no possible chance of misunderstanding or misapprehension. We have had rumours enough. Let there be nothing but fact emerge from this research."

"Mr. Stokes promised us there'd be no punishments, sir, and that the West House would win!"

"He as good as said that Sinclair would be sacked!"

"What about it, sir?"

Dr. Stafford held up his hand.

"These interruptions are not to continue," he said sternly. "With regard to Mr. Stokes' promises, I have only one thing to say. These promises were given to you on Mr. Stokes' authority alone—and were in no way official. The West House boys will fare according to the evidence of this investigation. If we find that there was sufficient justification for rebelling against discipline and authority, then there will naturally be no penalties. But the circumstances will have to be very, very exceptional for such a decision to be made.

"I am determined to thrash the whole thing out, once and for all. It is increasingly evident that the Head Prefect of the West House—Sinclair—is the centre of the vortex. The revolt was instigated because of real, or fancied, grievances against this boy. To-day we shall see which they were. I held no inquiry into this earlier because it is not my habit to parley with rebels. But the school is now quiet again, and the truth must be brought to light. Later on, any boy will be able to come upon this platform, and give such evidence as will bear upon the subject. For the moment, however, I am going to ask Mr. Stokes to give his reasons for deposing Morrow, and appointing Sinclair in his stead. That, I take it, was the beginning of the trouble—and it is certainly our object to go right back to the very start.

"I am still far from well, and I fear the strain of this ordeal will tell heavily upon me unless I leave the actual questioning to a deputy. So I am going to ask Mr. Nelson Lee to conduct the inquiry from now onwards. Sir John Brent and myself will act as judges. I require you to listen carefully, and to remain as silent as possible."

The Head was obviously unwell—but quite capable of remaining on the platform. As he had said, however, the strain would be too much for him if he continued actively in the forefront of the proceedings. Nelson Lee rose to his feet, and prepared himself for business.

The school gave him a preliminary cheer, and waited with breathless interest. The whole affair was beginning to take on the aspect of a court of justice. There was nothing really formal in the procedure, but everybody felt that both Mr. Stokes and Sinclair were on their trial.

There had been a revolt, and the Housemaster and the Head Prefect—the two people in authority—were on the carpet.

CHAPTER VII.

A LITTLE WHITEWASH.

NELSON LEE glanced at Barry Stokes.

"The Head has suggested that you should explain your reasons for appointing Sinclair to the post of Head Boy in your House, Mr. Stokes," he said. "I quite agree that the point is an important one—particularly in view of the fact that the inquiry is public. We want the whole school to know the absolute truth of this affair. That is the only safe way of scotching these unsavoury rumours. In your own interests, Mr. Stokes, I urge you to be absolutely frank."

"Nothing would please me better," replied Mr. Stokes, standing up. "Let me make a suggestion, however. We will take it for granted that I deprived Morrow of the Head Prefectship and appointed Sinclair in his stead. Would it not be better to deal immediately with the full reasons for my initial action at a later stage in the proceedings—when I think they will be more in place. I further suggest, Mr. Lee,

that two chairs should be brought in front of the platform, and formed into an improvised witness-box. You can then call your witnesses, and take their evidence."

"You are unwilling, then, to speak now?"

"No, I am not unwilling," replied Mr. Stokes quietly. "If you wish it, I will speak at once. But I would prefer it the other way. After all, it was Sinclair's advent that precipitated the trouble—and I maintain that my reasons for appointing Sinclair are rather beside the issue. I have, of course, a particular reason for making this request."

"Let Mr. Stokes have his way," said the Head, nodding. "It makes little difference whether he gives evidence now or later."

"Thank you, sir," said Barry quietly.

The school was very unfavourably impressed. It seemed quite obvious that Mr. Stokes was reluctant to make any statement. Perhaps he was hoping to escape the ordeal altogether. Guy Sinclair—who was on the platform—was inwardly gloating. He thought he knew the reasons for Mr. Stokes' attitude.

"He daren't give his evidence!" Sinclair told himself grimly. "He can only explain that he appointed me—he can't say that I forced him into it. He daren't mention anything about that night-club, or he'd kill all his chances. The man's in a hopeless mess. I knew it all along! He can deny these rumours, and swear that the photograph's a fake—but he can't explain why he allowed me to step into Morrow's shoes. And I've got my yarn all cut and dried, anyhow! These idiots can give any evidence they like—I shan't care!"

Nelson Lee glanced round at Sinclair, who wasn't quite prepared for being called upon so early. He had expected to hear all sorts of deadly evidence against himself—perfectly truthful evidence which he was prepared to categorically deny.

"Sinclair, I think you had better come forward," said Nelson Lee. "It is clear that you were the conscious, or unconscious cause of all the trouble, and I should like you to explain your methods—the methods which seemed so thoroughly unpopular."

Sinclair came forward in some surprise.

"Yah! Despot!"

"Now you're on the mat!"

"This is where you get it in the neck, Sinclair!"

In addition to many shouts, a considerable amount of booing and hissing broke out. Guy Sinclair scowled, and flushed.

"Take no notice, Sinclair," said Nelson Lee. "The Headmaster has requested the school to be silent, and I am hoping that the school will respect that wish."

The school grew quieter.

"There's nothing much to explain, sir," said Sinclair, attempting to recover himself. "My appointment as Head Prefect was a complete surprise to me. Mr. Stokes asked me to transfer into the West House, and particularly urged me to accept the appointment."

"Indeed?" said Lee. "Did Mr. Stokes give any reasons?"

"He said that the West House had got into a very lax state," continued Sinclair, drawing upon the fiction he had carefully prepared. "He seemed to think I had the reputation of being a fellow with plenty of force—plenty of determination and energy. He told me that Morrow was too easy-going—and that Morrow was largely responsible for the rot that had set in."

Arthur Morrow leapt up, furious.

"That's an infernal lie!" he shouted. "I don't believe Mr. Stokes said anything of the sort——"

"You will have an opportunity of speaking later, Morrow," interrupted the Head quietly. "These interruptions can do no good."

"But the man's accusing me——"

"If Sinclair is making false statements you may be certain that they will find him out," put in Nelson Lee. "Morrow, please retire. Sinclair, continue with your evidence."

Guy Sinclair was growing more confident every moment. He had been rather startled at first but now he was inwardly gloating. He couldn't have wished for anything better than this. He was getting in the first word, and that might make all the difference.

"Morrow is naturally unwilling to hear these things repeated publicly, sir," he said coolly. "In any case, I am only repeating what Mr. Stokes told me. He wanted me to take charge of the West House, and to lick it into shape. There was an awful amount of slackness last term, and the whole House needed bucking up generally. I promised I would do my best."

The Head looked at Sinclair closely.

"Let me remind you, Sinclair, that you are on your honour to speak the truth, and nothing but the truth," he said, with grim emphasis. "So far as I know, the West House revealed no trace of the slackness you mention last term. Indeed, I distinctly remember complimenting Mr. Stokes on the all-round excellence of his reports. I formed the opinion that the West House was holding its own with complete success."

"Then I can only say that Mr. Stokes had his own reasons for giving you such an impression, sir," replied Sinclair coolly. "When I took over my duties, I found an extraordinary amount of disorder. I saw that I was in for a stiff task. Discipline was at a low ebb, and my only course was to use a firm hand."

The West House listened to this with rapidly growing indignation. Every word of it was false. But Sinclair spoke with such free-and-easy assurance that his story sounded genuine. And, after all, he was the one fellow who had the whip hand. As

head prefect, his words were naturally of some weight, in spite of what had happened.

"Can you give us some idea of these irregularities, Sinclair?" asked Nelson Lee. "You have told us that discipline was in a deplorable condition when you took control. In what way was it so?"

"Oh, generally, sir," replied Sinclair promptly. "The Junior School was the worst. The Remove fellows were doing practically as they liked, staying out after calling-over, holding parties after lights-out, and ignoring any rule or regulation that they fancied. The whole discipline of the House was in a ragtime condition."

"Liar!"

"He's fooling you, sir!"

"The West House was never slack!"

"No fear!"

"Chuck him out!"

A storm of abuse came from the West House fellows, and even the seniors joined in the uproar.

"They don't like the truth being told, sir," said Sinclair calmly. "I'm not surprised that I was unpopular. The only way I could maintain order was to institute an iron control. The fellows resented it. After having had freedom for so many terms they looked upon me as an enemy when I came along and forced them to recognise the school regulations. Without any actual cause, I became known as a despot. I was looked upon as a tyrant. Nothing could be more ridiculous, sir. I just did my duty—nothing else."

Sinclair was thoroughly enjoying himself now. He was taking advantage of his position with both hands. It was a fine opportunity to whitewash himself, to get in his version of the affair before any of the other witnesses were called.

Sinclair was cunning enough to realise that a few carefully spoken sentences would help to nullify the effect of the deadly evidence which would presently be given against him. He had never hoped to give his story so early, and he was more convinced than ever that he would win.

"If you did your duty, Sinclair, then the West House had no justification for rebelling," said Nelson Lee. "We shall, of course, be able to form a better opinion after the other witnesses have spoken."

"I'm not going to ask you to doubt their word, sir, but they'll probably tell a lot of exaggerated yarns," said Sinclair warmly. "Look at the rumours that have been flying about for the last few weeks. I maintained discipline with a firm hand, and earned the reputation of being a tyrant. Most of the trouble started in the Junior School. In order to enforce order, I was compelled to distribute punishment pretty liberally. The juniors were bitter. They hated me. They always hate people who refuse to wink at irregularities."

"And so you obtained obedience by harsh methods?"

"Not at all, sir," replied Sinclair promptly. "My methods weren't harsh—they were just firm. You'll probably hear all sorts of ridiculous stories if these juniors give evidence, wild concoctions concerning my cruelty and tyranny. I advise you to take no notice of those yarns, sir——"

"You are not in that witness-box to advise me, Sinclair, but to make a statement," interrupted Nelson Lee curtly. "Indeed, I think you have said quite sufficient. You deny any despotism, and you definitely state that the reported harshness was nothing more harmful than a firm hand?"

"Yes, sir—absolutely!"

"You maintain that you committed no act of tyranny which would justify the boys in revolting against your authority?"

Sinclair laughed.

"From first to last I was worried stiff over the whole business, sir," he replied. "I was just doing my duty—maintaining authority as impartially as I could. I am not going to admit any blame whatever."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EVIDENCE AGAINST SINCLAIR.

GUY SINCLAIR was told that he could sit down again, and as he left the "witness-box" a yell of anger went up from the West House boys. They had listened to his faked-up story with rising anger, and every fellow was bursting with eagerness to rush forward and give his own account.

The headmaster and Sir John Brent were well aware of this exhibition of anger, and they did not fail to realise its significance. There was a chance that the boys would reveal such emotion even if Sinclair's story were true, but the indications pointed in another direction.

"Well, gentlemen, Sinclair has told us that he gave the West House no excuse for rebelling, that he only enforced the recognised rules and regulations of the school," said Nelson Lee. "As this inquiry is purely informal, I think we will now hear the boys themselves."

"An excellent suggestion, Mr. Lee," said Sir John Brent, nodding.

"They'll only tell a pack of lies, sir," said Sinclair.

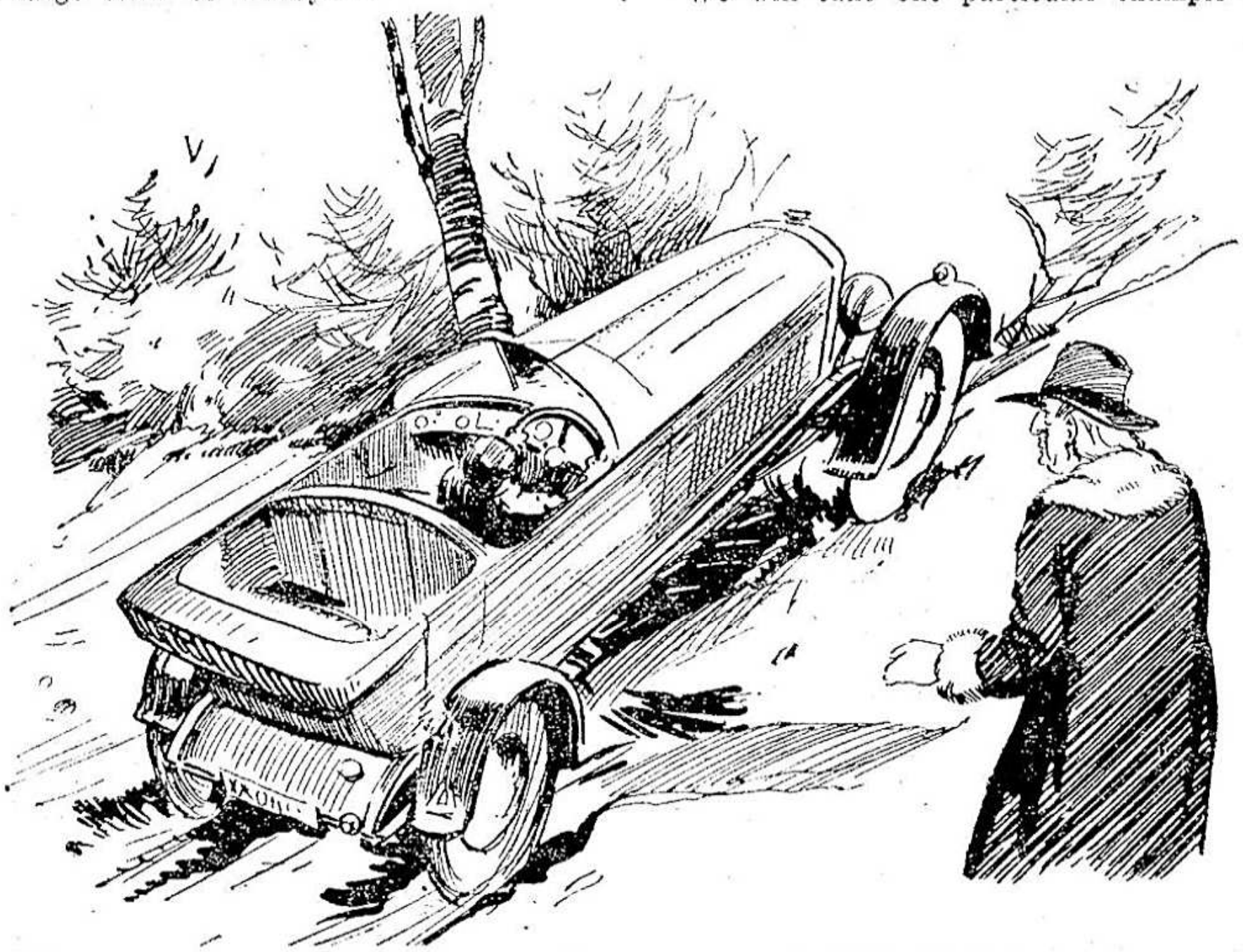
"They will be on their honour to speak the truth, Sinclair, just as you were," retorted Lee. "It will be for us to judge which statements are true, and which are not." He turned to the eagerly listening school. "Now I am not attempting to take evidence in full," he continued. "It will be sufficient, I fancy, if we examine one or two particular examples of Sinclair's methods. There is a rumour to the effect that many West House boys were robbed of large sums of money——"

these yarns, are you? They're only rumours!"

"If they are only rumours, Sinclair, there is no necessity for you to display this alarm," said Lee grimly. "The school will be able to judge which is a rumour, and which is not. Now, I want volunteers. No, no. Not twenty—not a dozen. I must ask you to remain calm."

