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Before Donnell could touch the fallen boy again a volley of snowballs was hurled at him.

DISCIPLINE LET LOOSE!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of "The Soldier Housemaster," "The Freak of St. Frank's," and many other Stories. *January 18, 1919.*

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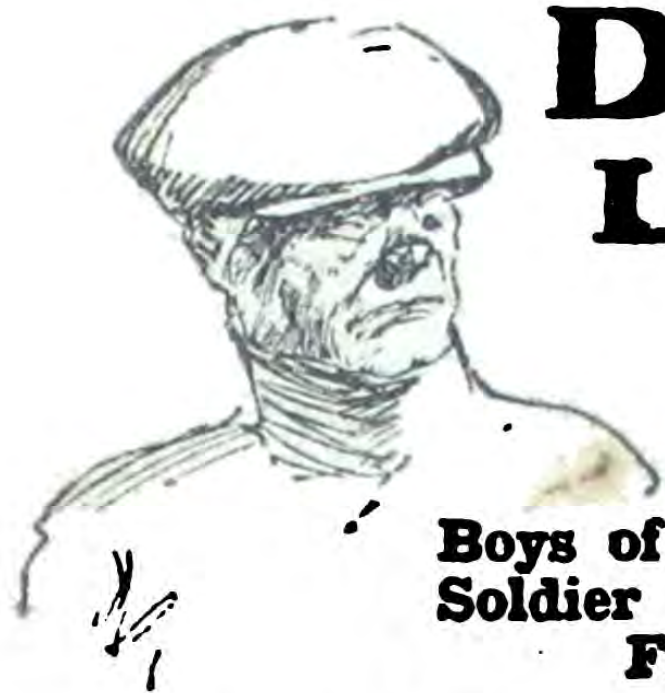
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

SERGEANT DONNELL CATCHES IT—COLD!

"**P** OOR chaps!" said Tommy Watson feelingly.

"Begad! You're right, dear old boy," remarked Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I feel frightfully sympathetic—I do, really. Christine and Co. are havin' a shoein' time."

I nodded in agreement, and we watched the movements of sundry College House juniors on the other side of the Triangle with great interest. I was standing with my chums on the Ancient House steps, and a crowd of other Removites were just inside the lobby.

Afternoon lessons were over, and the short winter's day was drawing to a close. The sky was heavy, with a promise of more snow. There had been several heavy falls lately, and the old Triangle at St. Frank's was six or seven inches deep in crisp, powdery snow. For it was freezing hard, and the countryside was completely in the grip of winter.

A crowd of Ancient House fags were enjoying a game of snowballs over by the gym; but the College House fags were unable to participate in this exciting pastime. They were standing in a miserable line, being drilled by Sergeant Donnell.

This individual was the new drill-instructor of the College House, appointed by Colonel Howard Clinton, the new Housemaster of the College House. Since the colonel's arrival at St. Frank's, at the beginning of the term, there had been very drastic changes—for the unfortunate Monks.

Nelson Lee, of course, was Housemaster on our side, and the Ancient House went on as of old. But Colonel Clinton was no believer in precedent. He made his own rules, and it was the Remove in particular that suffered. Discipline—strict and rigid and harsh—had been the order of the day for the past week or two.

Christine and Co., and the Monks generally, had been in a state of misery and fury ever since the colonel had revealed his true

character. Clinton was not harsh in ordinary matters of school routine, but his ideas on the subject of discipline were weird and wonderful. He had apparently come to St. Frank's with the conviction that schoolboys ought to be drilled into machine-like submission. He had instituted a military tyranny, and the position had grown worse and worse with every day that passed.

Not content with calling the College House the "barracks" and his own study "headquarters," he had appointed three Fifth Formers as officers of the Remove; he had published the edict that all juniors were to salute him, and that they were to salute the so-called officers; he had instituted sentries, and a junior was always to be seen on duty at the foot of the College House steps, pacing rebelliously up and down. And, as a final blow, the colonel had introduced Sergeant Patrick Donnell to his boys, and Donnell was invested with full powers.

In short, Colonel Clinton had turned the College House upside-down, and his system of control was a sheer farce. At least, it would have been a farce if it hadn't been so unbearable. We fellows on the Ancient House side had been inclined to laugh at first; but now we sympathised. We knew that our rivals were passing through a trying ordeal.

The coming of the sergeant had been the worst blow of all. Donnell had only been at St. Frank's a few days, but he had already revealed his character. He was a bully of the worst type—a big man, broad and brawny, of rather forbidding appearance. His puffy, red face was eloquent of the fact that he indulged in heavy drinking, and his little eyes had a hard glitter in them.

The sergeant, as his name indicated, was an Irishman. But he was one of the worst members of that race. Many Irishmen, of course, are wonderfully fine fellows, but others are very much the opposite. And Donnell was a man who hated British boys, and he revelled in this opportunity of exerting his power over the College House juniors.

Colonel Clinton had been foolish enough to

give Donnell full authority to punish the boys for any minor offence. The juniors were compelled to obey the drill instructor in almost everything, and it was a hateful state of affairs. To have such a coarse man in authority over them was scandalous. But the colonel had decreed that it should be so, and there was no appeal against it.

Christine and Co. had already done their best. Dr. Stafford, the Head, had been approached. But the Head took the view that the boys must obey their own Housemaster. And the worthy old doctor could scarcely have adopted any other attitude. It was certainly impossible for him to combine with the boys and side with them against their own Housemaster.

But I had an idea that the Head was bound by other reasons. He was a quiet old gentleman, and perhaps Colonel Clinton's tyrannous methods rather appalled him; it required a man of strength to argue with the colonel. The Head was undoubtedly courageous enough, but he had a horror of "scenes." And so he was allowing the colonel to go his own way; but meanwhile the school governors had been appealed to.

For the present, at least, the unfortunate situation had to continue. Christine and Co. had been bitter in their abuse of Clinton; but now it was Donnell who received all their maledictions. The sergeant was making their lives an absolute misery. He was always spying; he was always inflicting punishments. Ten times a day fellows were reported to the Housemaster. They hardly dared do a thing for fear of being pounced upon and heavily punished. Between Colonel Clinton and his brutal henchman a reign of terror had set in in the College House.

It couldn't last, of course. But before a revolt came the juniors had to suffer. It was necessary for them to be wrought up to the pitch of desperation which would result in a mutiny.

But the very thought of mutiny was impossible. The discipline was too strict—too harsh. The fellows never had an opportunity of collecting together in their own House. And, even if revolt was breathed, there was nobody strong enough in the ranks of the juniors to lead the way.

No wonder Tommy Watson had said "poor chaps"! Months before we had had our own trials in the Ancient House with a brutal individual named Hunter. But Hunter had been merely harsh and cruel; he had made no attempt to introduce a system of military-discipline into the House. This was just the difference. The colonel was, personally, quite a kindly man on occasion; he had performed several decent acts, which indicated the character lying beneath his military exterior. But discipline was everything to him, and he seemed to be insane on the subject. Harshness and cruelty on matters of discipline were, in his opinion, necessary. There wasn't a junior in the school who didn't suspect that Clinton was "touched" on the subject.

And now, in the dusk, Sir Montie and

Tommy and I stood on the Ancient House steps, watching the movements of the unhappy Monks. The Remove, for the time being, was not being persecuted; Sergeant Donnell had a crowd of lags in hand, and was putting them through their drill.

Christine and his two chums appeared from the College House lobby and strolled out into the Triangle. They were in close conversation, and took no notice of the sergeant as they walked within a few yards of him.

"Christine!" came a roar.

The three Monks turned.

"Speaking to me?" said Bob Christine, with studied politeness.

"Yes, I was speaking to you, you young whelp!" shouted the sergeant. "Why didn't you salute me? Salute now—d'you hear?"

"Oh, anything for a quiet life!" snapped Christine.

He saluted—and his chums followed his example. They hadn't got to the stage when they submitted to Donnell's bullying tamely. But it was far better to obey orders; it saved a lot of trouble.

"Now you'll salute again—properly!" snapped the drill instructor.

"Look here, we've saluted once, and—"

"I don't want any lip!" roared Donnell.

"Salute, you young dog! And call me 'sir' next time, or you'll be reported for insubordination."

Christine and Co. saluted like clockwork.

"That's better," growled the sergeant.

"Now you can go."

"Thank you, sir," said Christine meekly.

"We're very much obliged, sir. I hope, sir, that we shall always be polite, sir, in future, sir. If we are disrespectful, sir, you must tell us, sir. At the same time, sir, I wish to say, sir, that—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That yell came from Handforth and Co., who had paused in the middle of the Triangle to listen. Sergeant Donnell had certainly nothing to grumble at; he had ordered Christine to be respectful, and Christine's attitude was certainly all that could be desired.

"You insolent young puppy!" bellowed Donnell.

"I, sir?" exclaimed Christine, in surprise.

"Why, sir, I was only obeying orders, sir."

"Get out of my sight!" snarled the sergeant.

Christine and Co. walked on, grinning joyously. Donnell hadn't been able to do anything further, since he had no excuse. He couldn't report Christine to the Housemaster for being polite! Donnell himself would have got into trouble if he had complained. Even though Christine's politeness had been palpably sarcastic, it made no difference.

"It's the wheeze, my sons," declared Bob Christine, as he approached the Ancient House steps. "Did you hear me being polite to the sergeant, you chaps?"

"Regad! It was quite entertainin', old boy," beamed Sir Montie.

"We'll keep it up, too," said Christine.

"Might as well pull the rotter's leg while we're about it. He can't complain, anyhow."

If we've got to call him 'sir,' we might as well do the job thoroughly. Then, instead of us looking asses, he'll look silly."

"He seems to be taking it out of those fags," I remarked grimly.

Christine and Co. turned and gazed across the snowy Triangle. Sergeant Donnell, unable to vent his rage upon the Removites, was venting it upon the fags. He was shouting at them, abusing them, and delivering cuffs broadcast.

Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, emerged from the gymnasium. These two seniors had been appointed major and captain respectively of the Remove. And while they walked across to the House quite a dozen juniors sullenly saluted them. Grayson and Shaw merely nodded in return, without even troubling to return the salute.

"Just look at that!" growled Christine bitterly. "Parry, of the Fifth, is supposed to be a lieutenant, and he always salutes us. We don't mind the rot with him. But when those other cads just nod, it's unbearable."

"Why don't you complain to Clinton?" I asked.

"What's the good?" said Yorke. "We should only get into a row. Privates ain't supposed to make complaints against officers. Oh, my hat! What's St. Frank's coming to? There'll be a revolution before long!"

"Begad! Don't you think we'd better do somethin'?" asked Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez deliberately. "I am referrin' to that frightful cad over there. I really can't stand here an' be a spectator."

We all turned and gazed through the dusk. Snow was falling now, and it seemed as though a heavy flurry was imminent. Sergeant Donnell was still bullying the Third-Formers. And his temper had not been improved by the little encounter with Christine. The sergeant was hitting the fags about brutally.

One of them—Simms minor—had had enough spirit to protest. And as we watched, Donnell grasped the fag, boxed his ears cruelly, and then sent him spinning. The fag fell over and burst into tears.