About half the juniors of the West House had surged forward, creating some little confusion. They halted at Nelson Lee's command.

"We will take one particular example of



Lord Dorrimore's racer shot past the man in the road and actually scraped his coat. Then it plunged at the bank, reared up like a thing of life, and crashed through the hedge.

"It's true, sir!"

"We can prove it, sir."

"This rumour, which has been persistent, is to the effect that Sinclair confined some of his boys to the House, and then instituted a system of bail," proceeded Nelson Lee. "Such a course is naturally opposed to all regulations, and it is difficult to believe that the story has any foundation in fact. I mean to settle the point now—without any further delay."

"Hurrah!"

"This is where Sinclair goes green!"

"The whole story's a lie, sir!" roared Sinclair. "You're not going to listen to this alleged robbery," went on Nelson Lee. "Who was the boy who suffered the greatest loss?"

"Glenthorne, sir!" shouted Nipper promptly.

"Yes, by George!" roared Handforth "He was rooked of seventy-five quid!"

"Now, then, Archie—up you go!"

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne. "I mean, what? This is a dashed foul proposition, laddies. Cease this beastly pushing, Alf, old bird!"

"You've got to go into the witness-box, ass!" hissed Alf Brent.

On the platform the Head was looking worried, and so was Sinclair.

"This is all very irregular, Mr. Lee," said the Head impatiently. "I must confess that I cannot quite appreciate the wisdom——"

"The whole thing's a farce!" shouted Sinclair.

"Neverthless, it is the one direct way of getting at the truth," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I take it, that we are anxious to settle the issue as quickly as possible."

"Very well, Mr. Lee—if you think it best," agreed the Head.

"I am convinced that you will acknowledge the wisdom of my method very shortly," said Lee. "Glenthorne, kindly come upon the platform and give your evidence. But one moment. You are an Ancient House boy?"

"Absolutely, sir—one of yours!" said Archie proudly.

"It's all right, sir—he was the fellow who lost the most money," sang out Reggie Pitt. "He'll explain all about it in a minute!"

Archie mounted the platform and took his place in the witness-box. And the school settled itself down to listen.

"Now, Glenthorne, I shall only question you when I think fit," said Nelson Lee. "It will be better if you tell your story in your own way. Explain exactly how you lost this money, and remember that you are on your honour to speak the truth."

Archie gazed in astonishment.

"Odds slurs and insults!" he ejaculated. "I mean to say, good gad! You don't absolutely think I'd stagger into the good old witness-box and proceed to sully the good old lips with falsehood?"

"I know you to be a truthful boy, Glenthorne, and you may be quite certain that the headmaster and Sir John Brent will listen attentively and sympathetically," said Nelson Lee. "Go ahead, and be as brief as possible."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's a poser for Archie!"

Archie Glenthorne adjusted his monocle, and cleared his throat.

"I take it that this is absolutely official, and all that sort of thing?" he asked. "I mean to say, no suggestion of sneaking, and so forth?"

"None whatever, Glenthorne," said Nelson Lee. "Be perfectly frank."

"The absolute facts of the case are these," said Archie. "Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, two thoroughly sound sportsmen, were frightfully keen on playing in a dashed football match. But that foul excrescence of a Sinclair had absolutely bottled the poor blighters up for the dashed afternoon. I mean to say, the whole position was murky in the extreme. Could anything be more ghastly, as it were? Here were these two chappies, bursting with energy and what not, and there they were, absolutely corked up. I mean, there you are!"

"What an extraordinary boy!" muttered Sir John, staring at Archie.

"Nevertheless, his narrative is fairly clear," commented the Head.

"Well, the good old word got round that Sinclair was willing to accept bail," went on Archie. "Odds impositions and trickery! There was this bounder, like a dashed magistrate, levying bail!"

"Are you quite sure of this, Glenthorne?" asked Nelson Lee keenly. "Please remember that we are not dealing with rumours now, but fact. Are you seriously telling us that Sinclair detained his boys, and then allowed them a period of liberty on the payment of bail?"

"Absolutely!" replied Archie. "Why, gadzooks! I mean to say, oddslife! The whole dashed school was talking about it. It always strikes me as being bally rummy that these things go on, and the beaks know nothing about it. Sinclair and his bail were the talk of the bally school!"

"He's right, sir!"

"Everybody knew it!"

"He rooked scores of chaps!"

"The rotter made a small fortune in less than a week!"

Sinclair leapt to his feet.

"Lies!" he shouted fiercely. "This is nothing but a faked——"

"Glenthorne is giving evidence now, Sinclair—so be good enough to remain silent," interrupted Nelson Lee sharply.

"But I can't listen to this string of invention——"

"You absolutely foul chunk of fungus!" interrupted Archie hotly. "Good gad! Are you trying to deny that you burgled me of seventy-five of the best? Why, you bally robber——"

"Address your remarks to me, Glenthorne—not to Sinclair," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You have stated that Sinclair took seventy-five pounds of your money. In what way did he do this?"

"Well, some of the lads bearded the wolf in his den, and found out that he wouldn't let Pitt and Grey play in the match unless they conjured up seventy-five of the brightest," replied Archie. "Naturally, the dear old sportsmen were in despair. I mean, the amount was somewhat frightful. The old doubloons don't roll about in such quantities among the majority. It's a bally shame, but there you are."

"Well?"

"I heard all about the problem, and I can tell you honestly that the good old gear-box was somewhat wrenched," said Archie earn-

estly. "I mean, I absolutely got into third speed before it struck me to consult Phipps. When it comes to anything brainy, Phipps is absolutely the lad to visit. You've only got to say the word, and out he pops with the solution. I mean to say, while you wait."

"Phipps, then, suggested a solution?"

"Absolutely!" replied Archie, nodding. "Phipps came out with the brainy scheme that I should risk a certain amount of contamination, and visit Sinclair in his bally counting-house. So there I trotted, legging it thence with some speed. The spider was lurking in his good old web, on the look-out for victims. I suggested bail, he mentioned seventy-five of the right quality, and out came the good old wallet."

"You paid Sinclair seventy-five pounds for the release of Pitt and Grey?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"But was there no arrangement or understanding?"

"That's where you touch the thing on the spot," said Archie, nodding. "Sinclair pronounced the edict that the two prisoners were to be brought back by five o'clock, or the bail would be forfeited. Well, the lads rallied round nobly, but all in vain. Some of Sinclair's myrmidons performed dirty work at the cross roads, and the two sportsmen failed to check in. I mean to say, we all dashed up after the good old chimes, and Sinclair glued himself to the cash. And that, I mean, is where I kissed it good-bye."

"You positively state, Glenthorne, that you paid this money to Sinclair, and that he failed to return it?" asked Nelson Lee. "We will not press the question of time limits or enforced delays. It will be quite sufficient if we can establish the one solid fact. Your evidence is to the effect that Sinclair took seventy-five pounds of your money, and failed to return it?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"You state that definitely, and on your word of honour?"

"Absolutely twice, sir," declared Archie. "In fact, absolutely with knobs on!"

"Is there any boy who can corroborate your story?" asked Nelson Lee. "I am not doubting you, Glenthorne—I accept your statement as given in good faith. But corroboration would be helpful."

"There was nobody with me when I paid the money over, sir, but three of the lads buzzed round at five o'clock, when we went to collect the cash," replied Archie. "They were Pitt, Grey, and Hamilton. Why, dash it, there was quite a shindy. Sinclair admitted taking the money in front of all of us, but refused to pay up. He said we were late in getting back, and that the money was confiscated. I mean, isn't that corroboration?"

"I think you can return to your place, Glenthorne," said Nelson Lee quietly.

CHAPTER IX.

PILING IT UP.

THE school was tense with subdued excitement.

Most of the West House boys knew the full facts, but many of the others were learning them for the first time. On the platform, Dr. Stafford and Sir John were exchanging low comments, and the other masters were looking grim. And Guy Sinclair had a sullen, defiant expression on his face.

"Pitt, Grey, Hamilton!" said Nelson Lee. "Do you substantiate Glenthorne's story of this confiscated money?"

"Yes, sir!" replied the three, in one voice.

"You are perfectly satisfied that Sinclair had the money, and refused to give it up?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then that incident can be left to stand for the moment——"

"No it can't!" shouted Sinclair, getting up. "I object! Glenthorne has lied! On his own admission, he was alone when he interviewed me, so it is his word against mine. I didn't receive a cent from him. I wouldn't dream of asking for such a thing. I released Pitt and Grey from detention in order that they might play in an important match."

"This interruption is a mere waste of time, Sinclair," said Nelson Lee. "We have heard your denial, and we have heard Glenthorne's statement. We shall judge which is correct at the right time. I propose to take further evidence at once, so I must ask you to remain silent."

Sinclair sat down, scowling.

"We will take another so-called rumour," said Nelson Lee. "I have frequently heard that the revolt was precipitated by an exhibition of open defiance by a set of junior boys. Mr. Stokes discovered that Sinclair had been thrown out of the West House, and he ordered the boys to calm themselves, and to re-admit the Head Prefect. They refused, and forthwith revolted. I think I have stated the facts correctly, Mr. Stokes?"

"Perfectly," agreed Barry Stokes.

"Then it will be helpful, I think, if we ascertain why Sinclair was defied and assaulted," said Nelson Lee. "I am satisfied that the boys would never have taken that step without some strong cause—either real or fancied. Can anybody supply me with the facts?"

About a dozen volunteers were ready.

"Handforth minor, I think you are the most capable boy to give this particular evidence," said Nelson Lee. "Come upon the platform."

Willy Handforth responded briskly, and the Third gave him a cheer. Sinclair looked rather uneasy. Like many another, he had a wholesome fear of Willy Handforth. There

was something so confoundedly cool and collected about this Third Former!

"You want to know why Sinclair was biffed out, sir?" asked Willy briskly. "I can tell you that in two ticks——"

"I don't want to know in two ticks, Handforth minor," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Tell me the story in detail. What was the incident which led up to Sinclair's ejection?"

"That's easy, sir," replied Willy. "It all started with Dicky Jones. He's one of the West House fags, you know—and at the time he was fagging for Sinclair. The poor kid's life was a misery to him. He was gradually dying away to a shadow, and he could never call a minute his own."

"But this is scarcely what I wanted to hear——"

"Leave it to me, sir, and you'll hear everything else in good time," went on Willy, with the utmost confidence. "Dicky was cleaning out Sinclair's study that particular afternoon, and Sinclair came in and twisted his arm. Morrow can tell you that, because he was there, and I wasn't. In fact, Morrow knocked Sinclair down for it. He knocked him right out."

"Do you agree with this, Morrow?"

"I do, sir," replied Morrow. "I found Sinclair bullying Jones, and he refused to stop when I protested. I knocked him out."

"You can go on, Handforth minor," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Well, for a time old Dicky was missing," proceeded Willy "Some of the chaps found him in the cloak-room, hugging his arm. The poor beggar was in such pain that he could hardly speak, so we decided to rush him to the doctor's. Browne was just going to the village, so we commandeered his car. And when we got to the doctor's we found that Dicky's shoulder was dislocated."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Head, startled.

"The boy is exaggerating, surely?" said Sir John.

"The boy isn't, sir!" said Willy grimly. "Ask old Browne! Ask Chubby! Ask Juicy! They were all there!"

"Juicy" murmured the Head, in astonishment.

"Lemon, sir," explained Willy. "We call him Juicy for short. I'm not yarning—all those chaps I mentioned can tell you the same thing. Sinclair twisted Dicky's arm until his shoulder was dislocated—and if you don't believe us, you can ask Dr. Brett. I'll run down to the village——"

"Such a step is quite unnecessary, Handforth minor," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Proceed."

"Isn't that enough, sir?" asked Willy indignantly. "We decided to take matters into our own hands—the Third, I mean. It was against the rules, but I don't mind speaking because I reckon we were justified. We rolled Sinclair in a lot of treacle, and smothered him in feathers. Then the Remove and all the seniors heard about Dicky, and decided to biff Sinclair out. That's all, sir. They biffed him out—and then the revolt started. My hat! If those chaps weren't justified in holding a barring-out, you can call me a Hottentot! If you don't sack Sinclair and let the West House off, I shan't speak to any of you again!"

Willy was so indignant that he fairly bristled The Head and Sir John looked startled, but Nelson Lee allowed a smile to cross his face.

"You have given your evidence, Handforth minor, and you can return to your place," he said smoothly "Well, Dr. Stafford, I hardly think it necessary to call any further witnesses."

"Good gracious! I am inclined to agree with you!" said the Head, rising to his feet. "Sinclair, what have you to say in answer to these appalling accusations? What possible answer can you give? If they are only half true, I shall be inclined to overlook the entire revolt——"

"There's not a shadow of truth in any of the statements, sir!" interrupted Sinclair, panic-stricken. "Didn't I warn you that these boys would get up a lot of lies to save their skins?"

"But Glenthorne is an Ancient House boy—and has no necessity to save his skin," said the Head sternly. "I cannot see why he should complain that he has been robbed of seventy-five pounds unless——"

"It's a conspiracy, sir!" interrupted Sinclair furiously. "Glenthorne's in the Remove—they all work together! And why do I take all the blame, anyhow?" he went on, with a sudden burst of rage. "What about Mr. Stokes? He's the man who instigated everything! I'll admit I went beyond the mark now and again—but only on Mr. Stokes' orders! I deny these lies about robbery and violence, but I'll confess that the West House was goaded into defiance. And it was Mr. Stokes who caused it all."

"Control yourself, Sinclair——"

"How can I control myself when I'm accused?" roared Sinclair. "Why don't you accuse Stokes? He's sitting over there, looking harmless and innocent! And what is he?" went on Sinclair, pointing an accusing finger at the Housemaster. "A night club haunter! A humbug who pretends to be perfect, and he's——"

"One moment!" interrupted Mr. Stokes, leaping to his feet. "Sinclair has accused me of haunting a night club. This morning the school was swamped with snapshots and scurrilous references to myself. I think the time has come for me to say something in my own defence."

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Mr. Stokes!"

"Tell us that Sinclair's a liar!"

"Unfortunately, I cannot do that in this particular instance," said Beverley Stokes quietly. "For his statement happens to be partially true."

"True?" ejaculated the Head, aghast. "Are you telling us, Mr. Stokes, that you actually visited this infamous night club? Do you admit, in front of the whole school, that that appalling photograph is genuine?"

"It is perfectly genuine," replied Mr. Stokes. "I was in the club at the time, and I was actually thrown out of the place."

The whole school hummed with excitement. Such an admission from a Housemaster was sensational indeed!

CHAPTER X.

MR. STOKES IN THE BOX.

MR. BEVERLEY STOKES was quite calm.

Indeed, there was something about his attitude which reminded the school of that fateful evening when he had quelled the riot. He possessed that same air of magnetic confidence.

"He's admitted it!" shouted Sinclair gloatingly. "He's admitted that he was in that night club! And if he's capable of such things as that, you can't accept his word! I tell you, he's rotten to the core!"

"Silence, boy!" thundered the Head.

Dr. Stafford was thoroughly alarmed. When he had ordered the inquiry to be public, he had never dreamed that such a disclosure as this would come out. But, since it had come out, there was nothing else for it but to proceed. Nelson Lee was perhaps the only man who showed no astonishment.

"Mr. Stokes, I think you had better add to your statement," said the Head grimly. "We cannot let the matter rest as it stands at present."

"I have no intention of letting it rest, sir," replied Mr. Stokes smoothly. "I have long awaited this opportunity. I was in that notorious night club on New Year's Eve, and the photograph was taken, I believe, by some of Sinclair's friends. At least, he had one in his possession on the first day of term. Before I go into any explanation of my presence in the place, I will tell you what happened between myself and Sinclair."

If Guy Sinclair had been alarmed before, he was now thoroughly panic-stricken. From the very first, he had assumed that Mr. Stokes would deny point-blank his presence in the night club—for Sinclair, from first to last, had taken it for granted that the Housemaster's secret was a guilty one. To hear Mr. Stokes admitting, before the entire school, that he had been flung out of the Smugglers' Lair was a staggering shock.

It upset every one of Sinclair's calculations. His plan had been to discredit the Housemaster by circulating that eloquent photograph, but he had been prepared for Mr. Stokes to call it a fake, and to swear that he had never been near the infamous place.

As it was, he had apparently signed his own death knell—so far as his career was concerned. Not that this made any difference to Sinclair. It seemed to him that Mr. Beverley Stokes had decided to sacrifice himself in order to drag the head prefect down with him. The object of this fresh development was plain—Mr. Stokes intended to tell the full truth of Sinclair's blackmailing tactics. And Sinclair trembled in his shoes.

"What happened on the first day of term, Mr. Stokes?" asked Nelson Lee. "We all feel that your evidence—on the top of what we have already heard—will provide the key to the entire puzzle."

"Of that there is not the slightest question," said Mr. Stokes grimly. "I have no intention of going into close details. Sinclair came to me on the very evening of my arrival, and insolently demanded the Head Prefectship of my House."

"You did not, as he has stated, approach him?"

"I had too much confidence in Morrow to desire any change," replied the Housemaster. "It is scarcely necessary for me to add that my House was in no need of severe methods. My boys were working in perfect harmony, and Morrow was discharging his duties as head prefect with exemplary satisfaction."

"Good old Morrow!" sang out somebody.

"Hear, hear!"

"Down with Sinclair!"

"Naturally, I was startled by Sinclair's demands," proceeded Mr. Stokes, amid a slight buzz. "He coolly instructed me to depose Morrow, and to appoint him in Morrow's stead. I was furious, as you will readily understand. But in the end, owing to the exceptional circumstances, I was compelled to submit."

"Compelled?" asked the Head sharply. "I presume these exceptional circumstances mean that Sinclair had learned of your visit to this night club?"

"Not exactly that," replied Mr. Stokes. "However, I will make that clear very shortly. Sinclair forced me to appoint him—and then he proceeded to bring his undesirable companions into the West House. He flouted my authority, and made himself absolute dictator. While I stood by, helpless, this boy took the helm out of my hands, and led my ship upon the rocks. I need say nothing concerning Sinclair's methods during his hectic régime. You have heard sufficient evidence from others."

"But why, in Heaven's name, did you submit to this outrageous treatment?" demanded the Head angrily. "Why did you not come to me, Mr. Stokes? Why did you not report Sinclair's conduct?"

"Because he was afraid to!" shouted Sinclair. "He knew that if he breathed a word I should tell of his visit to the night club—and that would mean the sack for him!

I'm finished now—I know it! But if you want to know why he kept mum——"

"We are not asking you to interfere, Sinclair!" rapped out the Head curtly. "Mr. Stokes, we are waiting!"

Barry Stokes was perfectly cool.

"I will tell you why I went to this night club," he said smoothly. "During the Christmas holidays I was staying at home with my parents. And late on New Year's Eve an old friend of the family—I hardly need mention names—came to me in great distress. His son, a normally level-headed fellow, had been taken by some boisterous companions into one of the worst haunts of London—a notorious place known as the Smugglers' Lair. This friend requested me to go there, and bring his son away."

A great silence fell on the school, and Mr. Stokes' words were followed with rapt attention.

"At first I objected—I disliked the idea of penetrating such a den," continued the young Housemaster. "In the end, however, he persuaded me. I went. The young fool was half-drunk, and resisted my earnest entreaties. Being irresponsible, he became violent, and flung a glass of wine into my face. It was at that moment that some young idiot took a flashlight photograph—and caught me in a most awkward predicament."

"It all sounds very plausible——" began Sinclair.

"Silence!" thundered the Head angrily.

"I was not particularly displeased at the turn events had taken, however, for both the young man and myself were thrown out of the place," continued Mr. Stokes. "Thus I gained my object, and took my companion home without any further trouble. Upon arrival, he was much sobered, and very contrite. His father was relieved and grateful—but begged of me to keep the whole affair a locked secret in my heart."

"And did you consent?"

"I was compelled to give my word of honour that I would seal my lips on the subject," replied Mr. Stokes quietly. "My old friend's concern was so great that I had no alternative. And I really thought the whole wretched business was over and done with. I had nothing to reproach myself with. I had done the young fellow a good turn—although he didn't realise it at the time—and I had had an insight into the underworld which I am not likely to forget. It was all experience."

"But why did you submit to Sinclair's dictation?" asked the Head. "Please make that point clear, Mr. Stokes."

"There was no other course open to me," replied Mr. Stokes quietly. "Sinclair had found out this sordid tale—from one of those friends of his, I presume, who took the snapshot. At all events, he had the whole thing on the end of his tongue, and threatened me with exposure unless I submitted."

"But could you not have appealed to me?"

"I fail to see how, Doctor," said the Housemaster. "Remember, I had given my pledged word that I would keep my lips sealed. If I had spoken to you of Sinclair's attitude, I should have been compelled to explain the whole circumstances—and would thus have broken my promise. Or I could have told you of the boy's blackmail, and let it rest at that. And he, of course, would have obtained his revenge by spreading the story. Unable to deny it, because of my promise, I should have been deemed guilty. To tell you the truth, I was in a difficult position, and chose, in my opinion, the better course. I allowed Sinclair to have his way—but only on the understanding with my conscience that his punishment would ultimately come."

Sinclair pointed at Mr. Stokes.

"Do you believe him?" he shouted, appealing to the school. "Do you believe this cock-and-bull yarn? He's only invented it to save his own skin! And he's given himself away, too—he's proved that his word of honour is a thing of no account!"

"Sinclair, I must order you to——"

"I can't help it, sir—I've got to speak!" roared Sinclair. "Didn't Mr. Stokes say that he'd given his word of honour to keep his mouth shut? And now he's blurted out the whole story in order to save himself from going under! Why, he's not only a liar, but worse! He's proved to everybody that his pledged word is no better than mud!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

MR. STOKES leapt forward.

"You infernal young hound!" he shouted. "I have put up with your jeers and taunts long enough. Be silent, or——"

"Control yourself, Mr. Stokes!" said the Head sternly. "Remember that we are facing the entire school! Upon the whole, I am glad that this inquiry is public. At least, there can be no misapprehensions regarding the true position."

"I beg your pardon, sir!" muttered Mr. Stokes quietly.

He stood there, breathing hard. Sinclair was nearly beside himself with rage and alarm. But his brain was working rapidly—he seized upon every chance to discredit his enemy.

The school hardly knew what to think. They knew that Sinclair was done for—he was irretrievably sunk into the mire. But the problem of Mr. Beverley Stokes remained acute. He had admitted visiting the night club, and he had given a very plausible explanation. But now it seemed that he had broken his word!

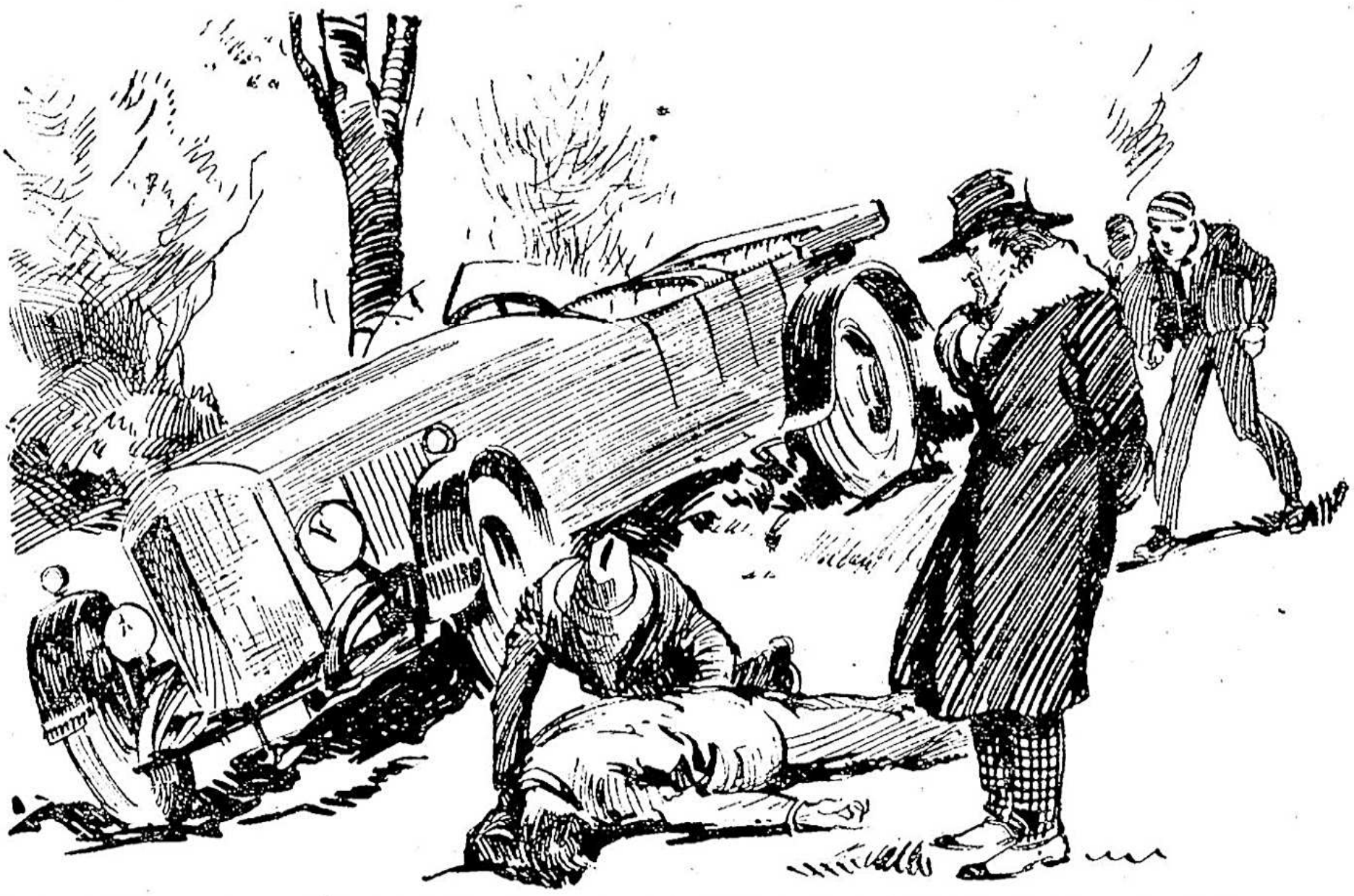
"Forgive me for allowing this boy to goad me, sir," went on Mr. Stokes. "I need

scarcely tell you that I value my pledged word higher than Sinclair indicates. Please be good enough to read this. I received it on the evening of the recent riot. It was this letter, indeed, which gave me the courage to take the school in hand when it most needed guidance."

Dr. Stafford, rather flustered, took the letter which Mr. Stokes held out to him. He read it through, and his face cleared somewhat. He was about to pass the document to Sir John Brent, when he paused.

"May I read this letter aloud, Mr. Stokes?" he asked.

"With pleasure, sir."



Mr. Noggs approached. He wore a coat with an immense fur collar—and, generally, he gave one the impression of being an actor of the old school.
"If this man be dead, then we are indeed in the midst of tragedy," quoted the newcomer.

"Since everything else has been publicly exposed, it is essential that we should reveal the contents of this most important communication," said Dr. Stafford. "The letter is from the gentleman Mr. Stokes has already referred to—I do not think it necessary to make the name public:

"'My Dear Barry,—Your letter only reached me after a long delay, as I have been touring for some days in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and only returned to New York from Boston this morning.

"'I am alarmed and concerned at your unfortunate predicament. My dear boy, why on earth did you take that promise so seriously? This is a matter of your honour, and your career depends upon your freedom of speech. I am filled with admiration for your high sense of duty, but you really should not have waited.

"'By all means tell the whole truth of my son's unfortunate lapse. His was the discreditable action—not yours. I had hoped to keep the matter secret, but do not hesitate to make the entire episode public if the occasion demands it. You are naturally released from your promise, and I hope this letter will reach you in time to undo any possible harm.

"'Be quite frank and unreserved, and make certain of your own good name. Naturally, if there is any possible way of saving my son from public disgrace, I should like you to take it—but if it is a question of yours or his, have no compunction in publishing the entire truth.

"'With my sincere hope that this will reach you in time,

"Always Your Grateful Friend,

"'RODNEY L——'"

The Headmaster broke off before reading aloud the name, and the school felt rather disappointed. But that letter was undoubtedly enlightening.

"You see, this gives me permission to be perfectly frank," said Mr. Stokes, as he indicated the document. "It was most un-

fortunate that the gentleman should be abroad—or I should have scotched Sinclair's outrageous game within a couple of days."

"Naturally—naturally," said Sir John Brent, nodding. "As it was, you were compelled, as you say, to submit to his dictation. A really distressing affair, Mr. Stokes—and I really cannot see how you could have acted otherwise. The boy, of course, imagined that you were guilty, and took your silence to mean that you were afraid of him."

Sinclair was thinking very much the same thing, but he wasn't finished, even now.

"Can I speak, sir?" he asked thickly.

"Be brief!" commanded the Head.

"I ask you, gentlemen, is this story plausible?" panted Sinclair, his eyes gleaming viciously. "Are you going to swallow it? Are you going to believe such a faked tissue of invention? Are YOU going to believe it?" he went on, turning to the school.

"Shut up, you libellous cad!"

"Yah! Sit down!"

"You ought to be horsewhipped, you blackguard!"

A perfect storm of abuse greeted Sinclair.

"You're blind!" he shouted fiercely. "Has Stokes hypnotised you, or what? Can't you see his game? He went to that night club for his own pleasure—as that photograph ought to tell you! He's had weeks and weeks to prepare this yarn! It's all faked from beginning to end—as any idiot with one eye could see!"

"Sinclair, you had better cease this tirade——"

"It's not fair, sir!" panted Sinclair desperately. "Mr. Stokes is fooling you all, and you don't know it! He got somebody to write that letter to him—he invented the tale about fetching somebody away from the night club. Can't you see how it all fits in? It's weeks and weeks ago since he had the warning, and he's been preparing ever since. And now you're all ready to swallow his cookery whole! I tell you it's a fake. He was in that night club because he wanted to indulge his own pleasures!"

Sinclair's words were so emphatic that the school was silenced. Many fellows believed that Sinclair had hit the nail on the head. Others were wavering. They didn't quite know what to believe.

Mr. Stokes' story was plausible—but so was Sinclair's. It was impossible to choose between the two. Sinclair, however, was exposed as a rascal, and Mr. Stokes wasn't. The majority were ready to support the Housemaster

At the same time, the position was unsatisfactory—for it left an unsavoury doubt. If the investigation ended at this juncture, there would always be a certain element in the school who believed that Mr. Stokes had escaped dishonour by a cleverly invented tissue of lies. In order to accept his story, one had to have faith in him. There was nothing conclusive in the evidence. But the Headmaster saw a way out.