"Stop that, you young cub!" snapped the sergeant. "Get up, hang you!"

He applied the toe of his heavy boot to Simms minor's prostrate form, and I looked round at my chums grimly.

"This is where we take a hand," I exclaimed, hot with indignation.

"What the dickens can we do?" asked Watson.

"There's plenty of snow about; and if we pelt the rotter with snowballs he'll get more than he cares for," I replied. "And if he likes to report us to our Housemaster—well, he can report. Mr. Lee won't punish us!"

"Rather not!" exclaimed Reginald Pitt. "On the ball, you chaps!"

Pitt and Grey had just come out, and they were eager to join in the fray. At the same moment Handforth and Church and McClure came tearing across from the direction of the playing-fields.

"Ain't you going to do anything, Nipper?" bawled Handforth, glaring. "Are we going to allow that fag to be half killed? We don't care a rap for Donnell, and I propose we rush him and roll him in the snow."

"You're too late, Handy," I said briskly. "We've already decided what to do. Donnell is going to be snowballed. We'll simply smother him in the barrage!"

"Rather!"

"Pile in, my sons!"

Within a minute half a dozen Ancient House Removites, including myself, were manufacturing snowballs at express speed. Christine and Co. took no hand in the affair, although they would have dearly liked to. But the pleasure would have been too expensive. The most excited of the three was Yorke, and he did not consider the consequences.

"Of course, we can't join in," he said. "but couldn't we just chuck one each while the sergeant isn't looking?"

"Nipper and Co. will do all that's necessary," replied Christine. "I'd love to have a shot, Roddy, but it's not worth it. If all our chaps weren't in it it wouldn't matter so much. But just the three of us would be dropped on in a second. We should be slaughtered by old Clinton."

Christine's words were words of wisdom. He was as plucky as any fellow in the Remove, but he saw no fun in asking for trouble.

Meanwhile, we had manufactured several huge piles of ammunition. We were ready, and I restrained Handforth and some other excited spirits from hurling the snowballs too soon.

"We'll let fly all at once," I said. "Give him a regular fusillade. Donnell's going to catch it hot now!"

"Is he?" grinned Pitt. "I should say he's going to catch it cold!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Get ready, you chaps!" I commanded. "Now—fire!"

With unerring aim fifteen or sixteen snowballs whizzed through the air towards Sergeant Donnell. From the point where we were standing we could aim at him without much danger of hitting his diminutive victims. We had no desire to snowball the fags. But the drill instructor was well under fire.

Half the snowballs missed, shooting past the sergeant in wild disorder. But the other half sped true. And when a man receives eight or nine snowballs at the same moment—well, he knows all about it!

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "Give him another volley!"

The sergeant had been nearly bowled over by the first onslaught. He was smothered with snow, and he turned blindly, snarling with rage, wondering where in the world the attack had come from.

He turned just in time to meet the second volley of snowballs. They plastered themselves over his chest and legs and face with.

deadly force, and the drill instructor staggered, falling headlong.

"You young cubs!" he bellowed wildly, scrambling up.

He was soon down again, however, for the next volley was even more accurate than the last. The man was simply pelted until he couldn't stand. And at last he remained down.

"That's for being a bully!" roared several chaps.

"Don't throw any more!" I hissed. "Let him think it's all over—and then give him another taste when he's not expecting it!"

"Good wheeze!" murmured Jack Grey.

We waited, and Sergeant Donnell imagined that the battle was over. He rose to his feet, cursing under his breath. And then he ducked, for about twenty fresh snowballs came whizzing through the air towards him. One of them, I saw, had left the hand of Yorke, of the College House. That excited junior had not been able to restrain his desire to be in the fight.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Over again, by George!" yelled Handforth.

And the sergeant was over. But this time he sprang up like a Jack-in-the-box and came charging across with his head down. Some of the fellows scattered, but I stood my ground, together with Handforth and seven or eight others.

"You'll suffer for this!" snarled the sergeant, gasping painfully for breath. "I'll teach you to snowball me, you young demons! I'm going to report you to your infernal Housemaster——"

"You can report what you like!" I snapped. "And you'd better not refer to Mr. Lee in those terms, either. You're out of place here, Sergeant Donnell. You ought to be in charge of a gang of criminals."

"Rather!" said Handforth. "Birds of a feather—eh?"

The drill instructor was speechless for a moment.

"You think you're safe, being boys of the Ancient House," he exclaimed at last. "But we'll see about that!" He twirled round. "As for you," he went on, pointing at Yorke, "I'm going to make an example of you!"

"I knew what it would be!" growled Christine crossly.

"What have I done?" demanded Yorke.

"You took part in this outrage," said the sergeant fiercely. "I can't touch these other kids, but I can touch you! I'm going to punish you so that you won't be able to see straight again for a week! You threw a snowball at me——"

"Yes, and I'm jolly glad I did!" roared Yorke recklessly. "It hit you in the chest—and I wish it had burst over your beastly face! If you like to report me to the colonel you can do it—and rats to you!"

"Good for you, Yorkey!" yelled Handforth gleefully. "Tell him off!"

"You hold your lip!" snarled Donnell.

He strode forward and seized the unfortunate Yorke roughly. Handforth uttered a

snort, and was about to interfere when I caught hold of him and pulled him back.

He struggled wrathfully.

"Lemme go, Nipper!" he bawled.

"Don't be an ass!" I said. "We can't carry the thing any further. Donnell's yanking Yorke off to the colonel, I expect. The fathead asked for trouble by throwing that snowball. I don't exactly blame him, but we can't butt in now."

"Look here!" roared Handforth. "I'm not going to——"

"Shut up, Handy!" put in Pitt. "What's Donnell up to over there?"

The sergeant had marched his prisoner over to the gymnasium, where the snow-filled wind cut round the building icily. It was the coldest and most exposed spot of the whole Triangle. Yorke was placed with his back about eight feet from the gymnasium wall, and the wind whistled round him shrilly, the snowflakes now descending in ever-increasing numbers.

"Salute!" barked the sergeant.

Yorke saluted sullenly, wondering what his punishment was to be. Donnell was almost mad with fury, and the junior expected unusual violence. But the sergeant had other ideas in mind.

"Keep your hand at the salute!" he roared, as Yorke was about to drop it. "Obey my orders, or I'll report you to the colonel for cells!"

This threat was quite sufficient. "Cells" consisted of being locked away in an attic, without food, for perhaps a whole day. It was one of Colonel Clinton's methods of "disciplinary" punishment.

"Now, Private Yorke," said Sergeant Donnell, with relish. "I'm going to punish you as you deserve, you insubordinate little brat. You've got to stand like that—with your hand at the salute—for an hour!"

"I shall freeze!" shouted Yorke hotly.

"No back answers!" rasped the sergeant. "You'll do as I tell you! If you move a finger even, I shall take you straight to the orderly-room, and you'll be given cells for two days. Now then, stand straight!"

Yorke was scared, but there was no getting out of it. He was compelled to stand there, in the icy wind, perfectly motionless at the salute—for a whole hour! It was a drastic punishment indeed!"

CHAPTER II.

THE "DEATH" OF RODDY YORKE.

"**T**ENTION!" thundered Sergeant Donnell.

Five minutes had passed, and the brutal drill-instructor was standing before eight Remove fellows. The fags had vanished during the snowballing, but Donnell had collected these other juniors together before they could flee.

His sole object in drilling them was to keep his eye upon the unfortunate Yorke. It was the sergeant's intention to remain in the

Triangle for an hour, and he thought he might as well make some of the juniors keep him company.

This system of punishment—making a boy stand motionless at the salute for an hour—was an indication of Donnell's brutal nature. He was willing to stay out in the cold himself so that he could make his victim suffer. But the sergeant was able to move about and to keep himself warm. Yorke's position was absolutely awful.

It was just about tea-time, but Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were still against the Ancient House steps. Handforth and Co. were there, too, and Pitt and Grey were just inside the lobby with some other fellows.

"I'm going to Mr. Lee!" declared Handforth firmly.

"What for?" I asked.

"What for?" repeated Edward Oswald. "You ought to know! Do you think I'm going to sit down to my tea, knowing that Yorke is out here, slowly freezing to death? I'm going to get help!"

"Rather!" said McClure. "Donnell's a beast. I don't suppose he realises what he's doing. Why, Yorke will drop dead before the hour's up!"

I shook my head.

"No, he won't," I said. "He'll collapse within half an hour, I expect. The sergeant may expect him to squeal for mercy—that's what Donnell would like! And if poor old Yorke is compelled to stand over there for an hour, or even for half that time, he'll be only fit for the hospital for weeks. He can't stand such exposure for——"

"And you're telling me not to go to Mr. Lee?" snorted Handforth. "I'm going now, and you can do what you like!"

"Hold on!" I put in. "Yorke is going to stand perfectly still for the whole hour. And when Donnell speaks to him he won't reply—he'll be like a log of wood."

"Eh?" said Watson.

"He'll be as rigid as a statue——"

"What?"

"He'll give Donnell a terrific fright——"

"What the dickens do you think you're jawing about?" snorted Handforth, glaring.

"I'm going to explain," I replied briskly. "One thing's certain—we're not going to let Donnell keep Yorke there. And we're not going to appeal to Mr. Lee, either. We'll take the matter in hand ourselves."

"Rescue Yorke by force?"

"No. There's a splendid chance here of having a little game with the sergeant," I explained grimly. "He needs teaching a lesson. Force wouldn't do, so we're going to employ strategy."

"And leave Yorke standing there meanwhile?" asked Handforth sarcastically.

"He won't have to stand long—if everybody helps me at once," I replied. "Come inside, and I'll expound."

"You'll do which?"

"Explain—describe the wheeze," I said briskly.

The others were rather puzzled, but they

followed me into the lobby, which was now brilliantly lit by the electric lamps overhead. The dusk in the Triangle was deep, and it would be practically dark by the time the sergeant's hour was up.

"Nipper thinks he's got some idea or other," shouted Handforth. "Collect round, you chaps, while he explodes—no, I mean 'expounds.'"

Pitt and Grey joined us, and immediately afterwards De Valerie and Somerton strolled up, with Burton and Yakama. The Trotwood twins appeared from the Remove passage, and there was quite a collection of fellows in the lobby. They all knew about Yorke's position, for it had been the sole subject of conversation for the last five minutes. There was considerable indignation, too.

"What is it—a rescue?" asked De Valerie.

"Yes; and something else, too," I replied calmly. "Look here, we've got to be sharp about this affair, so we don't want a lot of talk. Do you remember that old guy some of the fellows made last November? It's a figure of about your size, Handy, and looks a bit like you, too——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you comparing me to a guy?" bawled Handforth.

I sighed.

"What a touchy chap you are!" I exclaimed. "As a matter of fact, that old guy looks as much like me as anybody else. I spotted it the other day in one of the box-rooms. The chaps who made it were pretty smart at the job. An old Eton suit was used, and there's a mask for a face——"

"What's that got to do with Yorke?" demanded Watson, staring.

"Everything," I replied. "I want two or three of you to rush to the box-room and get that old dummy. All we've got to do is to put somebody's cap on it and fix one of the arms at the salute. See? Then we'll distract Donnell's attention and rescue Yorke—without him knowing of it."