"This is very unfortunate—very distressing," he said quietly. "With this letter in my possession, I know that Mr. Stokes has told the truth, and nothing but the truth. Many of you may doubt it—many of you may think that Sinclair's ill-natured assumption is founded upon fact. I must squash that belief at once—but only at the cost of exposing the identity of the youth whom Mr. Stokes rescued from the night club. As a matter of fact, I happen to know him personally—since he was a pupil in this very school—and his father before him. The authenticity of this letter need not be questioned, for I am well acquainted with the gentleman's handwriting. You can take my word for it that——"

"One moment, doctor," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Forgive me for intruding, but there is no necessity for this unhappy publicity. The incident is over—let it be closed for good."

"But it is my duty to save Mr. Stokes from any possible suspicion——"

"There is another way—a better way," put in Lee. "I thought it advisable to bring another witness, and he is ready to give evidence this very minute. This witness is known to the entire school, and his word will not be questioned. He can place every doubt at rest."

The school was freshly surprised. And a yell went up from most of the juniors when the door at the rear of the platform opened and the new witness walked in.

He was none other than Lord Dorrimore.

CHAPTER XII.

DORRIE DOES THE TRICK.

"BY George!" gasped Handforth. "Old Dorrie!"

"But—but where does he come in?" asked Nipper, in astonishment. "Dorrie, of all people in the world! Just like the guv'nor to leave a dramatic surprise for the finish!"

"It's gettin' frightfully thrillin', dear old boy," murmured Sir Montie.

Lord Dorrimore, looking as wiry and healthy as ever, joined the other gentlemen on the platform, and talked for a few moments. He shook hands with Sir John Brent and the Head, and the consultation was brief.

He turned towards the packed hall, and nodded cheerfully.

"There seems to be a little mix-up here," he said, in his languid manner. "I'm sorry you can't take Barry Stokes' word that everythin' is O.K. Still, it's just as well

that we should leave nothin' to chance. I'm in a position to put the whole thing square, an' I'm only too glad to do it."

"Good old Dorrie!"

"Let's have it, sir!"

"Let's do Sinclair in the eye!"

"Hear, hear!"

Sinclair was looking quite pale. A few minutes before, he had half hoped that he would drag Mr. Stokes down with him. But now his last card had been played. Even Mr. Stokes was astonished—for he could not understand how Lord Dorrimore could give any evidence on this matter."

"As a matter of fact, I was in that beastly night club on New Year's Eve," said Dorrie calmly.

"Oh!"

"You needn't look shocked—my motives were just as innocent as Mr. Stokes'," went on Dorrie, grinning "He didn't know I was there, an' I didn't think it necessary to tell him. I was rather anxious to save him from any embarrassment, so I kept in the background."

"This is news to me!" murmured Mr. Stokes.

"I happened to come across an old friend that evening," continued his lordship. "Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, to be exact. He was goin' on a search for a crook of some kind, an' I thought it rather good fun to join in the hunt. He didn't mind takin' me along, an' so off we went. An' in the course of our travels, we took a look round The Smugglers' Lair."

"And you saw Mr. Stokes there?" inquired the Head.

"The inspector and I saw everythin'," replied Lord Dorrimore. "I need only tell you that Mr. Stokes went there to rescue a friend of his. Lennard and I were in the next alcove, an' we couldn't help hearing what took place. Mr. Stokes collared the young idiot, an' asked him to leave. The young idiot refused, an' that's when the dust-up started. If I'd known that Barry Stokes was tied by a pledge, I would have come along sooner."

"This evidence, of course, is absolutely conclusive," said Dr. Stafford quietly. "It is quite unnecessary for you to proceed, Lord Dorrimore. I am willing to accept your word—and I know the school is. I wonder how you knew of Mr. Stokes' quandary?"

"Well, it was really a matter of chance," replied Dorrie. "I met Mr. Lee a day or two ago, an' he told me of this comin' inquiry. I thought of that night club incident, an' wondered if there was any connection. Mr. Lee advised me to be here in case I was wanted——"

"Thank you, Lord Dorrimore," said the Head. "We are all grateful."

"None more grateful than I," put in Mr. Stokes huskily.

Dr. Stafford turned to the school.

"You have heard the entire evidence, and I think I am safe in saying that Mr. Beverley Stokes has explained his actions in a satisfactory manner," he exclaimed. "I should like to feel convinced that you all agree with me——"

"Rather, sir!"

"Three cheers for Barry Stokes!"

"Hurrah!"

The school nearly lifted the roof of Big Hall in its whole-hearted support of Mr. Beverley Stokes. That cheer was a terrible sound for Guy Sinclair, as he stood on the platform.

"Needless to say Mr Stokes remains in control of the West House, and I should like everybody to forget this episode as quickly as possible," continued the Head. "Mr. Stokes has proved himself to be a man of courage and honour, and he is the type we welcome to our school—the type we should be reluctant to part with——"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Barry!"

"What about Sinclair, sir?"

The Head became grave.

"I have very little to say regarding Sinclair," he exclaimed. "The rebellion is a thing of the past—and I shall make no further inquiries. There will be no punishments——"

"That's just what old Barry promised us!"

"We knew he'd turn up trumps!"

"Rather!"

"Sinclair, of course, cannot remain in this school," continued the Head sternly. "After what has happened, he will be publicly expelled to-morrow morning—I do not desire to detain the school any longer at present. Sinclair will remain here overnight, but in the morning he will leave in disgrace. That will do for now. You may dismiss."

"Hurrah!"

"Sinclair's got his deserts!"

"Yah! Cad!"

"Good old Barry!"

Without any attempt to maintain silence, the school trooped out of Big Hall—the juniors excited and animated, only too glad to get out, in order to discuss the situation freely.

The West House fellows were in high feather. Everything had turned out right for them. Sinclair was sacked, Morrow was made Head Boy again, and Mr. Beverley Stokes was in his old place. As far as the West House was concerned, everything in the garden was lovely.

Some of the East House fellows, led by Timothy Armstrong, were inclined to be highly indignant. Sinclair was to remain at St. Frank's overnight! That meant he would stay in the East House!

At present Sinclair was passing through an exceedingly bad quarter of an hour under the lash of Dr. Stafford's tongue. Nobody knew what the Head was saying during this

private, heart-to-heart chat—nobody, that is, except the luckless Sinclair. But when the disgraced prefect crawled out of the Head's study, he bore a close resemblance to a worm.

"It's like the Head's nerve!" snorted Armstrong, as he addressed a crowd of Fourth Formers in the Triangle. "We're jolly pleased to see him back again, but it's a bit thick of him to plant Sinclair on us until to-morrow. The beast ought to be sacked this afternoon!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's ambush him, and kick him out ourselves!"

"Jolly good idea!"

"Talking about nerve, what about yours, Armstrong?" asked Buster Boots.

"What about it?" demanded Armstrong.

"I seem to remember that most of you East House fellows played a pretty discreditable part in that rioting the other day," said Boots grimly. "And you were one of the worst, Armstrong. You haven't got much cause to regard yourself as a nineteen-twenty-six model!"

"Go and eat coke!" snorted Armstrong, with a glare. "You Modern House rotters can mind your own business. Sinclair's been pushed into our House, and we're not standing him!"

"Not at any price!" agreed Griffith.

"We've a good mind to kick Kenmore out, too!" declared Turner.

"Kenmore's lucky," said Reggie Pitt, as he paused to listen to the argument. "And so is Parkin. They both supported Sinclair in the West House, and their names weren't even mentioned at the inquiry. You East House chaps are welcome to the pair of 'em. No rubbish shot here. You keep them in that dusthole of yours."

"Funny West House fathead!"

"Think you're everybody now, don't you?"

"We kicked Sinclair out, anyhow!" retorted Reggie. "We kicked him out—and we kept him out."

"Two can play at that game," said Armstrong darkly. "We're going to kick him out, too, or rather, we're not going to let him get back. We won't even let him pack his blessed bag. We'll jolly well drum him out of St. Frank's. Blow the Head! We can't wait until to-morrow morning!"

"Good idea!"

"Let's wait until he comes and then grab him!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with Sinclair!"

The East House juniors were thoroughly excited, and Guy Sinclair, as he strode through Big Arch, had absolutely no inkling of the reception that awaited him. But it was undoubtedly a reception that he richly deserved.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNREHEARSED THRILL.

THE disgraced senior was feeling utterly cowed.

The headmaster's scathing words had penetrated his thick hide, and perhaps for the first time he realised the despicable nature of his recent conduct. He was feeling in a mood for repentance, if such an emotion was possible in his hard, supercilious heart.

But the future loomed black, and Sinclair was thoroughly frightened.

Until the blow had actually fallen, he had hardly appreciated the possible result. He had always sailed somewhat near the edge at St. Frank's; he had taken risks ever since he had come up from the Junior School. And he had been so successful in these escapades that he had grown careless.

But now he was reaping the harvest of his recklessness.

He was stunned, dazed by the force of the blow. There would be no 'Varsity for him, with its long-looked-for joys. He would be sent home in disgrace, and the very thought of interviewing his pater set all sorts of wild ideas into motion in his mind. He daren't go home and face his parents after they had received the Head's report; he would rather run away somewhere, and never face them.

In fact, he was wretched to the very marrow, and was full of self-pity. He felt that Fate had been hard on him, that he was being ill-used. And yet at the same time an awakening conscience told him that he was receiving less than his deserts.

But it was too late; repentance would be useless now.

He was under sentence of expulsion, he was scorned by the entire school, he was due to leave St. Frank's for good on the following morning. Now that he was paying the penalty he was realising the enormity of his misdeeds. Previously they had seemed mere airy trifles.

"There he is!"

"Booh! Blackguard!"

"Grab the cad!"

Guy Sinclair had just emerged from Big Arch, and was walking mechanically towards the East House, following the paved path unseeingly. Now he halted, jerked into sudden alertness by those significant shouts.

He stared, and his heart leapt.

At least twenty juniors were racing towards him, and their attitude was so menacing that there could be no mistaking their intent. They were East House fellows, although Sinclair didn't notice this. He only knew that a horde of juniors were bent upon attacking him.

He gave one gasp, turned on his heel, and fled.

He dodged along, parallel with the junior wing of the School House, and ran faster than he had run since his junior days. He simply bolted. And behind him streamed the yelling crowd of Fourth-Formers.

Sinclair knew what it would mean to be captured. He remembered vividly that other incident, when he had been dipped into a treacle barrel and smothered with feathers. This new ordeal would be twenty times as bad.

He ran headlong, panic-stricken and utterly frightened. Flying round the end of the Ancient House wing, he ripped across the West Square like a fox with the hounds in full cry. A number of Remove fellows stood in the Square and stared. This was a novel scene. A senior, a former head prefect, fleeing from a crowd of juniors.

Sinclair tore round the end of the West House, with a vague idea of making for the main gates. And then suddenly he paused; he pulled up with a jerk. Right close to him stood a rakish-looking automobile, in point of fact, Lord Dorrimore's sports car. It was a racing model of the most expensive type, and the engine was running.

Dorrie himself had just gone indoors to fetch Nelson Lee. And one or two admiring Removites were standing about the car, pointing out its many beauties. One might have imagined they were automobile engineers, judging from their learned comments.

But Sinclair saw none of this, he only saw the empty car. And he knew that the pack was gaining upon him. There was no time to think, no time for hesitation. His next act was more or less automatic.

With one leap he reached the driving-wheel and fumbled with the controls. He was familiar with motor driving, and somehow he got the low gear in. And as he accelerated the crowd surged round.

"Hi! Get out of that, you idiot!" gasped Tommy Watson. "Dorrie's coming——"

"Drag the madman out!"

With a shriek Sinclair slipped the clutch in, and the powerful car gave such a leap forward that it nearly left the ground. Two or three of the excited Fourth-Formers were thrown violently off the footboard, where they had climbed. The car sped towards the main gates like a live thing, and fortunately nobody was hurt.

"Stop him!"

"It's Sinclair; he's gone mad!"

The car scraped through the gateway as though by a miracle. How Sinclair escaped destruction nobody knew. With a perfect roar from the gears the racer charged out into the lane, swerved giddily, and set off towards the village. Somehow Sinclair managed to get the next gear in.

Although he wasn't on top, the car developed an appalling speed as he recklessly opened the throttle. It fairly thundered down the lane. And the scared juniors trooped out from the Triangle and stared.

"He'll kill himself!" gasped Armstrong in alarm.

"The idiot will wreck that car, too!"

"Where's Dorrie? Why didn't somebody stop that maniac?"

"It was all the fault of you East House idiots!" shouted Fullwood. "If you hadn't chased him he wouldn't have gone off his head like that. He's down, anyhow, so why couldn't you leave him alone?"

"We were going to drum him out," said Griffith huskily.

"It's a pity you couldn't leave the thing to the Head!" snorted Fullwood. "The man's expelled, and that doesn't seem to be enough. He'll probably kill himself in that car!"

Without wasting any further words they ran down the lane, feeling that their journey would not be particularly long. For it seemed incredible that Sinclair would get through the village in safety.

In the meantime the expelled senior was gaining a little control over his powerful steed. He was filled with a wild exhilaration. He had escaped. And in this racer he would be able to make a clean break for freedom. He wouldn't even return to his own home, but would start life on his own hook.

The car swung round the bend, and Sinclair's heart nearly stopped beating.

In front of him were a number of heavy motor lorries, one of them seemed to be a motor caravan. They were strung in a line, and proceeding in the same direction as Sinclair. He dimly guessed that the whole affair was a travelling circus, or something of that sort.

But there was just sufficient room for him to scrape past. He could overtake this road-train by swinging over to the offside, and he had to chance whether any other traffic was coming along.

For he found it impossible to pull up. In his sudden alarm he only depressed the accelerator more, and tore down like a charging juggernaut. With a roar and a swirl he thundered past the string of lorries, scraping the hedge on one side, and escaping disaster by mere inches.

And then came the crisis.

He had succeeded in getting past the lorries when he caught sight of a figure crossing the lane a mere twenty yards ahead. And twenty yards, at the speed Sinclair was going, was a mere trifle. There wasn't a single second in which to act.

He didn't notice that all the lorries were stationary, and that a gate was open just ahead, the gate of a big meadow on the outskirts of Bellton. The figure was that of an elderly man, and he was backing across the road, contemplating the view, utterly unconscious of the appalling peril.

At the last second he saw it, but there was no time for him to dodge or move an inch. The car was actually upon him.

Sinclair had no idea of how it happened. If he acted at all it was unconscious. He only knew that he wrenched at the steering-wheel in a mad frenzy; he wrenched without even knowing what he was doing, for he was utterly terrified. It had all happened in a fraction of a moment.

Lord Dorrimore's racer shot past the man in the road, and actually scraped his coat. Then it plunged at the bank, reared up like a thing of life, and crashed through the hedge.

Guy Sinclair soared into the air in a most alarming fashion, like a gigantic stone flung from a catapult. He went completely over the hedge, and there immediately followed a dull, heavy thud.

And then there was silence.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. ANDREW SYLVANUS NOGGS.

THE silence seemed endless.

The man in the road was standing absolutely still, momentarily petrified by the narrowness of his escape. He was staring fascinatedly at Lord Dorrimore's car, which by some freak of chance had wedged itself partly on the bank and partly in the hedge, apparently unharmed. The engine was still purring.