"But he'll know a minute afterwards, when he sees that Yorke isn't there," said Grey, looking puzzled.

"No, he won't," grinned Pitt calmly. "I can see what the wheeze is. It's ripping—it's absolutely top-hole! When Donnell looks over towards the gym, again he'll still see Yorke there—or think so, anyhow!"

"Exactly!" I agreed. "But it won't be Yorke at all. It'll be that old dummy—and the sergeant will be nicely diddled, until he makes a close investigation. It'll be rather a lark if Donnell starts talking to it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I call it potty!" said Handforth flatly. "Why, the sergeant will spot the detection in less than two jiffs! He's not blind, I suppose?"

"He won't spot it for a minute or two, anyhow—and that'll give Yorke time enough to get away," I replied patiently. "Besides, it's nearly dark, and the snow's coming down more thickly than ever. It's a ten-to-one chance that Donnell doesn't find out the trick

until he makes a close examination. And there might be some fun."

While I had been speaking, Pitt, full of enthusiasm, had dashed off with several other fellows, and they soon returned with the "guy." It was a figure made to represent a junior schoolboy, and had been remarkably well done. Of course, in a strong light nobody would have been deceived; but in the dim Triangle, with the snow as an added advantage, the figure would pass very well for Yorke.

"Don't you see how we're helped?" I asked, as we set about faking up the figure. "Yorke has been told to stand motionless at the salute. Well, this thing will stand motionless—it can't do anything else."

"It might blow over," remarked Watson.

"Begad! That would be rather rippin', dear old boys," smiled Tregellis-West. "The sergeant would think that Yorke had collapsed, you know. But hadn't we better buck up? The poor old fellow's been standin' out there for ten minutes already."

"Yes, hurry up, my sons!" I said crisply.

It didn't take long to fake up the figure. Plenty of string was forthcoming, and the arm was tied securely to the head, with the elbow bent. In a dim light it looked exactly as though the figure was saluting. A cap on the top of it, pulled over the mask, completed the head portion.

De Valerie had thoughtfully fetched a couple of sticks, and these were secured to the back of the thing, and they formed excellent props. Within five minutes we were all ready to make the substitution.

"Yorke's still there," called Grey from the door.

"What about Donnell?" I asked.

"He's drilling those other Remove chaps."

"Well, look here, he hasn't got to see what we're up to," I went on quickly. "De Valerie, you'd better take Handforth and McClure and four or five other chaps and make a frontal attack on the sergeant, so to speak. There's no need to be violent—just engage his attention. I'll see to the rest."

"Leave it to me," said De Valerie promptly.

Handforth didn't quite like the idea of being under De Valerie's leadership; he wanted to take command himself. But there was no time for argument. The party hurried off across the Triangle, and I smuggled the dummy out, carefully covered by Pitt and Sir Montie and Watson. From the steps we watched De Valerie's little band march over to Donnell and address him.

The snow was coming down hard now, but the sky over towards the West had lightened a trifle, and the Triangle was by no means dark. But the only people in it were Donnell and the Removites. Everybody who could be indoors was indoors. But we had work on hand, and postponed tea.

"Now's our chance!" said Pitt suddenly. "Look! Yorke's taken his hand down, and I believe he's going to slip off."

This was, indeed, the case. But the ser-

geant was fully engaged with the Ancient House fellows, abusing them roundly. And we, making a slight detour, arrived at the gymnasium wall without our movements being seen. We ran right into Yorke as he was coming away.

"I'm going to complain to the Head!" he chattered, his face blue with cold. "It'll kill me if I stand out in this snow for an hour——"

"That's all right," I exclaimed softly. "We're going to put this fellow in your place, Yorke, as a substitute. I'll bet a quid that Donnell doesn't know the difference! That's not an insult——"

"My hat!" gasped Yorke, livening up. "What a stunning idea! The sergeant won't know the difference unless he comes close! But you'll have to buck up!"

We did buck up. Within a minute the figure was securely propped into position, and there was not much fear of the wind blowing it down. At close quarters, in the present half-light, it could easily be seen that the figure was not human, but was merely a dummy.

But when we had scooted round back to the Ancient House steps we uttered many chuckles of delight. At this distance I should have sworn that Yorke was still standing against the gymnasium wall. The old guy looked exactly like the Removite, standing motionless at the salute.

"You'd better keep in the background, Yorke," I said warningly. "If Donnell spots you, it'll ruin the whole thing. Hallo! The other chaps are coming back now. They've done their bit splendidly."

"All serene!" grinned De Valerie, as he came up with the others. "We've been chip-pin' Donnell to death, but he's got relief now. He didn't look round once——"

"But he's looking round at present," interrupted Pitt, grinning.

We all stared across the Triangle. The sergeant, free of his persecutors, had turned back to his "squad." He also looked long in the direction of the gymnasium, and was apparently satisfied, for he went on with his drill instruction.

"It's worked," I grinned. "Who's game to see the thing through? We may have to wait half an hour in the snow, but I reckon it'll be worth it. We can take up our positions in the shrubbery, just against the gym."

Nearly everybody was eager to witness the finish of the trick. Overcoats and mufflers were fetched out, and tea was again forgotten. If the fellows had been compelled to go out into the Triangle in that snow they would have grumbled enormously. But when it was a matter of a jape, it made all the difference. They were willing to suffer discomfort if there was any prospect of being rewarded.

There were about twelve of us altogether who essayed to witness the sergeant's discomfiture. The other Removites preferred the warmth and comfort of their own studies.

Later on they wished that they had come out with us.

We reached the shelter of the shrubbery without incident, and easily took up our positions at the edge of the trees, so that we could look right out upon the dummy figure. Our place of concealment was quite sheltered from the wind, too, and the discomfort wasn't half so bad as we had anticipated.

"No talking, mind," I whispered. "And if anything funny happens, don't laugh. At the first sound Donnell will suspect, and the whole of the game will be spoilt. We've got to wait patiently; but I don't suppose the sergeant will wait until the hour's up."

"I've been standing there for about twenty-five minutes already," grinned Yorke. "I say, I shall get into trouble for this afterwards; but I don't care! Clinton can't possibly uphold that beast in such a rotten piece of brutality."

We spoke only in whispers, and these soon died down. The drill-instructor, we could see, was getting tired. The light was fading with every moment, and a fresh bank of clouds had caused the Triangle to become very gloomy indeed, and the thickness was increased by the heavy flurries of snow which swept across the Triangle. We, however, only received a few flakes on the edge of the wind.

Ten minutes later Donnell dismissed the juniors—much to their relief. They scuttled indoors quickly—although they had really come to no harm. The sergeant had been exercising them so strenuously that they were probably in a glow of warmth.

Donnell himself had been casting frequent glances towards the gym. Yorke was still standing there, and he was rather uncomfortably still. There seemed to be something unnatural about his attitude, and the sergeant realised, for the first time, that his order had been unduly harsh.

His temper had subsided completely, and he generously came to the conclusion that Yorke had had sufficient punishment. Moreover, the snowfall was now most chilling, and Donnell wanted to get indoors to his own fire. He began to see that his temper had led him into suffering discomfort on his own account.

He strode over towards the gym, and halted ten or twelve feet from the motionless figure.

"That's all right, Private Yorke," he growled. "You can go indoors now."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Handforth explosively.

"Shurrup, you ass!"

The still figure made no reply—which wasn't very surprising!

"Can't you hear me, boy?" snapped Donnell, moving closer. "You can go indoors," he added, raising his voice. "Don't stand there like a dummy!"

We nearly burst ourselves with suppressed merriment. It was extremely funny to hear the bullying sergeant addressing an old, stuffed guy, and expecting it to answer! But, of course, the trick would soon be exposed now.

"I'll make you smart for this!" growled Donnell, striding forward.

The snowfall had increased, and he could hardly see ten feet ahead of him. And, to our joy, the sergeant was still deceived when he stood right close to Yorke's double. The dimness and the snow made it almost impossible for the drill-instructor to see the true state of affairs. Moreover, the snow had collected on the figure's shoulders and chest and head until it was almost smothered.

"What's the matter with you, Yorke?" demanded Donnell anxiously.

We easily detected the change in his voice. He was growing concerned now. That mass of snow on "Yorke's" shoulders indicated that the junior had not even troubled to shake it off. And the statue-like stillness of the junior was most disconcerting. Being quite positive that he was facing Yorke, it was only natural that Donnell should not suspect the truth.

"Wake up, confound you!" growled the man huskily.

He took hold of the figure's shoulder and shook it. The next second he started back with a gasp of horror. For Yorke had toppled over stiffly, with the most horrible rigidity. It was absolutely deathlike.

"Good heavens!" gasped Donnell, panting for breath.

He stared down at the figure lying so close to his feet. The legs, even, had not fallen limply, but were stuck out as though frozen! The sergeant was frightened out of his life, and he stood as though petrified.

"He's dead!" muttered the man hoarsely. "He's frozen to death!"

And the most amazing thing of all was that we, in our concealment, did not yell with laughter. But we didn't. The joke was too rich to be spoilt so early. We waited, nearly choking with suppressed merriment.

CHAPTER III.

THE JOKE OF THE TERM.

SERGEANT DONNELL was horrified.

In that dreadful moment he fully believed that Roddy Yorke was dead—frozen stiff! And it was he—Donnell—who had given the lad the order which had led to this ghastly tragedy!

The sergeant wouldn't have been so concerned if he had seen into the clump of trees so near to him. But we had no pity. This lesson was well needed, and it was panning out far better than we had expected.

Donnell had sentenced Yorke to a heartless punishment, and it was only right that the man should be given a fright. He believed that the junior had frozen as he stood, owing to the exposure and the rigid position.

The figure looked horribly still and distorted as it lay there in the snow. Already it was being covered by the rapidly falling flakes. And Donnell, shivering with fright and panic, stood close by, not daring to investigate further.

I had never dreamed of this gorgeous development; but it was only natural, after all. The sergeant would have been willing to swear on oath that Yorke had been standing against the gym. ever since he received the order. So how could there be any trickery? The idea of a substitution never entered Donnell's head. He had no possible reason for suspecting such a thing. Therefore the figure's distorted rigidity suggested only one thing—that Yorke was dead!

"The young fool!" muttered the sergeant hoarsely. "Why didn't he move?"

Donnell apparently forgot that he had given Yorke express orders not to move. But was amazed that the junior should have allowed himself to freeze to death as he stood! If it had actually happened it would have been amazing!

The sergeant's wits seemed to return to him, for he bent down, and then fell upon one knee beside the "body." I was almost relieved, for I badly wanted to yell. The exposure could only be a matter of seconds now.

But another unexpected thing occurred.

Before Donnell could touch the figure he heard the sound of a cough behind him. He turned, and saw somebody walking rapidly towards the College House, his head down.

"Clinton!" murmured Reginald Pitt joyfully.

"There will be some fun, my good friends," breathed Nicodemus Trotwood.

That curious Removite was almost next to me, and he was enjoying the scene immensely. The arrival of the colonel himself was too rich for words; but for a moment we feared that Clinton was going to pass by without noticing Donnell's bent figure. The sergeant himself evidently meant to say nothing.