"Mr. Noggs!" shouted another man, running up from the lorry-train. "Good heavens, sir, I thought you were killed——"

"Cease this unseemly prattle, Mr. Ashwood!" exclaimed the other in a deep, booming voice. "I am well. I am safe. Go beyond the hedge and see what has happened there. I fear the worst."

"Quick—come along, you fellows!" shouted Mr. Ashwood, an athletic-looking man of obvious refinement. "The guv'nor's all right, thank goodness! But the driver of this car is as good as dead, I'm afraid."

One or two other men hurried up, and they broke through the hedge, rather fearful of what they would see. Guy Sinclair

was lying in a huddled, unnatural position on the ploughed soil. The meadow was on the opposite side of the lane.

"He's broken his neck, by the look of it!" muttered one of the men.

There was every reason for this fear. Sinclair was lying perfectly still, with his head doubled under his body, and his arms sprawling. With gentle hands the men turned him over and lifted him up. He was breathing, but his face was pale, and he was quite unconscious.

"He's still alive, anyhow," said Mr. Ashwood huskily. "Only a youngster, too—one of those boys from the school, judging by his cap."

"Reckless young idiot!" said one of the others indignantly. "I thought he was going to catch the guv'nor head on!"

"That's what I thought, too," said Mr. Ashwood. "But you've got to admit that he showed amazing presence of mind. He risked his own life in order to avoid an accident, anyhow. Poor kid! I'm afraid he's done for."

Mr. Noggs approached. He came with a slow, deliberate stride, and there was something impressive in his whole bearing. He was an elderly man, with a powerful cast of countenance—heavy featured, clean-shaven, and with bushy eyebrows. His hair was long and flowing, standing out behind his great hat in masses. He wore a coat with an immense fur collar—and, generally, he gave one the impression of being an actor of the old school.

"Let me pass!" he said imperiously. "If this man is dead, then we are indeed in the midst of tragedy. A man can die but once—Shakespeare. Let us hope that that once has not yet occurred."

"He is still alive, Mr. Noggs," said one of the others. "We're thankful to see you alive, too—we thought——"

"Let not your minds dwell upon my personal well-being," interrupted Mr. Noggs firmly. "This unfortunate lad has risked his own life in order to save mine. Are we to stand by and gossip while he breathes his last? Away, Allen, and bring water!"

Mr. Noggs knelt down by Sinclair's side, and raised the unconscious senior's head. But before any first aid could be applied, a crowd of excited juniors burst through the hedge, and flooded round.

"What's happened?"

"Great Scott! Sinclair's been killed!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"He's wrecked Dorrie's car, too!"

The juniors swarmed round, excited, breathless and scared. Mr. Noggs rose majestically to his feet, and his eyes blazed.

"Away!" he thundered. "Who are these striplings who come careening round like a pack of hungry wolves? Leave us, base interrupters! By the shade of Shakespeare, am I to submit to this disturbance?"

Armstrong, who was one of the foremost juniors, stared.

"Not only did I witness the accident, but it came about on my account," replied Mr. Noggs, in his deep voice. "I know not who this boy is, but he will live for ever in my memory as a hero. To my dying breath I shall be grateful to him for saving my life."

"Who—who are you?" he asked blankly.

"Who am I?" repeated Mr. Noggs. "You stand there and ask such blatant questions? I am Noggs—the only Noggs! I am Andrew Sylvanus Noggs!"

"My hat!" said Armstrong.

"Sinclair's alive, you chaps—I don't think he's hurt much!" sang out somebody. "We'd better carry him up to the school at once. Come on—lend a hand! Now then, Griffith, go easy—don't yank him like that!"

About half-a-dozen of the juniors lifted Sinclair from the ground, and gently carried him out of the field. In the meantime, several of the others were tearing back to St. Frank's at top speed, anxious to be back first with the startling news. They didn't wait to find out the extent of Sinclair's injuries. In fact, they took it for granted that he was dead.

They hadn't been in the Triangle for more than ten seconds before the word was being passed round like wildfire. And within five minutes the Headmaster himself was on the scene, together with Mr. Goole and one or two of the other masters. Dorrie was still in the Ancient House with Nelson Lee—and neither of them knew what had been happening.

"I cannot believe that this appalling tale is true," the Head was saying. "Sinclair dead! Killed in a motor accident! Impossible!"

"The very thought is horrifying, sir!" muttered Mr. Goole. "Had we not better hasten down the lane and meet these——"

"It is unnecessary, Mr. Goole," interrupted the Head. "The unfortunate boy is being carried in even now. I fear the rumour is true. How dreadful! After what has just happened, how extremely dreadful!"

They advanced towards the slow procession which had just entered the gates. Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs was in advance, like an undertaker at a funeral. His expression was solemn, and his gait was slow and deliberate. He halted and bowed to the Head.

"What has happened?" asked Dr. Stafford tensely.

"We convey hither a hero, reverend sir," replied Mr. Noggs, with stately dignity. "Fear not—he lives! I know not yet the extent of his hurts, but of his courage there is no question. Bravery never goes out of fashion—Thackeray That being the case, this youth is well up-to-date."

"You say he lives?" panted Mr. Goole. "Thank Heaven! I suspected these rumours were exaggerated."

Sinclair was taken straight indoors—into Nelson Lee's study in the Ancient House, for the Head had plenty of confidence in Lee's medical ability. The boys were dismissed—and they gathered in crowds in the corridors, in the lobby, and in the Triangle.

Sinclair lay full length on Nelson Lee's couch, and round about stood the Head, Mr. Goole, Mr. Pagett, and the picturesque stranger. Nelson Lee looked up after having made an examination.

"There is nothing to worry about, Doctor," he said quietly. "Merely slight concussion and a few bruises. He must have fallen on his head, and will probably remain unconscious for another hour. But there is nothing seriously wrong. No bones broken, at least."

"I am truly thankful!" said the Head fervently.

"If the report of the accident is true, Sinclair has escaped by a miracle," continued Nelson Lee. "I take it that you witnessed the accident, sir?" he added, turning to Mr. Noggs.

"Not only did I witness the accident, but it came about on my account," replied Mr. Noggs, in his deep voice. "I know not who this boy is, but he will live for ever in my memory as a hero. To my dying breath I shall be grateful to him for saving my life. A somewhat old life—a much battered life—but nevertheless, valuable to me, if to nobody else. We are all apt to place a high value on our own miserable bodies."

The Head regarded Mr. Noggs in some surprise.

"You say that this boy saved your life?" he asked.

"In the course of a varied career, I have looked upon death more times than I care to confess—but never so microscopically as this afternoon," replied Mr. Noggs firmly. "I am at a loss to account for my presence here at this moment. By every law of chance I should now be a mangled and battered pulp by the roadside. To this boy I owe my existence. In order to save me, he braved death."

"We have heard that Sinclair—that is the boy's name—wrecked the motor-car, and met with a terrible accident," put in Mr. Goole. "If you can give us any details of the distressing affair——"

"Nothing could be simpler," interrupted Mr. Noggs. "In the first place, there is no wreckage. The car, to the best of my belief, remains whole."

"Dorrie will be pleased to hear that," commented Lee. "He's gone off in a rare stew——"

"Who is this man who values his car above the life of this noble soul who lies unconscious before us?" asked Mr. Noggs sternly. "I blame nobody but myself. In an abstracted moment, I walked backwards across the road—full into the path of the oncoming car. But did this boy kill me? No! Instead, he turned his chariot into the hedge, and went to almost certain death. Providence stepped in, and spared him."

"This is most extraordinary!" said the Head, glancing at the others. "Sinclair! I should hardly have imagined him to be the type of boy to risk his own life for the sake of another's. But we cannot doubt this gentleman's story. I am glad—overwhelmingly glad. It is good to learn that Sinclair has at least a redeeming quality."

CHAPTER XV.

GUY SINCLAIR'S CHANCE.

MR. NOGGS went into further details.

His account of the accident was both picturesque and eloquent. He gave a glowing tribute to Sinclair's presence of mind and self-sacrificing courage. And in this, Mr. Noggs was perfectly sincere.

He really thought that Sinclair had deliberately swerved in order to save him—and he was consequently grateful. He had no suspicion that that swerve had been accidental.

For, to tell the truth, Sinclair scarcely knew anything about it. He had been panic-stricken—helpless with fright. His action in wrenching at the steering-wheel had not been dictated by a courageous heart. Mr. Noggs was unaware that he had escaped death by chance, and nothing else but chance.

And while he told his story—while he held his listeners enthralled by his elocutionary prowess—a subtle change came over the patient. In a word, Sinclair recovered consciousness without anybody in the room being aware of the fact.

At first he heard only a blare of voices. He lay there, only knowing that his head throbbed in a dull, persistent fashion. He

seemed to be flying through space in a roaring monster which refused to obey his controlling hand. Then the illusion vanished, and he knew where he was. He heard the voices—recognised them as such. But he didn't move—his head ached too much, and he just wanted to remain still.

And as consciousness grew clearer and clearer, the import of Mr. Noggs' words penetrated into his intelligence. For a few moments, he merely felt surprised. He was astonished that such a mistake should have been made—that this stranger with the booming voice should imagine that his life had been deliberately spared.

But, second by second, Sinclair appreciated the value of the situation. He knew that he wasn't hurt much, and he remembered that he was booked for expulsion on the following morning. Wasn't there a chance here? Wasn't there an opportunity for him to escape that dread sentence?

He was still more or less dazed, and when he acted it was an impulsive movement. But the cunning was there. He suddenly sat up, and gave a hoarse, gasping cry.

"The old gentleman!" he shouted. "Is he safe? Is the old gentleman safe? Tell me——"

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated the Head, starting round. "The boy is conscious again! Sinclair, control yourself."

But Sinclair appeared to be frantic.

"I have killed him!" he moaned. "I tried to swerve aside—I did my best to avoid him—but it was no good! I've killed the old chap——"

"The gentleman is here—alive and well!" interrupted the Head quietly.

Sinclair stared at Mr. Noggs dazedly.

"Alive!" he muttered. "The old gentleman's alive! Thank Heaven!"

"We are all agreed that the circumstance is a happy one," said Mr. Noggs. "I am grateful to you, young man, for preserving my unworthy life—but let me urge you to look more closely. Is it necessary to harp so much upon the 'old gentleman'? I am experienced—I am slightly withered. I will confess I am troubled with rheumatism. But in the sere and yellow leaf, never! I beseech you to choose your language with greater care."

Mr. Noggs seemed quite upset, but Sinclair took scarcely any notice. He was indifferent to the old actor's affairs—he only wanted to impress the Headmaster.

"Why did I escape?" he muttered miserably. "I didn't want to kill the old gentleman." (Mr. Noggs winced); "but I didn't care what happened to my own skin! I'd rather die! I've got nothing to live for, anyhow!"

"Hush, Sinclair——"

"I'm disgraced, sir!" panted Sinclair feverishly. "I'm ruined! Oh, I deserve it—I know! I can't expect anything else after all the rotten things I've done. But I'm sorry for everything—I've had a lesson I shall never forget! Can't I have a chance? Can't I have another shot, sir? I daren't go home to the pater—he's set his mind on my going to the 'varsity. It'll kill him when he learns——"

"This is very distressing," muttered the Head, with a painful frown. "I am truly sorry for the boy. He seems penitent—and he has undoubtedly performed an action which wipes out much of the stain. I wonder—— No, I'm afraid the circumstances are too——"

"Won't you give me another chance, sir?" breathed Sinclair tensely. "I'll do anything to atone! I know Mr. Stokes doesn't bear me malice—he's too good a sort! I was a fool—I didn't know what I was doing! The thought of having power got into my head and turned it! If I could only have another chance——"

He sank back, panting.

"Dear me, this is painful in the extreme!" said Dr. Stafford. "I should hate to be harsh with the poor boy, particularly in these trying conditions. I really believe he wishes to prove that he is capable of better things. And yet I doubt if I should be justified—— No, his offences were too glaring, too scandalous. And yet—— I'm sure I don't know. Mr, Lee, will you see that Sinclair is made comfortable in the sanatorium? I must consider this matter with Sir John."

Sinclair, pretending to be exhausted, felt a glow of hope within him. The Head was wavering; he had been impressed by this exhibition. And there was Mr. Noggs, too—Mr. Noggs was his champion.

"Your information has rather put me in a quandary, Mr. Noggs," said the Head in a low voice. "This unfortunate boy is under sentence of expulsion. He is to leave the school in disgrace to-morrow morning. But after this heroic action of his——"

"Never!" said Mr. Noggs grimly. "Never! By the ghost of Garrick I protest! This boy has saved my life, has pulled me back from eternity, when I stood upon the brink. If he has sinned, then he has also atoned. That one action wipes out every blot!"

"I wish I could decide," murmured the Head in perplexity. "If the boy has really atoned—— Well, well! I will leave it for the moment. Mr. Noggs, I trust you will excuse me now. I thank you for giving us such a graphic account of the accident."

Mr. Noggs bowed.

"I take it that I am dismissed?" he said. "It is well. To the best of my knowledge a meal is awaiting me, and a voice calls me. Gentlemen, I bid you good-day. But remember! Place any punishment upon that boy at your peril. Adieu!"

He left the room with another sweeping bow, and strode majestically along the passage. In the lobby a crowd of juniors pounced upon him, swarming round like

so many flies round a jam pot. Mr. Noggs found it impossible to proceed. He paused, his eyes gleaming.

"How is he?" asked Nipper. "How's Sinclair?"

"Is it true that he's dead?" shouted Handforth.

"Am I to speak with this babble in progress?" thundered Mr. Noggs. "Have no fear concerning your companion. He lives. Indeed, he has suffered little or no hurt. Away, noisy youths. Have you any knowledge of whom you detain?"

"So Sinclair's all right, eh?" said Handforth. "Well, the chap's not such a rotter as we all thought. He might have been killed."

"He risked his life to save this old gentleman, anyhow," said Watson.

Mr. Noggs started.

"Again!" he muttered. "Am I so withered, then? Alas, it behoves me to repair this damage or I shall never play Hamlet again! You are wrong, my little ladkins. We do not count a man's years until he has nothing else to count—Emerson. I will confess that I can count but little in the way of wordly goods; but enough. I beseech a passage."

"He's a rum old stick!" said Handforth. "Looks like a character out of Dickens!"

"Ah, there you have a master!" said Mr. Noggs enthusiastically. "Dickens! A name to conjure with. A name to juggle with. How many times have I not played the immortal Scrooge? And that reminds me. We are presenting our version of 'A Christmal Carol' on Thursday evening, at six o'clock prompt. The prices are low, the seats are comfortable. Ahem! Forgive me! One is apt to wander in one's enthusiasm!"

The juniors grinned.

"We thought you were a circus proprietor, sir," said Reggie Pitt.

"Great Cæsar!" ejaculated Mr. Noggs aghast. "Have I lived these sixty years—I should say, these fifty years—to hear such a slur? I—the great Noggs. A circus proprietor. Let me flee from this base spot!"

"Well, we heard something about caravans, sir——"

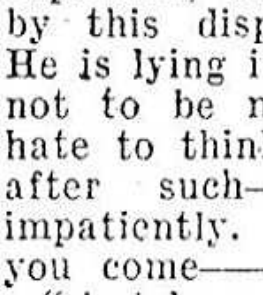
"A man may not live in a caravan without being confused with a circus," sighed Mr. Noggs sadly. "I am an actor. I am a tragedian. I am the proprietor of Nogg's Imperial Theatre, which has been toured throughout every county of England and Wales. Remember. We open to-morrow evening at six o'clock. The prices are low, the seats are comfortable. There will be a change of programme throughout our brief visit to your neighbourhood—— But I am wandering again. Forgive me!"