But Colonel Clinton suddenly halted.

"Who's that?" he demanded sharply.

The sergeant scrambled hastily to his feet.

"It's me, sir," he gasped, in an unsteady voice.

"What on earth are you doing there, Donnell?" snapped the colonel. "Come indoors at once——"

"Something—something's happened, sir!" said Donnell hoarsely.

"Eh? What are you talking about, man?"

Clinton walked nearer, peering through the gloom. We could just see him, and the thought that he, too, was to be japed was a delight to us. We held ourselves in check, nearly weeping with mirth.

"What's the meaning of this, sergeant?" went on the Housemaster sharply. "I have no intention of standing out here in the snow—— Good gracious! What—what is that lying in the snow there?"

Sergeant Donnell gulped.

"It's—it's Yorke, sir!" he panted fearfully.

"Yorke!" roared the colonel.

"Yes, sir—Yorke, of the Remove——"

"You fool!" shouted Clinton. "What is the boy doing on the ground? Has he been hurt? Don't stand there mouthing at me,

Donnell! You are as white as a sheet, man! Pull yourself together."

The colonel moved forward a pace or two.

"Yorke!" he rapped out. "Get up, you young idiot! You'll catch your death of cold lying there! Do you hear me, Yorke?"

Roddy Yorke, next to me, had the greatest difficulty in smothering the gasp of laughter which insisted upon being released. But he managed to keep quiet, except for a little gurgling sound, which was unheard by the two men, owing to the high whistle of the wind.

"The boy doesn't answer!" exclaimed the colonel, in a startled voice. "Good heavens! What have you done to him, Donnell?"

"Nun—nothing, sir!" gasped the sergeant.

"Don't tell lies, confound you!" shouted Clinton, in alarm. "The boy is incapable of speaking, apparently. You have been knocking him about, Donnell! I have warned you against hitting the boys——"

"I—I didn't touch him, sir!" interrupted Donnell truthfully. "There'll be terrible trouble over this, sir! When Dr. Stafford learns that Yorke is dead——"

Colonel Clinton started.

"Dead!" he echoed, aghast. "Dead!"

"I'm sure the boy's dead, sir," said Donnell, shivering. "He's—he's stiff! When I shook him he fell over—rigid and still! Look at his legs, sir! They're frozen——"

"This is terrible, Donnell—terrible!" exclaimed the colonel. "We must take the boy indoors at once. How did he meet with this awful catastrophe? I presume some of the other juniors set upon him for some reason?"

"No, sir," gasped the sergeant. "He—he was standing against the wall. He—he threw a snowball at me, and I—I punished him——"

"What?" shouted the colonel. "Then you are responsible for this tragedy, Donnell? You told me a moment ago that you did not touch him! What do you mean by telling such falsehoods——"

"It's true, sir—I didn't touch him!" panted the drill-instructor. "I just told him to stand by that wall for a few minutes until I dismissed some boys I was drilling. I—I forgot him, and he must have collapsed!"

This version was a novel one, and Donnell could only have voiced it in a panic, for a dozen fellows could explain the actual truth. Both Colonel Clinton and the sergeant were thoroughly startled, but the latter was mortally scared in addition.

"It wasn't my fault, sir," he muttered hoarsely. "I—I didn't think——"

The colonel cut him short.

"I will talk to you of this affair later, Donnell," he said. "We must get the unfortunate boy into the College House. The doctor must be fetched immediately. It is foolish to assume that Yorke is dead."

"But he's stiff, sir——"

"Nonsense! You are in a panic!" snapped Clinton. "Help me to——"

The colonel paused abruptly. A sound had come from the still figure! It was a moan—a low, awful-sounding moan! The grin on my face vanished, and I looked at my chums

in a startled way. They, too, were no longer grinning.

"Did—did you hear anything?" breathed Handforth faintly.

"It must have been fancy," I muttered. "But I'm sure I heard—— Great Scott!"

A second moan had sounded; this time much stronger. And, without a shadow of doubt, it came from the dummy figure!

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie blankly.

Tommy Watson and Pitt and the others were equally as startled. What on earth was happening? The dummy—the stuffed "guy"—was moaning! I pulled myself together with an effort, and grabbed Yorke's arm. The College House junior was simply amazed by this unexpected event.

"It must be the wind!" I said softly. "Don't look scared, you ass!"

"But—but——"

Yorke was interrupted. The moan was repeated; but this time it was more of a shuddering cry. And Donnell uttered a great gasp of relief.

Colonel Clinton bent forward quickly.

"Pull yourself together, Yorke," he said gruffly.

"I—I'm dying, sir!" groaned the dummy. "I'm sinking fast!"

Yorke clutched at my arm feverishly. The voice was his—the voice which had come from the guy! It had spoken—that inanimate collection of straw and rags and old rubbish had spoken! I thought I was going dotty for the moment.

"Did you hear it?" muttered Tommy Watson nervously.

"It's amazing!" I breathed. "I can't understand—— Listen!"

We all remained perfectly still.

"It was Donnell's fault, sir," said the dummy. "He made me stand still here. I'm dying, Colonel Clinton—and the sergeant will be my murderer!"

"It was your own fault, you young fool!" panted Donnell hoarsely.

"Be silent!" snapped the colonel. "Well, Yorke, you must let us lift you——"

"It's no good, sir," interrupted the dummy faintly. "I'm nearly at my last gasp. Please let me die here. I shall soon be nothing but a mass of rags and rubbish—you'll find that out soon, sir. My legs feel like straw, and I believe that's what they're made of, too! My face seems to be a mask——"

"The boy's light-headed!" said the colonel sharply.

"Don't be silly!" went on Yorke's double. "I've got more sense than you have, you old duffer!"

"What?" gasped the colonel.

"It was your fault, really, for bringing this bullying hooligan to St. Frank's," said the dummy indignantly, his voice much stronger. "He's a disgrace to the school—and so are you! All this military rot——"

"Yorke!" thundered the colonel. "I suspect that you have been playing a trick on me! How—how dare you? Get up at once, you young rascal! Get up at once, or I will cane you——"

"More brutality," sneered the dummy. "But you can't cane me, you harsh old rotter! If you do my stuffing will fall out! Besides, I'm dead now. Why don't you have a proper look at me, instead of standing there like a lunatic?"

The colonel uttered a furious ejaculation. Watson and Yorke and the other chaps were spellbound. What did this amazing thing mean? If we had only known, we should have been more amused than ever. The "guy" was checking Clinton in the most daring manner.

"There's only one explanation," I whispered. "One of the other fellows—perhaps Christine himself—is just behind there, hidden by the snow. From here it sounds exactly as if the figure's talking. It's a ripping wheeze, anyhow. Won't the colonel get a shock in a minute!"

"Begad! I expect you're right, old boy," breathed Montie—"about Christine. I mean. There's nothin' else to account for it!"

All the others agreed that my guess must be the truth; and they were relieved. And the intense humour of the situation was then apparent. Colonel Clinton was talking to this dummy—and the dummy was checking him! The whole school would yell over the affair when the news got about.

"Christy's an ass!" breathed Yorke. "But it's a stunning jape!"

The Housemaster stood over the still figure.

"Get up at once, Yorke!" he commanded harshly. "This disgraceful scene has gone on long enough. I know well enough that you have been shamming, and you shall be heavily punished for your insolence!"

"Rats!" said the figure.

"You young ruffian!" roared the colonel. "Here, Donnell, seize the boy and drag him to his feet. I have had enough of this farce!"

The sergeant groped forward in the darkness and grasped the figure's head.

"Come on up, you cheeky young varmint!" he growled fiercely. "You'll know better than to play tricks—— Great thunder! His—his head's come off, sir!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Clinton faintly.

This was really too much for us; we couldn't possibly keep ourselves in check a second longer.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh roared out from a dozen throats. It was a continuous yell, and at the same time we dodged away into the centre of the "Triangle." Colonel Clinton twirled round, amazed and startled. And Donnell gave a furious roar.

"It's straw, sir!" he bellowed. "It's a dummy! Yorke isn't here at all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mind it doesn't bite you!" yelled Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Yorke's dead, sergeant!" shouted Pitt. "You'll be hanged for the horrid murder! Do you want us to fetch a policeman?"

"You young demons!" howled the sergeant frantically.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come here—come here at once!" thundered Colonel Clinton. "Upon my soul! You shall suffer for this, you impudent puppies—Do you hear me, boys?"

We heard him right enough; but we didn't heed. We thought it far safer to get into the Ancient House. After all, the jape had been against Donnell, and it was the colonel's own fault that he had been diddled too.

He apparently realised this, for he turned upon the sergeant fiercely.

"You fool!" he snarled. "I have a mind to knock you down, Donnell!"

"I—I didn't know, sir——"

"That's enough!" snapped Clinton. "Perhaps you are content, now that you have made me the laughing-stock of the whole school! Get indoors, you blockhead——"

"But the boy—the figure—talked to us, sir!" gasped Donnell.

"Nonsense! It was one of those infernal Ancient House brats!" said the colonel angrily. "They shall suffer for this, or I will know the reason why! Mr. Lee shall be compelled to inflict the heaviest punishment!"

Clinton stalked away, in a fine fury, leaving Donnell to follow. Within ten minutes the story was all over the school, and both Houses were chuckling and yelling and shouting. It was the joke of the term.

Yorke had sneaked away into the College House, and a crowd of Monks was soon collected in the lobby. Colonel Clinton made no attempt to clear it. The very sight of him was enough to cause a fresh yell of laughter. He thought it wise to lie low for a while.

The cream of the joke, of course, was that the dummy had talked. But for that fact it wouldn't have been half so rich. Who was responsible? Who had made the figure talk?

Christine, we found, knew nothing. Every College House junior, in fact, with the exception of Yorke himself, had been indoors at the time of the incident. And the same applied to the Ancient House fellows.

It seemed that the only juniors to be out were the boys who had been with me. And we hadn't caused the dummy to speak. It was quite a mystery—until I received an inkling of the truth.

Having questioned Christine and Co. in vain, I returned to the Ancient House, and found several fellows in the lobby, collected round the hot-water radiators.

"It's jolly queer," I said thoughtfully. "Nobody seems to know who made that dummy talk. But somebody must have been there—a chap with plenty of nerve, too. Yet he hasn't come forward, and we're still puzzling—What the dickens are you grinning at, Corny?"

Cornelius Trotwood, the deaf twin-brother of Nicodemus, was smiling serenely to himself. The twins were standing by themselves, and had been talking together. The

two juniors were absolutely alike, in face, figure, and dress.

"What are you grinning at?" I repeated.

"Are you addressing me, my dear Nipper?" asked Cornelius mildly.

"Yes, I am," I said. "What's the joke?"

Cornelius smilingly shook his shock of sandy hair.

"Really, I must decline——"

"Eh?"

"I must decline to give my dear brother a poke——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" I shouted. "I didn't say anything about a poke! I asked you what the joke was. Why were you grinning?"

"I have been told so before?" beamed Cornelius.

"You have been told what?" I yelled.

"Why, that my ways are winning——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Your ways are enough to turn a chap's hair grey!" I snorted. "I want to know why you were smiling all over your face just now," I added, with my mouth to his ear. "Can you hear that?"

"My dear Nipper, I am really only slightly deaf," protested Cornelius. "You wish to know why I was smiling? I was merely amused at the thought which entered my head. My dear brother, Nicodemus, has evidently been displaying his remarkable powers——"

"Pray remain silent, my good Cornelius!" interjected Nicodemus hurriedly.

"Since you wish it, my dear brother, I will refrain from further conversation," said the other twin, blinking amiably. "I am always obliging, I hope."

"Like a couple of freaks in a side-show, ain't they?" grinned Handforth.

I stared at Nicodemus thoughtfully.

"You've been displaying your remarkable powers, have you?" I asked. "I know you've got a wonderful memory, but that doesn't apply in this case. A memory wouldn't make a stuffed dummy speak—— Great Scott! Did you do the trick, Nicodemus? Did you make that figure talk?" I added quickly.

Nicodemus Trotwood sighed.

"You have allowed the cat to escape from the bag, my good Cornelius," he said reproachfully. "I am a truthful boy, I believe. I cannot tell you a falsehood, Nipper. I must confess that I was guilty of the little joke."

Everybody stared at the twins.

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "How could this ass make the figure talk? We were all together, and Nicodemus didn't leave us——"

"But he might have thrown his voice," I said. "My hat! Nicodemus must be a giddy ventriloquist! It's the only explanation!"

"What!"

"That fathead a ventriloquist!"

"Oh, rot!"

"Nevertheless, it is the truth; my dear schoolfellows," said Nicodemus modestly. "I trust you are not displeased with me? I thought the incident would be somewhat

amusing, and the colonel deserved the allight lecture I delivered, did he not? A few home-truths are always acceptable—although the colonel did not seem to appreciate them, I am afraid."

"Well, you're a wonder!" I said frankly.

I remembered how "Yorke" had spoken to Clinton. Nicodemus had completely dropped his elaborate style of conversation, and had mimicked Yorke amazingly well. A side of his character was revealed which had never before been suspected.

"He's pulling our leg!" said Handforth gruffly. "He can't throw his silly voice!"

"Of course he can't!" said McClure. And what about the voice? It was Yorke who spoke—Yorke to a T. This ass couldn't have imitated Yorke's voice like that?"

"You dry up, you disbelieving fathead!" roared Handforth.

"Eh?" gasped McClure. "Why, you just said——"

Handforth's eyes goggled.

"I—I didn't speak at all!" he exclaimed blankly. "That—that wasn't my voice, you chaps——"

"Oh, don't be a sillier idiot than you can help, Handy," McClure seemed to say. "We all know you're off your rocker——"

Handforth turned red.

"What!" he shouted. "Why, I'll—I'll punch your nose for that!"

Smack!

McClure went down on his back, and he scrambled up dazedly, although he wasn't particularly hurt.

"But—but I didn't speak at all!" he panted. "I didn't call you an idiot, Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody in the lobby chuckled.

"Splendid!" I said, grinning. "Nicodemus, you're an absolute marvel. You imitated Handforth's beautiful baritone wonderfully——"

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"Your voice is like a steam-hooter, Handy."

I stared wonderingly. The voice was mine to perfection, but I hadn't uttered a sound. And the words appeared to come from my lips, too! Handforth turned on me as the fellows chuckled afresh, but I held up my hand.

"It's only Nicodemus," I explained. "You wouldn't believe him, Handy, and so he's giving us a practical demonstration. It was Trotwood who made McClure call you an idiot, and it was Trotwood who just made me compare your voice to a steam-hooter. The comparison wasn't far wrong——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What the dickens are you jawing about?" roared Handforth.

Nicodemus Trotwood beamed.

"I must apologise, my good schoolfellows," he said mildly. "Nipper is quite correct. It was indeed I who caused this little confusion of voices. But my word was doubted, and I deemed it necessary to show you that I am not a boy who tells falsehoods."

Handforth wasn't convinced even yet.

"Oh, it's too thick!" he said. "I don't believe——"

"Handforth!" snapped a voice from the rear.

"Yes, sir!" gasped Handforth, turning.

There was nobody there, and Edward Oswald stared.

"Wasn't that Mr. Crowell?" he asked, almost fearfully.

"No, my good friend, it was I," smiled Nicodemus. "It was intended to further convince you. Have I succeeded? Do you believe that I am possessed of certain ventriloquial powers?"

Handforth gave a roar.

"Great pip!" he shouted, rushing at Nicodemus and grabbing his hand. "I should think you have convinced me! Nicky, old son, you're a wonder! I could have sworn that was old Crowell!"

It was like Handforth to make prompt amends. He apologised for his disbelief; he wrung Nicodemus's hand; he called for cheers. But Nicodemus was quite unmoved, and smiled as serenely as ever.

"It gives me pleasure to know that I have earned the approval of my Form companions," he said mildly. "But would it not be wise to say as little as possible with regard to my voice-throwing powers? I am no coward, and I do not fear the wrath of the insufferable Colonel Clinton, but——"

"What's it got to do with Colonel Clinton?" demanded Handforth. "I'm going to let the whole House know about this."

I shook my head.

"Better not be rash, Handy," I remarked. "Clinton doesn't know a thing now; but if Trotwood's ventriloquism is talked about too much, the colonel will soon understand how that dummy cheeked him—and then Trotty will get it in the neck."

"Begad! You're right, old boy," said Montie. "Better say nothin'."

The other fellows were in agreement, and we decided to keep the secret to ourselves. But Nicodemus soared high in the estimation of those juniors who knew the truth. He wasn't such an ass as he looked! In fact Nicodemus was quite a unique character, and his wits were well about him.

Meanwhile, Christine and Co. were celebrating the victory. For they reckoned that both Colonel Clinton and Donnell had been "diddled" beautifully. The whole College House was chuckling over the farcical affair.

The idea of Colonel Clinton and Sergeant Donnell talking to a stuffed dummy in the ivy Triangle, and thinking that it was Yorke, struck the fellows as being a scream. And the sergeant's fear that Yorke had been dead was simply gorgeous.

The Remove in particular was delighted until Donnell appeared in the common-room. He was greeted with a subdued yell of laughter, and this had the effect of enraging him even more—for he had been in a temper upon entering.

"I'll give you some extra drilling for this!" he said viciously. "If there's any more laughing I'll take the whole crowd of you

out in the Triangle now—this minute! Understand, you young cubs?"

The Removites did understand, and they subsided.

"Where's Yorke?" went on Donnell grimly. "Clear out of the way, Private Christine! It's no good trying to hide——"

"I'm not trying to hide him," snapped Christine, who had been standing in front of Yorke. "What do you want him for? He's done nothing——"

"You hold your tongue!" shouted the sergeant, striding forward and grasping the unfortunate Yorke. "Now then, you brat, I'm going to make you smart for that trick in the Triangle!"

"I didn't do anything, you bully!" panted Yorke, struggling.

"It was those Ancient House fellows!" roared Talmadge. "They worked that trick on you, sergeant—and jolly rich it was, too! Yorke wasn't to blame——"

"That's enough!" thundered Donnell violently. "This boy was a party to the disgraceful scene—and he's going to suffer!"

"I suppose you're going to take me to the colonel?" asked Yorke fiercely.

"No, I'm not—I'm going to punish you here, in front of all your fellow-brats!" snapped the sergeant. "You're going to be given a lesson, my fine joker! Put your hands above your head, to begin with."

Donnell was gloating over his victim. The man looked coarse and brutal, and his little eyes were glittering viciously and vindictively. The Removites looked on, with growing anger.

Yorke put his hands up, as ordered. The Housemaster had given Donnell full powers to inflict punishment, and any disobedience was at once reported to the colonel. And then trouble followed—bad trouble. It was far easier to submit to Donnell's petty tyranny.

"Now then," said the sergeant, grinning. "Take that, to begin with!"

He slapped Yorke's face. The blow was so forcible that the junior reeled, and nearly fell. His left cheek plainly showed the marks of Donnell's huge fingers. There was a mutter of anger from the fellows, but nobody moved.

"You—you brute!" gasped Yorke.

"No back answers!" snarled the sergeant. "Stand at attention, you cub! D'ye hear me? And don't glare at me——"

Yorke wasn't glaring, and his position was one of rigid attention. But the sergeant pretended otherwise. And he suddenly lunged forward, boxed Yorke's ears, and bit him brutally in the face. The junior staggered and fell.

"Shame!"

Donnell twirled round, scowling.

"Who said that?" he roared.

"I did, for one!" shouted Bob Christine furiously. "You rotten bully! If you don't leave that chap alone I'll knock you down!"

The sergeant simply stared. For a mere junior to threaten to knock him down was staggering, quite apart from the insubordina-

tion of the threat. Donnell was three times as big as Christine.

"Don't be an ass, Christy!" muttered Yorke uneasily, scrambling up.

Donnell's eyes were glittering evilly. He swung his fist round, and his knuckles caught Yorke full on the ear.

"You hold your lip!" thundered the sergeant.

Yorke crashed over, for the blow had been a powerful one. And a roar arose, and Christine dashed forward, all caution thrown to the winds. The exhibition of bullying had aroused the Remove skipper to a pitch of utter recklessness.

"You rotten cad!" he shouted thickly.

Crash!

Christine's fist hammered forcibly upon Sergeant Donnell's nose, and a gasp of horror went up from the juniors. Donnell was taken utterly by surprise. He staggered back, tripped, and fell with a thud which shook the whole common-room!

CHAPTER IV.

FOR THE SAKE OF HIS CHUM.

CONSTERNATION reigned in the College House junior common-room.

Bob Christine's impulsive act had taken everybody by surprise; he was rather staggered himself. But Bob was in grim earnest, and the other Removites knew it. They had been growing more and more "fed up" with the sergeant's brutality, and this incident had brought matters to a head. The fat was in the fire now with a vengeance!

"Oh, you—you silly ass!" gasped Yorke fearfully.

He wasn't ungrateful, but he was anxious for his chum. Christine would be punished with the utmost severity for this outbreak. He had threatened to knock Donnell down—and that was amazing! He had actually knocked the man down—and that, as all the juniors agreed, was fifty times more amazing still!

"Scoot, old man!" muttered Talmadge urgently.

But Christine held his ground, pale with emotion. The sergeant rose to his feet slowly, and his coarse face was brick-red with fury and astonishment combined. He suddenly hurled himself forward.

"You young whelp!" he panted harshly.

But Christine had his eyes open. He knew that Donnell would attack him, and he was prepared. As the sergeant attempted to grasp him he twisted away and dodged to the side.