"By George, a giddy theatre!" said Handforth, with a gleaming eye. "A travelling theatrical show. This is worth looking into, you chaps!"

Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs succeeded in getting out at last, and he had created such an impression that there were plenty of fellows who were determined to obtain all particulars of the travelling theatre as soon as possible.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SCHOOL DECIDES.



SIR JOHN BRENT pursed his lips.

"Certainly, Doctor, the circumstances are peculiar," he said gravely. "The boy has performed a courageous action, and it is to his credit. But do you really think it is sufficient to nullify his previous offences?"

"That is the problem," said the Head slowly. "Personally, I am afraid we should be making a mistake in condoning Sinclair's misdemeanours. I should certainly refuse to undertake the responsibility, Sir John. But as you are here——"

"Come, come; that's too bad!" protested the chairman of the Governors. "You are the headmaster, and I leave this affair in your hands, Doctor. Oh, no, you can't place the onus upon me in that fashion. I leave you to rule the destinies of your own boys. It is for you to decide."

The Head smiled.

"Of course you are right, Sir John," he admitted. "Really, I am in a quandary. I don't know what to do. Sinclair deserves expulsion, but he has mitigated his offences by this display of self-sacrificing courage. He is lying in the sanatorium, and he ought not to be moved for at least a week. I hate to think of him returning in disgrace, after such—— Come in!" he added impatiently. "Upon my word, Phipps, need you come——"

"A telegram, sir," said Phipps evenly.

"Oh, indeed!" said the Head. "Thank you. You needn't wait, Phipps. If there is any answer I will ring."

Phipps retired, and the Head opened the telegram. He started, and glanced across at Sir John with a rather alarmed expression.

"This is extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "Dear me! Most singular! Just as we were talking about the boy, too. This telegram, Sir John, is from Sinclair's father."

"Have you communicated with him regarding——"

"No, I was on the point of writing when we received the news of the accident," said the Head. "A most unpleasant task, I can assure you. The boy's father has no knowledge whatever of the sentence. This telegram, in any case, is on a totally different subject. It appears that Sinclair's mother is dangerously ill."

"H'm!" said Sir John, frowning. "That makes a difference, Doctor. In fact, it rather complicates the situation. Dangerously ill, eh? This news concerning her son may come as a fatal blow."

"That's just what I was thinking," replied Dr. Stafford slowly. "One must be very careful—— Upon my word, Sir John, I have a mind to be magnanimous! The circumstances are very peculiar, and very difficult. Sinclair has performed a praiseworthy action, and his mother is dangerously ill. Such a combination of unexpected events compels me to reconsider my decision. Sinclair shall remain here for a day or two, and then go home for the rest of the term. I will give his father a report of what has happened, and will allow the boy to come back next term if Mr. Sinclair deems it advisable. But we will spare him from the disgrace of expulsion, though he richly deserves it. We cannot risk a disaster to his mother."

"An idea strikes me," said Sir John. "How would it be to leave the matter to the school? I know it would be an unprecedented move, but the school knows so much of this affair that perhaps it would be as well. Tell the school what Sinclair has done, refer to his mother's grave condition, and ask the school to vote. How would that be?"

"I am inclined to think it an excellent suggestion," said the Head nodding. "Yes, Sir John, we will certainly take that course."

And in this way the school received another surprise half an hour later, when the order went forth that every Form was to march into Big Hall. The fellows wondered what it meant, but they were not left long in doubt.

The Head came to the point promptly.

"There is no need for me to remind you of this afternoon's happenings," he exclaimed. "You alf know that Sinclair has been sentenced to expulsion. And I think you all know that he has since performed an action which rather eradicates a portion of the stain."

"Hear, hear, sir!"

"The chap's got some good in him, sir!"

"Why not give him another chance?"

"I am glad to hear that somebody is charitable," said the Head. "You will all agree that Sinclair's misdemeanours warrant him being expelled. But we must not be too harsh; we must allow circumstances to alter cases, and temper justice with mercy. During the last hour I have learned that Sinclair's mother is dangerously ill."

"Oh!"

"His father has wired, asking me to allow the boy to go home, so that he may be near the bedside in case a crisis arises," continued Dr. Stafford. "I am placed in a most difficult position. If Sinclair returns home in disgrace his mother may learn of this blow and it may well prove too much. I am tempted to suggest another course."

"Why not let him stay on, sir?"

"I have already consulted Mr. Stokes, and Mr. Stokes has urged me to forgive the boy," continued the Head. "And Mr. Stokes, as you know, has more cause than any of us to be bitter."

"I'll forgive him, sir!" shouted Dicky Jones shrilly.

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Dicky!"

"I have a mind to send Sinclair home in response to his father's wish," said the Head. "Later, I will report the facts to Mr. Sinclair; but for the present I am inclined to be merciful and say nothing. If Sinclair reveals true penitence, then he will be allowed to return next term, and no more will be said. It will be up to the boy to prove his sincerity."

"Give him another chance, sir!"

"I am unwilling to take this course until I have heard the verdict of the entire school," went on the Head quietly. "It is not my usual custom to consult the school on these matters," he added drily, "but in this instance you are more closely concerned than myself. What am I to do? Allow Sinclair to go to his mother's bedside and return on the old footing, or shall I cast him out for good? All those who wish Sinclair to be given another chance will please raise their hands."

Practically the whole school responded, and a sea of hands confronted the Head.

"Thank you!" he said simply. "I was under no misapprehension regarding your attitude, but I am glad to see such unanimous goodwill. Sinclair has sinned, but his latest act has gone far to retrieve him. You may dismiss."

Upon the whole, the school felt pleased with itself. Nobody really liked an expulsion; it always left a disagreeable taste in the mouth. And perhaps Sinclair would turn over a new leaf after this and prove that the Head's kindness was not misplaced.

The whole affair was over now. And very few fellows realised how closely the fortunes of Mr. Andrew Sylvanus Noggs were to be wrapped up with those of a certain modest member of the Fifth.

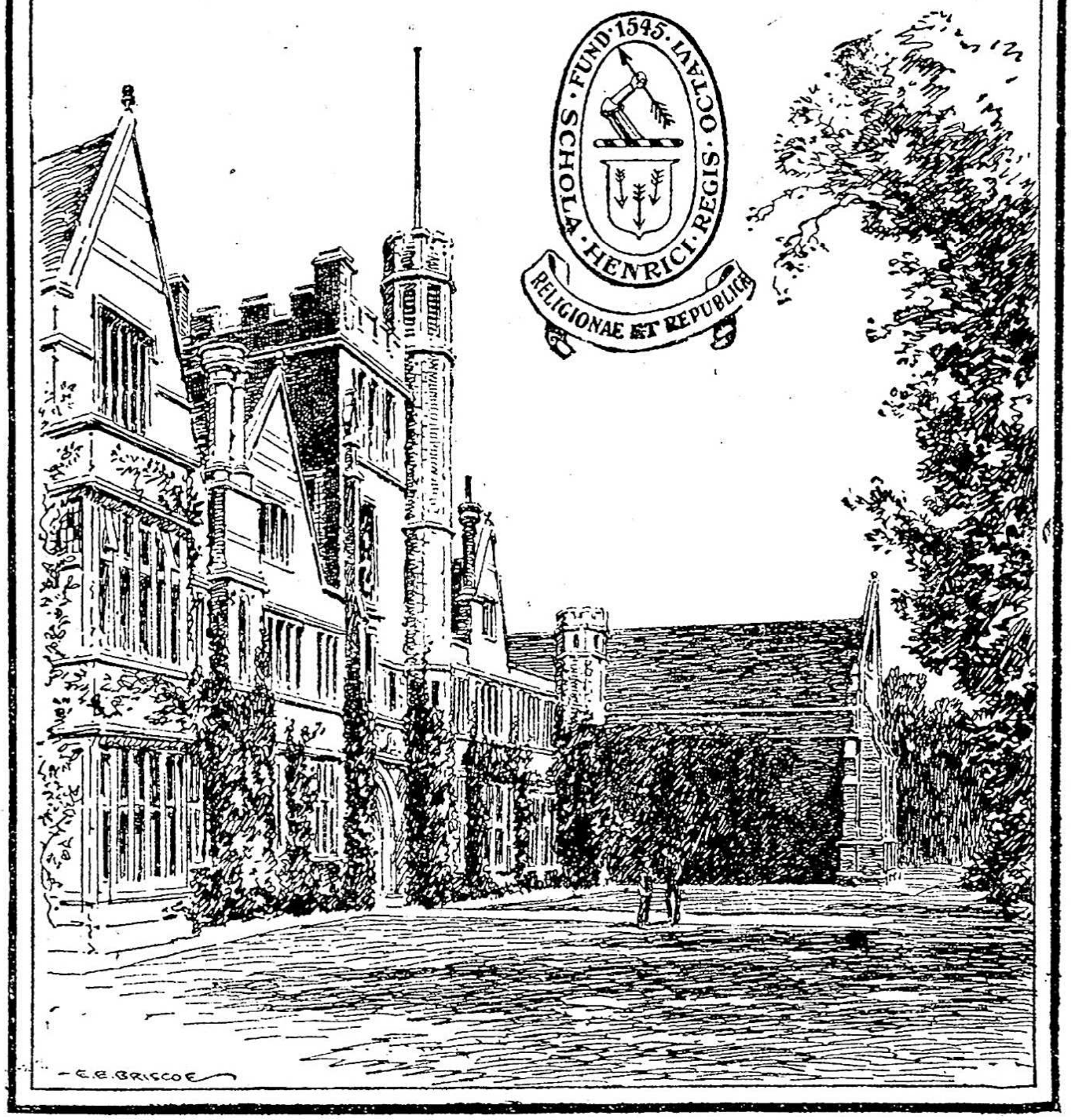
THE END.

With next week's story, entitled "THE LURE OF THE FOOTLIGHTS!" will commence a grand new series of the Boys of St. Frank's as amateur actors. As you can imagine, there will be lots of fun in these coming stories, especially when EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH gets the stage fever.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

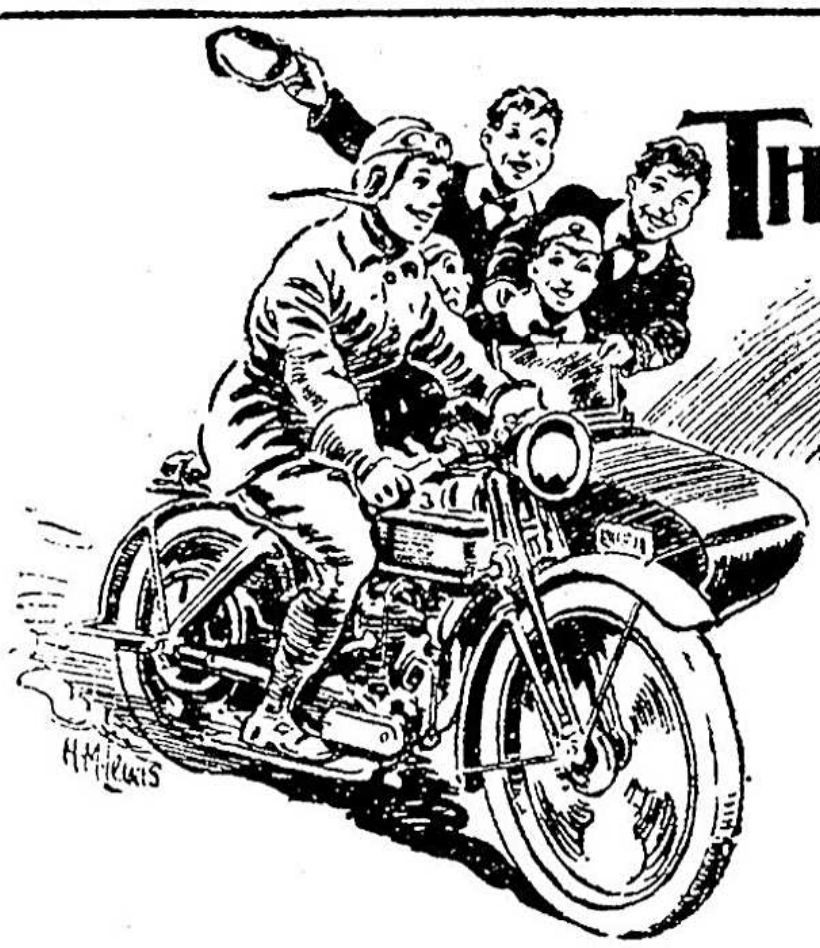
Special Sketch by Mr. Briscoe, for "The Nelson Lee Library," of

KING HENRY VIII SCHOOL, COVENTRY.



Founded by John Hales, in the reign of Henry VIII, this fine old school was removed to its present site in 1884. The school possesses a large gymnasium, a science laboratory, and workshop. There are 300 boys at the school. Rugby football and cricket are the principal games played. The playing fields are 13 acres in extent.

Grand New Serial Just Started.



THE CALCROFT CASE.

Another Clever Story of Sexton Blake, Tinker and the Boys of Calcroft School.

By

SIDNEY DREW

FOR NEW READERS.

TINKER, the brilliant young assistant of the world-famous detective, SEXTON BLAKE, pays a surprise visit to Calcroft, his old school, and meets some of his former school chums. During a motor-cycle spin with a fellow named Bindley, Tinker witnesses a motor-car smash. Foul play is suspected, for the driver is found to have been shot dead by mysterious assailants, who are believed to belong to a race gang. Tinker stays the night at Calcroft, and sees Beilby, an unprincipled little rascal, stealing forth suspiciously after "lights out."

(Now read on.)

"ASLEEP, Pye?"

"Wasser marrer?" asked Pye drowsily, from the neighbouring cot.

"Nobody seems to have noticed it except myself, but young Beilby's out," said Tinker.

"Then I jolly well hope he'll stay out for keeps, lil' beast," said Pye. "Goo'-ni', my ol' raspberry-drop!"

Tinker fell asleep and had a dream. He dreamed that Wilberforce Stott was learning to play the cornet. It was a monstrous instrument, and the curious thing was that as Stott blew into it, Tinker could see the notes of music floating out of it and drifting up towards the sky. The notes were coloured bright green, like the spots on Wilberforce's face. And the tune filled Tinker's soul with grief and pain.

Tinker awoke. The moon had risen and was shining down on wet trees and wet roofs, and showed Tinker the dim rows of white cots.

"Mee-ee-iaw-oo-o-iaw-owowh!"

It was not Wilberforce and a cornet, but the voice of the housekeeper's yellow cat, Cornelius, that had caused and broken Tinker's horrid dream. In the catty world, as a top-note reacher, Cornelius stood unrivalled and alone. At one time, so they said at Calcroft School, cats used to come from long distances to challenge Cornelius to a top-note contest, only to retire with broken hearts and broken voices.

And Cornelius was as nimble and wily as he was musical. He had been fired at with shot-guns, air-guns, catapults, and arrows from bows, but he had never been hit. He had been bombarded with lumps of coal, soap, soap-dishes, boots, slippers, hair-brushes, books, fire-irons, pails of water, cricket-bats, cricket-balls, stumps, and tennis-rackets and hockey-sticks, but he always came up smiling and unhurt.

"Mee-ee-iaw-oo-oo-iaw-weeowooooh!" trilled the cat.

Tinker bore it for some time and then got out of bed and found Bindley's soap. All the windows were open, for at Calcroft they believed in the value of fresh air. Though the voice sounded so close, Cornelius was sitting on the wall of the quadrangle, far out of range, so as a missile the soap was useless. Suddenly the song of Cornelius shut up like a clasp-knife, and, leaping from the wall, the yellow cat streaked across the quadrangle towards the cloisters with the speed of a hare with a couple of greyhounds behind it.

In the distance, Tinker heard either a gate or a door open, and then a faint sound of muffled footfalls. The visitor was Constable Blagg, who had a key to the door in the west wall. The constable had rolled up his oilskin cape and was carrying it in his hand. He flashed his electric lamp on the lower windows of Mr. Pycroft's House and passed on to the House adoining.

"If he's shifted Cornelius, good luck to him!" muttered Tinker, as he replaced Bindley's soap. "Hallo, he's still out, then!"

Beilby's cot was still empty. Deep and musical came the chime of the clock, striking two reverberating notes.

"Two o'clock in the morning, and somebody's wandering boy is still on the wander," Tinker thought. "That's queer."

It was so still that Tinker could hear the gurgle of the water under the arches of the bridge; so quiet that, although the constable's boots were shod with rubber, he heard him pass the house again and close and lock the gate. Then, in his slumbers, Wilberforce Stott made a few rambling remarks.

"My face is not a gargoyle, Fane," he said, "and though I am sadly aware that it is disfigured with green spots, I consider your song about breaking the news to mother that soap and water will not remove them perfectly foolish. At any rate—of course, I do not refer to you—I prefer to have green spots on my face than black spots on my character. And, further——"

"Oh, dry up!" grunted Tinker. "You're a jolly sight worse than Cornelius when you get wound up."

Wilberforce obliged, and then there was a crash. Manners had a flash-lamp under his pillow, and, turning over in bed, he had dislodged the lamp, which had fallen to the floor. The noise awakened Fane.

"What the thump is that row?" he asked sleepily. "If you do that again, you lout, I'll come along and paste you!"

"What with the rotten cat, silly fatheads talking in their sleep, and other fatheads slinging furniture about, I think this dormitory of yours a jolly nice place not to sleep in, Fane," said Tinker.

"Hallo, are you sitting up and taking notice?" said Fane. "Has old Cornelius been chirping a bit, then?"

"Blowing the roof off. He cleared out of it when your prize policeman came along. I say, that young rat of yours, Beilby, hasn't come back."

"Not back?" Fane sat up erect in his cot. "What do you mean by 'not back'? When did he mizzle?".

"When I went for my bag," said Tinker. "He was hitting it for the gate in a mack and tennis-shoes, and I saw him turn his cap inside out."

"That's rummy! I don't mind much what happens to Beilby, but it's queer. He's got something big in view, and that's money—for money's the only thing that will make him chance his arm. What time is it, after eleven?"

"You'd make a better guess if you said half-past two. There goes the clock now—two-thirty a.m. to the second."

Fane got out of bed and inspected Beilby's cot. To make sure that Beilby was not hidden in it, he used his fist and made the springs rattle.

"Well, that's the limit!" he said. "I wonder—— Look here, the little bounder didn't know anything about the murder, or precious little."

"He couldn't have known much; but I caught him with his ear at Pycroft's keyhole after I'd been talking to the inspector."

"Then I'll bet he packed off to find the editor of the 'Calcroft Gazette,'" said Fane. "That rotten little rag of a newspaper is published twice a week—Wednesdays and Saturdays. That's where he's gone, you can bet your boots, expecting to get about a fiver for the thrilling news. If there's only three-halfpence to be got, Beilby will be after it."

"He seems to be taking his time about it, old man," said Tinker. "They must have shut that newspaper office donkey's years ago."

"I hate the little pig," said Fane. "He wouldn't help you if you were dying, but—— Oh, why did you mention him, anyhow?"

Fane looked out of the window, put one leg into bed, and then withdrew it again. He said some unflattering things about Beilby under his breath, and then began to dress.

"Of course, I'm an utter ass!" he growled. "Nobody but a full-sized ass would bother about such a bounder; but, though we detest the kid, he belongs to Pycroft's. Got into some silly mess, I suppose. No chance of his being murdered, is there, Tinker?"

"Not a lot," said Tinker. "You sit tight, Fane, and I'll have a prowl round and look for him. Nobody will jump on my collar for going out."

"We'll go together, then, if you really mean it, but it's a jolly shame that you should lose your shut-eye. He may have been hanging about to watch Blagg clear, that's our policeman. He generally comes between eleven and twelve; but this murder business made him late."

Tinker borrowed Manners' flash-lamp and they tiptoed down to the study, where Fane lent him a pair of Bindley's tennis-shoes. The front door was not only barred, but bolted—a sure sign that Mr. Pycroft had come in last. Fane half-expected to find the missing Beilby huddling in the porch, chilly and terrified, and very sorry for himself; but when Tinker flashed the torch round, no one was there.

"If he's not in the long shed, I don't know what we can do," said Fane.

"Go easy," whispered Tinker. "If he's in the shed, I think I know where to find him. There! What did I tell you?"

The flash-lamp, which Tinker dulled by placing his handkerchief over the glass, revealed Beilby. He was sleeping soundly in the side-car, with a cushion under his head, and the rug pulled up to his chin. He was snug and warm there, and perfectly safe now the constable had made his rounds. Evidently it was Beilby's intention to wait till the charwomen arrived to clean up the classroom and dining-hall and light the fires, and then to creep up to the dormitory.

"Some sauce," grinned Fane, "to pump off your petrol and then use your side-car

as a doss-house. Aren't you going to pay him?"

Tinker looked at the sleeper's cunning little face.

"I'd like to," he said; "but if we wake him he'll be so scared, he'll caterwaul louder than Cornelius. Perhaps we'd better let this sleeping dog lie, my son. Some sauce, as you say, but—— S-sh! Down on your marrow-bones! Who's this?"

Fane and Tinker crouched down behind the motor-cycle. The moon was waning, but the rain had cleared the air and it was very bright. Someone was climbing the wrought-iron gates. The climber dropped to the ground, ran forward, looking back over his shoulder, as if nervous of pursuit, and then, slackening his pace, moved towards Pycroft's House at a cautious walk.

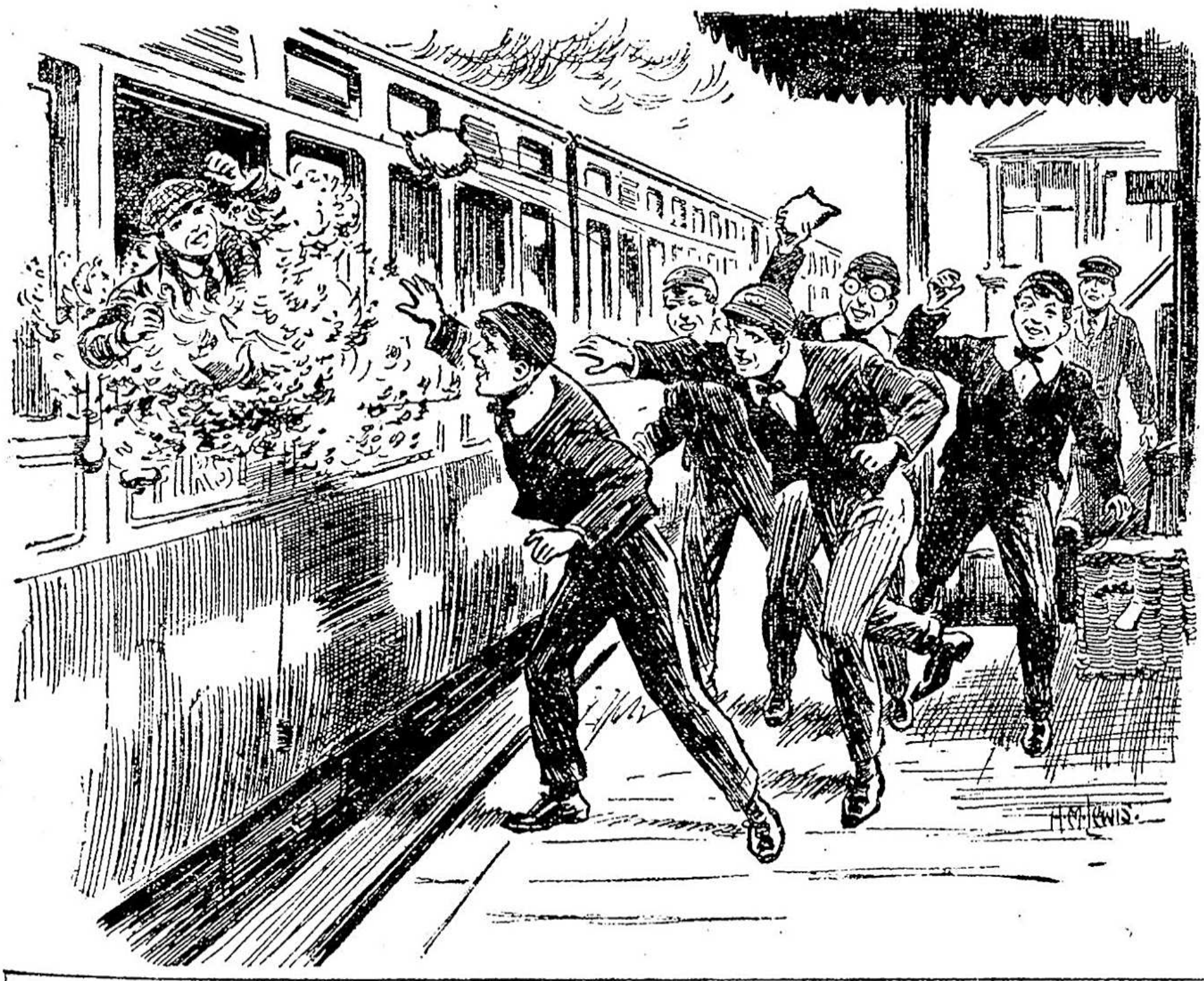
"Roath," muttered Fane in Tinker's ear.

"You've hit it," grunted Tinker. "You've got some late birds at your merry old school, my lad. He'll have a startler when he finds the door ajar."

Evidently Roath did get a startler, for he came running down the steps again. As nothing happened, he went up the steps once more, thinking, no doubt, that the door had been left open by pure accident.

"Perhaps he had leave, for I think he had a key in his hand," said Fane. "If he did have leave, Pycroft must have forgotten all about him. I say, it's awful to leave this snoring beast here without tweaking his little snub nose or giving him a bat over the bean, isn't it?"

"It can't be helped," said Tinker. "I know his sort, and he'll howl blue murder if he's suddenly wakened, for he won't remember where he is for a minute or two. You must save it up and take it out of him to-morrow. Beilby didn't want us to do him any good, but I think we've done that Fifth-Form chap, Roath, a bit of good without knowing it."



A bag of confetti smote Tinker on the chest, burst and smothered him with fragments of coloured paper.

Fane turned the handle of the door and pushed.

"Well, if this don't tear it, Tinker, old bean!" he said, with a low whistle. "The bounder has locked us out!"

"Don't worry," said Tinker. "I've got something in my tool-box that will open that ancient lock in no time. I don't mind

field and certain to win unless a miracle your locks, but if he's bolted us out, he's got us whacked. Let's have a look."

Tinker tried the door in turn, thrust his hands into his pockets and echoed Fane's dismal whistle.

"That's the sort of thing you get for being kind, pal of mine," he said with a grin. "The guy has bolted it right enough, and left us outside in the cold, wide world. When do they open up? It's eight minutes past three."

"The dustpan-and-broom lot get going about six," said Fane. "The cook gets up and let's 'em in. Three hours! I shall be grey-headed by then. If you can burgle a lock, surely you can open a window-catch, Tinker? I don't want to rot about here for three hours."

"What's wrong with that fan-light?" asked Tinker. "Gimme a leg up and hold your breath a minute."

Standing on Fane's shoulders, Tinker did a little manipulating. The fan-light was stiff, but he quickly pushed it back and crawled through.

The next moment he was on the mat inside and opened the door for Fane.

"Good egg!" said Fane. "All the fag for that little beast and then to find him tucked up in your side-car. I'd like to——"

"Ee-ee-ee-ee!" shrieked a terrified voice. "Help! Where am I? Ee-ee-ee-ee!"

Beilby had awakened in a state of frantic terror. As Tinker had anticipated, he did not know from Adam or anyone else where on earth he was, except that he wasn't in the dormitory in his warm cot. He had a thin voice, but a piercingly shrill one.

Expecting half the school to be roused, Tinker fastened the door and fled upstairs after Fane.

Beilby had recovered his wits and was quiet enough now. He crouched in the side-car, shivering and hoping against hope that he had not disturbed anybody who mattered.

"Lucky little beast!" said Fane, peering out of the dormitory window. "Everything's quiet again. I suppose after a dose of Cornelius nothing would wake 'em except an earthquake."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAN WITH THE LOST MEMORY.

THE inquest on the body of James Burton Aggsby, described as a commission agent, of Bethnal Green, London, lasted for nearly three hours, and the coroner's jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown. There were several strange faces in Calcroft Town, for the authorities, after so many outrages, had declared war to the knife against race-gangs, and Scotland Yard had joined hands with the local police and sent down several detectives who were fairly familiar with many of the members of the gangs and with their methods.

A note was passed along to Tinker, and later on Tinker walked into the coffee-room of the Calcroft Arms and discovered the writer of the note there and also the inspector, refreshing themselves with boiled leg of mutton and caper sauce and tankards of bitter beer. The writer of the note was an old friend, Detective Dedgard of Scotland Yard, burly, red-faced and thick-necked.

"I say, Tinker," said Dedgard, without any ceremony, "you thought these beggars had shot the wrong man?"

"I've been asking myself why," said Tinker, "but don't forget when I began to understand his point of view I told the inspector to take no notice of what I'd said."

"And I didn't," put in the inspector. "But why should you have mentioned such a queer thing at all?"

"That's a puzzler. I don't know, but the notion came to me as I was looking down at the poor beggar that the bullet that killed was intended for somebody else. You can't explain these things. That's what I thought at the time and I gave it as my opinion when I was talking to the inspector and Mr. Pycroft."

"But you didn't," said the inspector, reaching for the potatoes. "I remember exactly. When you said it was the wrong man, Pycroft exclaimed: 'What a hideous suggestion,' and you said, flat and plain: 'It's not a suggestion, it's a statement.'"

"You must have had some bee buzzing in your bonnet, Tinker," said the man from Scotland Yard.

"Perhaps I had, but I can't tell what put the bee there and why it buzzed. When are you going to make an arrest?"

"You've got me guessing," said Dedgard. "With all your high ideas, my lad, you couldn't have run a better inquest yourself, could you?"

"I couldn't, and I congratulate the inspector," said Tinker. "You did every old thing on earth except produce the murderer."

The inquest, twice adjourned, reflected a good deal of credit on the police. They had proved the identity of the dead man, produced the owner of the stolen car, and called several witnesses to whom Aggsby owed money for bets and the shopkeepers from whom he had purchased the hat and boots. They had also rounded up several notorious members of a gang who had been at Floringdon races, but all of them were able to prove that they had not been within fifty miles of the scene of the crime.

As a bookmaker, Aggsby was a man in a small way and only attended second-rate race-meetings. Every favourite had won that afternoon, and Aggsby had paid out honestly until the fifth race. Seeing the favourite in this race well ahead of the

happened, he had taken to flight. From what the police could discover, all the people he had welshed were local people, for none of the regular race followers had betted with him.