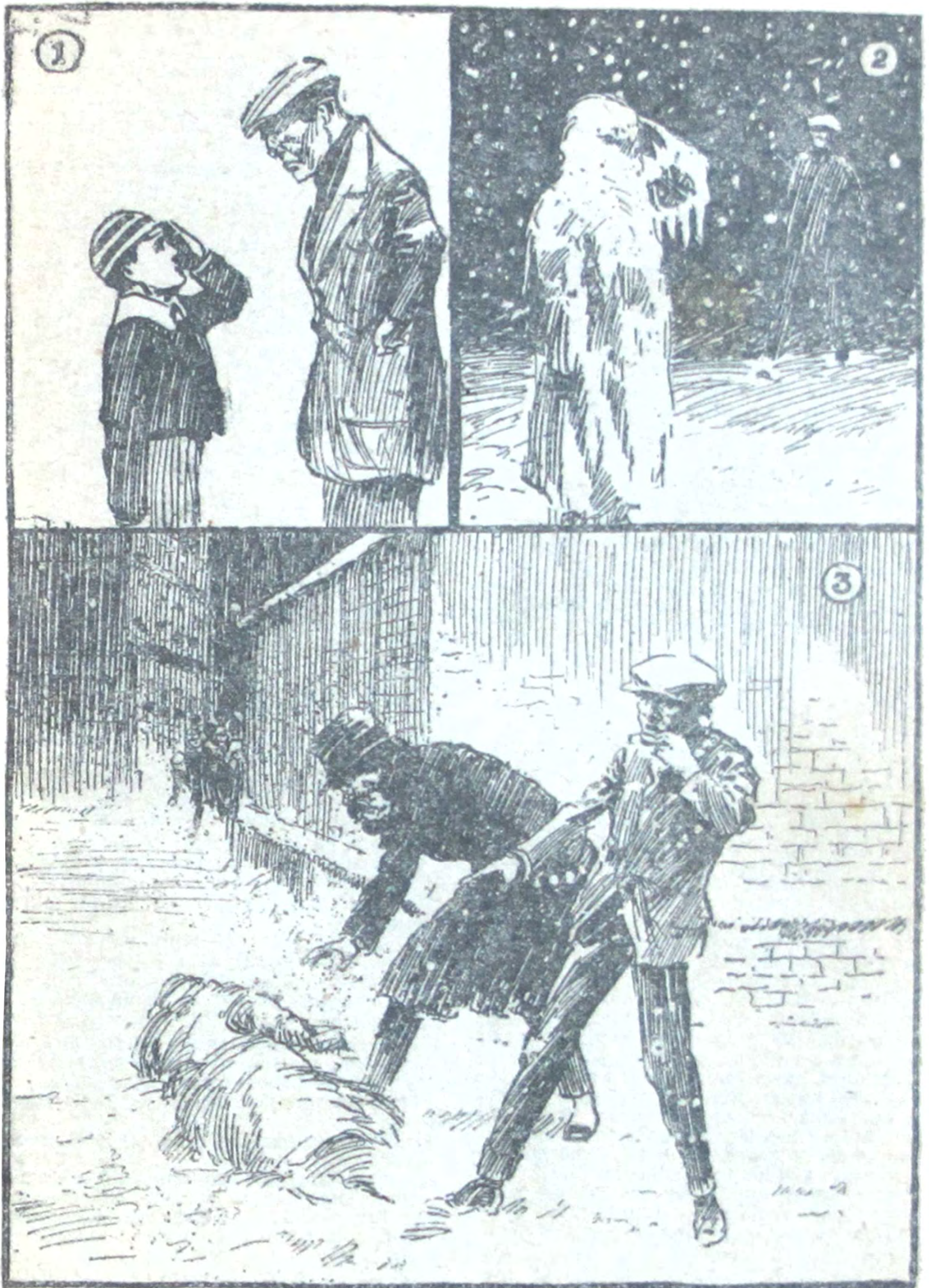
"Don't interfere, you chaps!" he shouted. "This is my affair. I'm not going to let this brute knock me about!"

"Good man!"

"Give him another punch, Christy!"

Donnell nearly choked.

"You'll be reported for this!" he snarled. "You'll be flogged and committed to cells!"



1. Quaking with fear, the fag saluted.
2. Yorke, turning blue with cold, stood at attention in the snow. Could he possibly last out an hour?
3. "Dead?" echoed Colonel Olinton, bending over the snow-covered figure.

But I'm going to take it out of you first, you little demon! Stand still, hang you! D'ye hear me—stand still!"

"Thanks, I'd rather not!" said Christine calmly.

He knew as well as anybody that Colonel Clinton would be informed of the affair; that was inevitable. But Christine saw no reason why he should tamely submit to being knocked about by this bully.

Donnell, however, had lost his temper completely. He dropped all attempts to catch the junior, but lunged out at him. One huge fist caught Christine on the shoulder, and he reeled back, his face distorted with pain.

"You—you awful br—!" he muttered.

Then the College House juniors were the witnesses of an amazing spectacle. Sergeant Donnell, the drill-instructor, was being attacked by a Removite! This was actually the case. Christine did not wait for further blows. He lost all caution, and just sailed in.

The other fellows quickly formed a ring, and they were dumb with excitement and consternation. The sergeant was fighting furiously, with the fixed intention of flooring this cheeky junior within the first minute.

But, somehow, Christine wasn't floored.

Donnell's heavy blows were sufficient to knock the junior out of time—just one lunge. But Christine was like a live wire; he dodged about so nimbly that the sergeant's thrusts merely beat the air. The Removite, on the other hand, got in several body blows, and these infuriated Donnell intensely.

The fight was a mad one, of course. If anybody had suggested it to Christine an hour earlier he would have laughed with derision. But now it was happening! A boy against a heavy man!

Yet Christine had many advantages over his opponent. Donnell was big and heavy, he was in bad condition, and really the last man in the world to appoint as drill-instructor. His drinking habits did not tend to improve his physical powers, and he wasn't in any sense fit. Moreover, he was clumsy and lumbering, and no match for the junior when it came to dodging blows.

Christine, although a boy, was strong, healthy, and fearless. He was the champion junior boxer of the College House, and he was capable of delivering hard, powerful blows. So, on the whole, he stood a chance.

Again and again the sergeant attempted to finish the fight. But his nimble opponent was too quick for him every time. And very soon, while Christine was still fresh, Donnell was seriously short of wind. He puffed laboriously, and his temper became more vile.

"You young dog!" he snarled hoarsely. "I'll half kill you for— Ugh-h-h!"

Christine's fist had landed squarely upon Donnell's mouth, and the man reeled backwards, his great hands beating the air uselessly.

"Go it, Christy!" shrieked several voices.

"Follow it up—follow it up!"

"Oh, good man!"

"Now's your chance!"

Christine was not in need of these

encouragements. He was already following up his advantage. Blow after blow rained upon the sergeant's face and chest. The man roared furiously, and he swore, too.

"Blackguard!" roared the juniors angrily.

"Close his rotten mouth, Christine!"

"Go it!"

"You'll win, old man!"

Bob Christine was by no means sure of winning, but he meant to have a good try. And he did not make the mistake of thinking that Donnell was beaten yet. The sergeant was only momentarily at a loss.

There was a pause, for Christine himself was rather breathless, and he drew back. Donnell wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and stood there, panting and glaring with malevolent fury.

"You'll be lucky if you're not kicked out of the school for this, you little imp!" he gasped huskily. "The colonel will have something to say to you later on, but I'm going to teach you a lesson first!"

"You're welcome to try!" said Christine grimly.

"By thunder!" grated Donnell. "I'll—I'll—"

"Why not do it?" yelled Talmadge.

"Yah! Coward!"

"Beaten by a schoolboy!"

"Rotter!"

These taunts, thoughtlessly uttered, did not do Christine any good, for they infuriated the sergeant even more. And his fury was largely occasioned by the realization that his authority had completely gone—for the time being, at all events. A prompt lesson administered to Christine would renew Donnell's prestige. It was impossible for the affair to finish as it now stood. Donnell would never be able to hold up his head again unless he obtained the mastery.

"Are you going to come with me quietly?" he exclaimed, his voice quivering with rage. "I'm going to take you to the colonel—"

"So you admit you're beaten?" jeered Clapson.

The sergeant did not reply verbally. He simply hurled himself at Christine with all his strength, and shouts of alarm went up. If Bob had been caught he would have been mercilessly handled on the spot.

But Christine squirmed out of the way like an eel, and Donnell blundered into several juniors and sent them flying.

"On him!" gasped Yorke. "Let's chuck him out!"

"Rats!" shouted Christine. "This is my affair!"

A second later the amazing fight was continued. And in this second bout the sergeant found that his task was even more difficult than before. Christine was never in the same place for a second at a time. But, for all that, Donnell managed to get in two or three half-blows. Christine was just too late to avoid them, but he escaped their full force.

One punch had caught him upon the nose, and that bruised member was bleeding slightly. And Christine himself was almost

certain that he would be beaten in the end. There could be no other result. Donnell would deliver a knock-out sooner or later—that seemed inevitable.

The Removite was becoming fagged after the gruelling ordeal, and he knew that a finish of some sort must soon come.

"Don't let him whack you, old man!" hissed Yorke anxiously.

"Go it, Christine!"

This time the shouts were encouraging, and Bob redoubled his efforts. He suddenly assumed the offensive, and got in a whirlwind of blows, utterly reckless of his own safety.

Sergeant Donnell was not prepared for the abrupt onslaught, and he was forced to give ground. In a flash Christine seized the opening, and his fists thudded upon Donnell's face as rapidly as he could deliver the blows.

The man staggered back, gasping and snarling. Then he lost his balance and fell headlong.

"Hurrah!"

"He's whacked—he's beaten!"

"Good old Christine!"

"Oh, well fought!"

The juniors were wild with excitement, and they made no attempt to moderate their tones. And it certainly seemed as though Donnell was "whacked." He lay upon the floor, panting heavily, his coarse face already showing signs of the punishment which Christine had administered.

It was an astounding victory, and Christine himself was the most surprised fellow in the common-room. He had beaten the drill-instructor in a bare-fist scrap! It was something to be proud of indeed! At that moment Bob Christine was a hero in the eyes of his Form-mates.

"You're a wonder, Christy!" said Yorke breathlessly.

Bob Christine laughed.

"Better not shout too soon!" he said, breathing rapidly. "There's going to be a lot of trouble over this, my sons——"

"Let's revolt!" shouted somebody excitedly.

"Chuck this bully outside!"

"Cave!" hissed Yorke abruptly.

The juniors were so excited that they did not realise what this scene exactly meant, and they were inclined to talk lightly of revolting. The defeat of the sergeant was the cause of this.

But now the door had suddenly opened, and Colonel Clinton himself strode into the common-room. There was a black frown upon his brow, and he paused as soon as he got into the apartment and glared round him.

There was an immediate hush.

"What is the meaning of this disgraceful noise?" demanded the colonel angrily, screwing his eyeglass firmly into his eye and sweeping his gaze over the entire room. "How dare you make this disturbance—— Good gracious me!"

The colonel paused, and his tone was one of sheer amazement. He had suddenly

caught sight of Sergeant Donnell, for the latter was now sitting up, and his face bore ample evidence of what had been occurring.

Clinton was almost speechless with fury.

"So you have had the utter audacity to assault Sergeant Donnell?" he exclaimed at last. "This gross act of insubordination shall be punished in a manner which you will long remember! By gad! Do you call yourselves young gentlemen, to set upon a man in such numbers?"

"Nobody's touched the sergeant except me, sir," said Christine quietly.

"Eh?" snapped the colonel. "Don't talk like a fool, boy! It is quite obvious that Sergeant Donnell has been assaulted by several of you——"

"He hasn't, sir," interrupted Christine. "The other chaps only looked on. The sergeant was hitting one of the fellows about in a cowardly, brutal way, and I interfered. I knocked him down."