"Want a lift back to town, Tinker?" asked Detective Dedgard, when the cheese and celery arrived. "I can squeeze you into our car."

"I'm training it," said Tinker. "Well, I hope that arrest will come off soon. It's quite a nice little case and looks so simple, doesn't it? You've only got to think of blood-thirsty race-gangs and a welshing bookmaker and the whole mystery is cleared up. So simple, isn't it? Good-day, inspector. See you again later this evening I suppose, Mr. Dedgard. M'yes, this is the simplest case I've bumped against for ages."

Tinker nodded and grinned as he left the coffee-room.

"I can't make him out at all," said the inspector. "He can't know anything, can he?"

"Can't say, but he's a champion leg-puller," answered Dedgard. "A fine kid, though. He's got Sexton Blake's notions, and they're weird and wonderful, though I must admit they often come off. Blake and I are very good friends, but if I tried to look at things his way, I should go cross-eyed. Now we'll have a smoke and have a jaw over the facts that weren't mentioned in court."

"And a precious poor lot they are, too," said the inspector hopelessly. "You're perfectly convinced that none of the men you questioned could have done it?"

"Absolutely," replied Dedgard. "We made 'em account for every minute, but, of course, we haven't finished yet."

Dedgard and the inspector adjourned to a side-table, where they were joined by Brewis, the local detective, and they put their heads together and talked in low tones.

Tinker was on the platform, waiting for the London train, when the Barren Tor omnibus rolled into the station-yard and deposited Fane, Pye, Bindley, Manners and Wilberforce Stott.

The juniors had not much time to spare, for as they came dashing down the platform Tinker had already taken his seat and the guard's whistle was at his lips.

"There he is," yelled Pye. "That's his face at the window, not a leg of pork, as you might imagine. Cheerio, Tink!"

"Chuck us a lock of your hair," shouted Bindley. "Good-byee!"

A bag of confetti smote Tinker on the chest, burst and smothered him with fragments of coloured paper. Before he could drag up the window, other bags of the same article, fired with deadly aim, whizzed in. When out of range, Tinker lowered the window and looked back. Pye and Manners were waving their caps, but Bindley and Fane were too busy. They had dumped Wilberforce Stott into an empty laundry basket and placed it on a truck. Tinker could see Wilberforce's hob-nailed boots kicking frantically as they wheeled him away, and then the train swung round the curve and hid the cheerful scene from view.

"Gee!" grinned Tinker, surveying the railway carriage. "What a mess! It looks like a wedding. They've absolutely plastered me and the whole show with the rotten stuff, and I expect at the first stop they'll send for the police, taking me for a youthful bridegroom, and want to know if I've chucked the bride out of the window. It'll take me the whole trip to dig the muck out of my ears, neck, and hair."

When the train pulled up, Tinker wisely changed into another compartment. He had bought a couple of newspapers at the bookstall. He discovered that although he had only paid for two he had obtained three.

"What's this rag?" he thought.

For such a small paper it had a large name, "The Curlwall Advertiser, Wisthorpe and Bolling News, and Aperling Advertiser." Tinker looked over it lazily and saw that the advertisements related chiefly to the sale of cattle, sheep, poultry and farm-stock. Then he came across an item of news headed "Mysterious Affair at Wisthorpe," and began to read it.

"Mystery Man, Wisthorpe Cottage Hospital. The man who was found pinned under a motor-car at the foot of Wisthorpe Hill on the evening of the eleventh Inst. still remains unidentified. Owing to the publicity given by the press there have been many inquiries and some visitors, but as yet the man has not been recognised.

"Curiously enough the police have been unable to trace the ownership of the car, which was badly damaged. The man recovered consciousness some hours after being admitted to the hospital, and though his injuries were not very serious he appears to be suffering from complete loss of memory. He had over thirty pounds and a gold half-hunter watch in his possession, but no letters or papers. At the request of the police we repeat his description, which was given in a previous issue.

"Age about thirty-five, height five feet eight, slight build. Clean-shaven, hair and eyes black, complexion dark and very sunburnt. Wore dark navy-blue suit, cotton shirt with narrow blue stripe, soft collar, black silk tie, brown shoes and grey socks. Hat, fawn velour with rather a wide brim. Inquiries to the Chief Constable, Bolling, or to the Cottage Hospital, Wisthorpe."

Tinker quickly tired of the country newspaper and took up a London one, but he had not got rid of Wisthorpe, for there he read:

"CURIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"The unknown motorist, whose identity the police have been trying to establish, has

(*Continued on page* 40.)

CAREERS FOR BOYS

— By A. C. HORTH —

THE BUILDING TRADES.

WHERE TRAINED WORKERS ARE WANTED.

Although the building industry is generally known as the building trade, a large number of separate trades are involved in the construction of buildings, and a large number of skilled men are engaged in building operations. In no branch of the work is there anything approaching a surplus of skilled craftsmen, and considering the vast amount of building now in operation and contemplated in the future, there is likely to be a constant demand for trained workers for many years to come. It has been stated by a trades union official that, while there should be 7,000 apprentices in London alone, there were only 2,000. Recent statistics show that in 1924 there were 62,000 fewer skilled men employed than in 1913, and this with builders complaining that they cannot obtain a sufficient amount of labour.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MANY TRADES.

The principal skilled trades are bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, masonry, plastering, plumbing, painting and decorating, smithing, slating and tiling; but, as a considerable amount of concrete construction is being carried out, concreting can be added. Skilled labourers are required in addition to trained craftsmen. These include scaffolders and navvies, and, of course, paperhangers and glaziers must be included. As steel work enters largely into modern building, an additional trade is involved, that of engineering, which also includes ventilation and heating, as well as sanitation. Most of these trades require a long training before proficiency is reached; but steady employment is assured to those who become efficient craftsmen. Indentured and unindentured apprenticeship prevails in some of the trades, but in most cases boys are taken on as learners.

ADVANTAGES IN THE BUILDING TRADES.

Generally all the skilled trades involved in building operations are full season trades. The rate of pay is usually slightly higher than in many other trades; the conditions as regards health are good, and there is sufficient variety in the work to make it interesting. There is, as a rule, no difficulty in finding employment within reasonable distance, and the hours are not excessive. Weather conditions affect some branches of the industry, but not sufficiently to stop work altogether. The hours of work are generally longer in the summer than in the winter, but conditions vary very much in different parts of the country and with different employers. Payment is usually by the hour, but the principle of placing work out to contract is growing in many parts of the country.

GOOD PROSPECTS FOR THE INDUSTRIOUS BOY.

There are considerable opportunities for the keen boy to get on in almost any of the trades. The boy who has worked well at school, and is good at arithmetic and drawing, especially geometrical drawing, and who takes care to master all the most difficult portions of his trade, will find suitable openings. The position of foreman is one to be aimed at by the ambitious apprentice, but it not only requires a very sound knowledge of his own particular craft, in which he should show the highest skill, but also a knowledge of building construction generally, and some experience in dealing with men. An observant apprentice may pick up sufficient knowledge of other branches of the industry, and by attending classes in building construction can qualify as a clerk of works; and in time, with the aid of a little capital, will be able to start in business for himself.

THE NEED FOR ATTENDING CLASSES.

In London and in most large towns there are trade schools for boys engaged in the building trades; in technical institutes and Polytechnics, there are all kinds of classes suitable for building apprentices, and for the convenience of apprentices who live in districts where there are no classes there are several well-established correspondence schools that offer instruction in many subjects. The boy who takes up one of the building trades as his career should attend a building school or technical institute from the beginning if it is in any way possible. Not only is the theoretical part of his work catered for, but he has opportunities of doing practical work, and this will prove of great value

(*Continued on page* 40.)

(*Continued from page* 38.)

WELL REPRESENTED BY TRADES UNIONS.

There are few trades that offer greater possibilities for advancement than building. A good craftsman will find many opportunities for commencing a business for himself. Many builders, now in a large way of business, have commenced with little or no capital, by accepting contracts, and have gradually built up a reputation for good work. The establishment of a builder's yard is not an expensive matter. The essential appliances can be obtained gradually, and added to as business is increased. The building trades are well looked after by the trades unions, the chief of which are as follows: The Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Workers, the National Federation of Building Trades, the National Builders' Labourers' and Constructional Workers' Society, the National Amalgamated Society of Operative House and Ship Painters and Decorators, the United Operative Plumbers' and Domestic Engineers' Association, and the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers.

"THE CALCROFT CASE"

(*Continued from page* 37.)

vanished. He was found lying unconscious beside a damaged car and removed to the Cottage Hospital at Wisthorpe, when it was found that he was suffering from loss of memory. On returning to the ward last evening, after a brief absence, the nurse in charge discovered that the bed was empty and the patient gone. At once she gave the alarm and a search was made, but without success, and the police telephoned for.

"The man appears to have escaped by climbing through a window and down the thick ivy into the hospital grounds. His only clothing was a suit of flannel pyjamas supplied by the hospital. Up to a late hour he had not been traced. Photograph on back page."

Tinker was scarcely interested enough to turn to the back page and look at the photograph. It was not a very good photograph, for it had been taken in a poorly-lighted hospital ward on a dull day, and was not well-reproduced. All the same, Tinker pursed his lips and whistled as he stared at it, and some memory stirred in his mind.

"Gee! Isn't he like Aggsby, the murdered bookmaker," he thought, "only Aggsby was two inches shorter and going bald. Oh, hang those kids!" Tinker felt in his pocket for a magnifying-glass to examine the photograph, and pulled out a handful of confetti, which he flung out of the window. When he had cleaned out his pocket, he made himself comfortable and went to sleep, and did not awaken until the train was running into the London terminus. He got into a taxi-cab and drove to Baker Street.

"You're back early, young 'un," said Sexton Blake, as his assistant entered the consulting-room.

"Yes, I cleared out as soon as I could get away, guv'nor," said Tinker. "Usual verdict. Did you know they'd sent Dedgard down?"

"He told me he was going," said Sexton Blake. "I suppose they haven't made an arrest yet?"

"If they have I didn't notice it," said Tinker with a grin. "Oh, botheration! here's more of it," he added. "Fane, Pye, Bindley and Manners turned up at the railway-station with that funny kid, Stott, and pasted me with bags of confetti. It was such a mess that I had to clear out of the compartment, and now I haven't got rid of it all. What stuff it is to stick!"

Sexton Blake went on with his writing, after glancing at the clock. He was still writing when Tinker, after unpacking his bag, came out of his bed-room, and then the private detective put down the pen and reached for his pipe.

"You didn't go up to the school again, Tinker?"

"I hadn't time, guv'nor, and there wasn't anything to go for. If I had I believe those kids would have collared me and kept me all night. They grouse that Calcroft is slower than a funeral, but I found it fairly lively. There are lots of places I dislike more than Calcroft School. Hallo, what have you been up to, there? Taking on my job?"

A few cuttings, clipped from the morning newspapers, lay beside the inkstand.

"There are one or two things there you had better docket and file, young 'un," said Sexton Blake. "I notice that the Liverpool Exhibition has been flooded with forged Treasury notes as Wembley was flooded last year. Clever forgeries they are, too. I had a sample sent to me from one of the banks this morning. Neat work, isn't it?"

Tinker took the one pound Treasury note, took it to the window and examined it with great care.

"Best I've ever seen, guv'nor," he said, after comparing the forgery with a genuine note. "They've got the water-mark fine, but the paper's just a trifle too stiff. Do they want you to chase round and find out where they make them?"

"Yes; but I'm not inclined to make a trip to Vienna just now, and I'm sure they're printed in Vienna. It looks like Hirbach's work. It's so absolutely clean and correct. If they find Hirbach, they'll soon find his printing-press. We have one or two specimens of his art, so put that note with them, Tinker."

"Right," said Tinker. "What are the others about? Great pip! What made you cut this out?"

"Oh, that photograph. I cut it out for you," said Sexton Blake. "I noticed how strongly it resembled the man whose inquest you were attending."

It was a photograph of the motorist who had lost his memory and escaped from Wisthorpe Cottage Hospital, and a much clearer reproduction than the one Tinker had seen.

"That's a bit weird, guv'nor," said Tinker. "I was looking at this in the train and thought the same thing. There's a big difference though. Aggsby was nearly bald, and this chap has kept his hair. And yet they are alike. I wonder if they've got him?"

"They've got him in hospital, haven't they? I only read what's printed underneath the photo, that he's lost his memory, and that the police want information about him."

"There's a bit more than that in one of the papers I picked up," said Tinker. "He'd made a run for it in his pyjamas. When the nurse was out of the way he slipped out of the window, climbed down some way and beat it."

"Oh, did he?" asked the private detective, stifling a yawn. "I'm going across to the garage, young 'un."

Blake opened the door just in time to meet a telegraph boy, and took the telegram.

"For you, Tinker," said the private detective.

Tinker opened the envelope, and as he read the telegram he grinned. The telegram had been handed in at Calcroft Town post-office.

"Amazing disappearance of two green spots from Stott's face. Spots of immense value, and must be recovered. Burglary suspected, so come at once. No fee too high.—FANE & COMPANY."

"I don't think it matters much, so there's no answer," said Tinker, handing the slip of paper to Sexton Blake. "Only a jape, guv'nor. Stott managed to push his face into some green dye, and it seems to be wearing off a little. I think we'd better turn that thrilling case down. 'No fee too high' looks tempting, but if they chuck their pocket-money away on three-shilling telegrams they'd want to pay us about fourpence, and sling in an old cricket-bat."

Sexton Blake laughed and went out, and then Tinker changed his mind about not answering the wire, though he had let the boy go. He wrote:

"Sorry cannot come. Search Stott's towel, and if missing valuables there, arrest same. Merry chi-ikes.—TINKER."

In the evening Detective Dedgard paid one of his frequent visits, and Tinker admitted him.

"Gosh! How warm and muggy it is!" said the man from Scotland Yard. "I'm putting on weight, and that makes me feel the heat more."

"You should take more exercise," said Tinker. "If you had a twenty-mile run before breakfast every morning and then lugged a sack of coal from the cellar to the top of the house and back again about umpteen times and gave up eating and drinking and smoking for a month you'd get quite slim again. That's good advice, though I'm not charging anything for it. Got that murderer yet?"

"For the love of Mike don't talk so much!" growled Dedgard. "Where's the guv'nor?"

"Messing about in the laboratory with poison," said Tinker. "He'll come when he's finished, and not before, even if you were the Emperor of Diddleypush. But why on earth did they send you to Calcroft? They don't think you could catch a murderer, do they?"

"I've caught a few in my time, and what they think doesn't worry me, my lad," said Dedgard. "Don't make it too strong, and put plenty of soda-water in it, for I'm boiling hot. Oh, I say! If you're not busy in the morning you might run down in your car and have a look at my wireless. Last night we couldn't get anything off it, except gurgles and squeaks, and I can't do anything with the gadget. The missus likes to hear it going, and she'll be very much obliged to you."

"I'll go if I don't forget," said Tinker, handing Dedgard his usual glass of whisky and soda. "What else have you got to ask me?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes, you have!" said Tinker. "What did the inspector at Calcroft want you to ask me?"

Dedgard looked curiously at Tinker over the top of the glass, and then shook his big head slowly.

(To be continued next week.)

LOOK OUT NEXT WEEK FOR:—

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Another Topping Long Story of the Boys of St. Frank's, and their experiences as Amateur Actors.

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CAREERS FOR BOYS,

in which Mr. A. C. HORTH describes

THE BRICKLAYING TRADE.

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