"You—you knocked——" Colonel Clinton paused, amazed. "What have you to say about this, Donnell?" he went on harshly. "Pull yourself together, man, and tell me the absolute truth."

The sergeant saluted.

"I came here to fetch Private Yorke, sir, as you instructed me," he said stiffly. "The boy resisted, and I thought it necessary to give him some punishment——"

"Quite right, Donnell——"

"The rotter was knocking Yorke about, sir!"

"He's a brutal bully, sir!"

"Silence!" thundered the colonel. "Do not dare to interrupt again, you young rebels! Now, sergeant!"

"While I was punishing Yorke, sir, Christine attacked me from behind," continued the sergeant defiantly. "Before I could turn he had punched me several times on the side of the head, and I fell. Then he rained blows upon my face as I lay on the floor. That's all, sir."

"Oh!"

"You—you liar!"

"Every boy in this room will go to bed without supper!" raved the colonel furiously. "Now, Christine, what have you to say to the sergeant's charge?"

"Nothing, sir—except that it's a lie!" replied Christine quietly.

"You infernal young puppy!" snapped the colonel. "You dare to stand there and accuse your drill-instructor of lying?"

"Donnell didn't tell you the truth, sir," replied Bob. "I didn't attack him from behind, but simply resisted his efforts to hit me. It grew into a fight, sir—and I floored him fairly."

"You have made your case infinitely worse by attempting such a palpable falsehood!" said the Housemaster angrily. "You must be mad, boy, to think that I would credit such a preposterous story! You, a mere boy, knocking down Sergeant Donnell! If you dare to say another word——"

"It's the truth, sir!" interrupted Christine hotly.

"Enough! Come with me!" snapped Clinton.

Christine was left no choice, for the colonel grasped his collar and practically hauled him out of the common-room. The sergeant had taken the precaution to go out in advance, for he had no wish to remain in the common-room with the Removites after the deliberate lie he had told. The juniors, in their present state of excitement, were quite capable of violence towards their drill-instructor.

Everybody knew that Christine's punishment would be severe. It was generally concluded that he would be soundly flogged, and perhaps confined to barracks for a week—as the freak Housemaster would probably put it.

But when supper-time came and there was no sign of Christine, the juniors began to get anxious. What had happened to him? Somehow or other, the Remove knew that their leader had met with greater disaster than they had anticipated.

Bedtime arrived, and still Christine was absent. The Remove was marshalled up to the dormitory by "Major" Grayson and "Captain" Shaw, and the two Fifth-Formers were looking very pleased over something. The bullying seniors probably knew what had happened to Christine, and they no doubt considered that the junior had well deserved the punishment.

The absence of the Remove skipper caused great uneasiness, but the truth regarding his fate was related to them by the colonel himself.

Clinton came into the dormitory in order to see the lights out, and there was a look of great satisfaction upon his pompous face. He surveyed the juniors grimly, and then fixed his gaze upon Yorke.

"You, Private Yorke, will report to headquarters to-morrow morning at nine-thirty," he said smoothly.

"What for, sir?" asked Yorke uneasily.

"It is not for you to question me, boy!" snapped the colonel. "However, so that you may ponder over your coming punishment, I will tell you that you are to be flogged. You took part in a disgraceful scene out in the barrack square this evening, in conjunction with certain ruffianly juniors of the Ancient House. Those boys, I may tell you, will be severely punished also. I intend to bring the matter to the notice of their Housemaster this very night, and he will be compelled to act."

"Where's Christine, sir?" asked Talmadge boldly.

The colonel rubbed his hands together.

"Ah, Christine!" he exclaimed. "You may well ask what has happened to that wretched youth. He was guilty of the most mutinous conduct, and he is now suffering punishment. That punishment is intended as a lesson to every other boy in this insubordinate Form. Christine has been flogged, and he is now commencing a term of seven days' imprisonment in a cell. He has been sentenced to solitary confinement, and he will not be seen by any of you again until this day week. Let it be remembered by you all

that a similar punishment will be meted out to other boys who revolt against the discipline I have determined to enforce."

Colonel Clinton switched the lights off and left the dormitory. The Removites were rather staggered by the news. Flogged and sentenced to solitary confinement for a week! This, they knew well enough, included a bread-and-water diet for the whole period of seven days. It was a grim lesson for the Remove, and all idea of revolt on a large scale was knocked on the head.

Such drastic punishment had been threatened, but the boys had never believed that Clinton would put it into execution.

He was completely obsessed with his ideas of ruthless discipline, and he meant to show the juniors, once and for all, that his orders were to be obeyed. And the only way to enforce his will was to adopt a system of rank tyranny.

Meanwhile, Bob Christine was suffering in solitude. The cells, as the colonel called them, were really several disused attics at the very top of the College House. They had been converted into prisons, the windows being barred and the doors being fitted with two locks to each. No escape was possible, and the "cells" were far removed from the frequented sections of the House. Only one stairway led up to them, and a sentry—a senior—was constantly on guard throughout the day, except during lesson-time. This was the colonel's plan.

Christine had received a flogging so severe that all the spirit was taken out of him. He was racked with pain, and sleep was impossible. His bed was hard, and the attic icily cold. And he lay there, knowing that he was to be confined for seven days—alone, and without a soul to speak to.

It was an appalling prospect, and Bob Christine almost regretted his fight with Sergeant Donnell. Colonel Clinton's methods, if not humane, were certainly effective!

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF STOWE LODGE.

NELSON LEE was very thoughtful as he lounged in a big armchair before the cheerful fire in his study.

The boys were in their dormitories, and the Ancient House was quiet. I had been to the gov'nor just before bedtime, and had had a word with him with regard to Bob Christine. For the news of Christine's punishment had reached the Ancient House before the Monks themselves knew about it. One of the seniors had been talking, and the information had quickly been passed round.

Naturally, the fellows on our side were greatly indignant. There was some talk of making an organised protest to the Head. But, after all, it wasn't our affair, and we should only be interfering. The Monks would have to look after themselves in their troubles. But I didn't put much faith in Christine's chums when it came to a matter

of decisive action. They were splendid fellows in all ordinary ways, but not strong enough to defy their cranky Housemaster.

And Nelson Lee had advised me to say as little as possible. Colonel Clinton, he assured me, would not remain long at St. Frank's. Such a thing was unthinkable. At present the colonel was having his fling. It would be strenuous, but necessarily short. So the best thing was to stick it. This was easy enough for the Ancient House fellows, because, after all, we were only spectators. But we were full of sympathy for our unfortunate rivals.

And now Nelson Lee was sitting in front of his fire, pondering over the whole situation. The colonel was no ordinary schoolmaster. He had undoubtedly earned many honours before the war; he had been a Housemaster in one of England's most famous public schools—a school as big as St. Frank's itself.

But the war had changed him. On the battlefield he had proved himself to be a man of great courage, and had left the Service with a D.S.O. to his name. But it was an undoubted fact that he had been strikingly unpopular with his regiment. His methods of discipline were harsh and unreasonable. And now he had come to St. Frank's, apparently with the idea that schoolboys were to be treated as soldiers.

The school governors had never anticipated anything of this sort, of course. They had appointed Clinton because he was a schoolmaster of excellent qualifications. And until the governors knew what the colonel was doing he would certainly remain in his present position.

Nelson Lee was still thinking of these matters when a sharp rap sounded upon the door panels. Colonel Clinton entered, without waiting for Lee to invite him. The schoolmaster-detective was rather astonished at this visit, but he did not betray his feelings.

"I have come to you, Mr. Lee, because I wish to lay a very serious complaint against several of your junior boys," said the colonel grimly.

"Indeed?" said Nelson Lee, lifting his eyebrows. "If you will take a seat, colonel——"

"Thank you, I will stand!" interjected Clinton.

"As you please, of course——"

"You do not seem to realise, Mr. Lee, that my errand is an important one," snapped the colonel, as Lee proceeded to poke the fire. "No doubt you have learned of the disgraceful affair which occurred this evening?"

"I have certainly heard a few rumours," said Nelson Lee, smiling.

"I fail to see anything amusing in the situation, sir!" snapped Clinton. "A party of your junior boys played a deliberate trick upon Sergeant Donnell, and I was involved. I have already decided to punish Yorke, of the Remove, for his part in the affair. He will be soundly flogged in the morning. It will be necessary for you, Mr. Lee, to flog the other culprits."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"That, I think, colonel, is a matter for me to decide," he said smoothly. "If you will give me the names of the boys who took part in the incident, I will see that they receive adequate punishment. It was wrong of them to play a trick upon you, I will admit; but, after all, it was merely a boyish prank——"

"Rubbish, sir!" snorted the colonel. "It was nothing of the sort! The boys deliberately planned to——"

"Really, Colonel Clinton, there is no necessity for us to argue on the point," said Lee quietly. "I need the names of the boys——"

"Confound you, sir, I don't know them!" roared the colonel fiercely. "How should I know the names of the impertinent young hounds? It is your duty to thrash the whole matter out—and I insist upon it being done!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I am very much afraid that I must ignore the whole matter," he said. "I shall certainly make no attempt to question the juniors, Colonel Clinton. Their offence was merely trivial——"

"Trivial!" shouted the other. "Don't talk nonsense!"

"I am not in the habit of talking nonsense, Colonel Clinton, and I shall be obliged if you will control yourself," said Lee, with ominous calmness. "If you can give me the names of the boys you complain of I will punish them—but not without. I can say nothing further."

Clinton simply glared.

"You do not seem to realise the enormity of the offence!" he exclaimed harshly. "These boys must receive floggings——"

"At the very most I should not give them more than a hundred lines, colonel," interjected Lee calmly. "But even that is impossible, since you are unable to supply the names——"

Nelson Lee paused. His reason was an excellent one, for Colonel Clinton had suddenly stamped towards the door and had made his exit. He slammed the door fiercely, and Lee gave vent to a low chuckle.

"I am afraid the colonel is rather displeased with me," he murmured. "However, I cannot consent to conduct the Ancient House on similar lines to those adopted by Clinton. It seems rather strange——"

Nelson Lee paused, opened the door quickly, and passed out into the passage. In a few seconds he reached a dark window and peered out into the dim Triangle, listening intently at the same time.

He had heard the soft crunch of booted feet upon the gravel. And the sound told him that Clinton was not returning direct to the College House. He also remembered that the colonel had been wearing his thick overcoat, his gloves, and his muffler—a rather complete attire for merely crossing the Triangle.

And now Nelson Lee's suspicion became a certainty. For his keen eyes dimly detected a dark form passing through the private gateway which led into the road. The colonel

had left the school premises, although it was bedtime. It wasn't likely that the House-master would choose this hour for a mere walk.

Lee walked back into his study slowly and thoughtfully. The snow had ceased, but the white carpet was fully five inches deep on the ground. Nelson Lee had no doubt whatever that Colonel Clinton was just setting off for Stowe Lodge.

This house was situated quite near to the River Stowe, and in a somewhat lonely position. Lee was greatly interested in the place, for there was some mystery connected with it that had aroused his curiosity.

Clinton had visited Stowe Lodge on several occasions. There was nothing remarkable in this. But it was remarkable that the colonel's visits had been secret ones. Moreover, the house was occupied, so far as Lee knew, by only one man—a strange, misshapen individual whose face Lee had never seen.

On one occasion the detective had peered through a window at Stowe Lodge. He had seen the curious man, and had been somewhat astonished to find that he wore a heavy mask. This, taken in conjunction with the fact that Clinton himself had once been seen wearing a similar mask, pointed to the fact that something of a very queer character was afoot.

The colonel, apparently, was not all he professed to be.

And Nelson Lee's natural instinct bade him keep his eyes wide open. It was really none of his business, but he felt that it was necessary to look into the matter. And the fact that Clinton had once lied to Lee gave the latter further cause for suspicion and distrust.

The detective had thought of making a trip to Stowe Lodge on this very evening, but the snow had made him alter his plan. The tracks would be too apparent, for there was nobody else about at that hour.

The colonel's departure, however, altered matters.

"I've a good mind to go, after all," Nelson Lee told himself. "It will be a simple matter to walk in Clinton's tracks, and he will know nothing of my activity. And I am certainly curious to find out more about that strange house."

Nelson Lee seldom hesitated, and he did not do so now. Before donning his overcoat and hat, however, he spent a full ten minutes in front of his study mirror. When he had finished, Nelson Lee was no longer visible; in his stead there appeared a foreign-looking man, with a black moustache, black, bushy eyebrows, and a swarthy complexion. It was a simple disguise, but good enough for the occasion. And there was no harm in being cautious.

Three minutes later Nelson Lee had sallied out.

The darkness was intense, but after a few moments he grew accustomed to it, and carefully picked his way across the Triangle in the tracks which Colonel Clinton had made twenty minutes earlier.

As Lee suspected, they led out into the road and then down towards the village. There were no other footprints visible, and it was a wise precaution of the detective's to make no fresh tracks. Clinton would certainly have seen them had he done so—and would have suspected.

Reaching the little lane which branched off towards an outlying farm, the colonel's footprints turned sharply, and proceeded along the new course. It was now certain that he had gone to Stowe Lodge. For this lane led to no other house except the farm, a mile beyond the riverside dwelling.

But now Lee's task was easier. Quite a confusion of tracks lay upon the ground, and the detective had no difficulty in arriving at the truth. A party of farm-workers—who lived at the farmhouse—had undoubtedly left the George Inn at closing-time, and had returned home in a little knot. This was after the snowfall had ceased, and so the tracks were quite clear. Lee was able to walk in them without the slightest difficulty.

Another welcome surprise awaited him at Stowe Lodge. A great pile of snow lay heaped up outside the front gate, and a glance showed him that a path had been cleared right up to the house—and, indeed, round the house, to the rear door.

The tenant undoubtedly had been busy with a broom after the snow had ceased falling. This pointed to the fact that he had been expecting a visit from Clinton, and the colonel was anxious, perhaps, to leave no tell-tale marks in the snow which lay in the Stowe Lodge garden.

It suited Nelson Lee admirably, and he lost no time in slipping through the gateway and getting to the side of the house. There was a window here—the same window through which Lee had peered on a former occasion.

But the curtains were now drawn to so closely that only one or two chinks of light appeared at the top. There was no chance whatever of getting a glimpse into the apartment. A dull murmur of voices came to the detective, but he could distinguish no word.

"I must be very careful," he murmured grimly. "I am trespassing, and, strictly speaking, I have absolutely no right here."

Lee was not intending to make any close investigations on this occasion. His main object in coming had been to ascertain whether the colonel had really gone to Stowe Lodge or not. Well, it was quite certain that he had. Nelson Lee decided that it would be far better to investigate on some occasion when Clinton was at the school. It would be a sheer risk to stay here under the present circumstances.

But the detective was rather reluctant to leave at the moment. He quietly left the window and made his way to a rustic gate, which apparently led into the rear quarters. It was unlocked, and he passed through, finding himself in a big paved yard. The clear path through the snow had been swept right up to the rear door, and Lee walked along this until he arrived on the stone step.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is most unusual."

In addition to the ordinary strong lock, the door was fitted with two Yales, one at the top and one at the bottom. The tenant of Stowe Lodge was apparently very anxious to safeguard himself against burglars. If his door was so secured, it stood to reason that the windows were similarly protected.

With so much snow lying about Nelson Lee could not approach the windows themselves without leaving evidence of the fact. So he wisely decided to leave without delay. But, even as he was turning, he heard a slight sound.

The back door swung open and a shaft of brilliant light from an electric torch illuminated Lee clearly. He didn't move a hair, but stood quite still.

"If you move a finger, you'll regret it!" exclaimed a strange, wheezy voice. "You are covered with a revolver, and you must walk forward and obey every order. At the slightest sign of resistance you will be shot!"

This, of course, was a threat; but it was a most uncomfortable threat, even though it might be idle. The detective was surprised, and he roundly upbraided himself for having been so rash. There was probably an alarm fixed somewhere—to the side-gate, in all likelihood—and these men had known of his presence.

But these very facts were all significant. No honest person secures his house as this house was secured; neither does he have secret alarms fitted. And the little scene now being enacted plainly indicated that the tenants of Stowe Lodge were extremely anxious to avoid prying.

There were two people behind the light. Lee saw this when the torch was shifted for a moment. One of them, he felt sure, was Colonel Clinton. But both men were wearing heavy masks!

Nelson Lee decided that he must avoid close contact with these two men. Once in their power, his identity would be disclosed almost immediately. At present they were both in ignorance of the truth.

"Put your hands up!" rasped out the wheezy voice.

Nelson Lee slowly obeyed, and walked forward. His expression was one of fear, and he muttered appeals for mercy in Italian. It was just as well to deceive the colonel and his companion.

Then, deciding to end the position without delay, Nelson Lee threw himself forward with astonishing swiftness. His hand swept the torch away, and it crashed to the ground. Two startled ejaculations sounded, and both the masked men attempted to grasp the intruder.

But Nelson Lee had no desire to fight the matter out. He decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and he dashed away. By the time he reached the road his pursuers were fairly close behind, but they gave up the chase almost at once. This was the second occasion on which Lee had been

compelled to run, and he did not quite like it.

The incident had been a lesson to him, however.

For he now knew that Stowe Lodge was carefully guarded. Any future investigation must be conducted with infinite care. But what was the secret of the place? What was the mystery surrounding those two masked men?

And how was Colonel Clinton involved? These were questions which Nelson Lee asked himself as he hurried away from the spot.

He was determined to find the answers at the earliest possible moment.

CHAPTER VI.

IN AID OF THE SUFFERING.

ST. FRANK'S lay in darkness. The hour was close upon midnight as Nelson Lee crossed the Triangle. Snow was descending again, and the sky looked as though several inches would be added to the already thick covering which lay on the ground.

Nelson Lee was not altogether dissatisfied with his trip to Stowe Lodge. His time had not been wasted, and no harm had been done. Colonel Clinton and his companion had not detected the identity of the man who had intruded. And Lee was more than ever convinced that something of a sinister nature was afoot at the lonely house.

As he entered the Triangle he removed his false eyebrows and moustache, and became himself except for the swarthy complexion. His thoughts were all centred upon his recent adventure.

But he suddenly came to a halt, listening. Whispering voices sounded through the snow—from the direction of the College House. This was most unusual, and Nelson Lee wondered. He knew that Colonel Clinton had not returned; indeed, it was more than likely that the colonel would not arrive at the school until another hour had elapsed. He would certainly wait at Stowe Lodge until he thought the coast was clear.

Who, then, were the owners of these whispering voices?

Nelson Lee altered his course and made for the College House. His feet made no sound in the soft, yielding snow. And as he hurried on he caught a glimpse of two figures just turning the corner of the College House. They vanished, and Nelson Lee broke into a run.

He arrived at the corner, and peered round, the snow beating into his face. And there, at the rear of the building, and within a few feet of the corner, a long ladder—Warren's ladder—was reared against the wall.

"Buck up, you slowcoaches!" said a crisp voice which Lee well knew. At least, he ought to have known it, considering that it belonged to me.

"Nipper!" murmured the gov'nor, in astonishment.

Then he recognised the two other figures as those of Tregellis-West and Watson. Lee turned the corner and walked sharply forward. I spotted him—a dim figure advancing through the gloom—at the same moment as Sir Montie.

"Begad!" ejaculated the schoolboy baronet. "The colonel!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Watson.

I stared at the figure in dismay—and then jumped.

"It's the guv'nor!" I muttered, with relief.

"Well, boys, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Nelson Lee sternly. "I have no doubt, Nipper, that you are the ringleader—as usual."

"Yes, sir," I said meekly.

"How dare you leave your dormitory at this hour of the night?" went on the guv'nor, his voice still stern and hard. "I shall be compelled to punish you very severely for this gross breach of the school rules. It may be even necessary to report you to the Headmaster—"

"Oh, come off it, sir!" I protested.

"I am not joking, Nipper," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Unless you can offer a very full and complete explanation—"

"We can, sir," put in Sir Montie.

"Very well—do so!"

"That's easy, guv'nor," I grinned. "You know all about poor old Christine being flogged and sent up into a cold attic? He's sentenced to 'cells,' as the colonel calls it, for a week. And he's got nothing to eat but bread and water, and only a few blankets to keep him warm. It's—it's disgraceful! The colonel ought to be booted out of the school—the inhuman rotter!"

Nelson Lee's expression relaxed.

"Well?" he said.

"Just listen, sir, and I'll explain the wheeze," I remarked calmly.

And I did explain. The guv'nor listened to the end, and then remained thoughtfully silent for a few moments. Sir Montie and Tommy and I waited anxiously. It would depend upon Nelson Lee's decision whether we continued our nocturnal adventure or went straight back to the Ancient House.

"It's cold, standing about here, sir," I remarked hintingly.

"Yes, Nipper, so it is," agreed the guv'nor.

"Well, I don't quite know what to do. The colonel is out, and he may be back very shortly—"

"At Stowe Lodge, sir?" I asked.

"Yes; but we cannot discuss that matter now."

"There's something queer about—"

"Exactly, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Look here, you'd better make all haste with your plans. Be back in your dormitory within twenty minutes. Can you manage that, do you think?"

"Easily, sir."

"Very well, go ahead," said the guv'nor softly. "Strictly speaking, I ought to be thoroughly ashamed of myself for allowing

you to continue this project. It is totally against all rules, and—"

"Can't always stick to rules, sir," I grinned.

"Apparently not," said Lee drily. "Well, I caught you red-handed this time; but I won't spoil your little plan. It is, after all, an errand of mercy, and I only urge you to make haste."

"Begad!" breathed Montie. "You're a brick, sir!"

"Rather!"

"And we won't breathe a word to a soul, guv'nor," I added. "Nobody shall know that you spotted us."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, you must be careful about that," he said. "What would people think of me if it became known that I countenanced such disgraceful breaches of discipline as this? A nice sort of Housemaster, eh? Well, hurry up, you young rascals!"

And the guv'nor chuckled.

"We'll be indoors within a quarter of an hour, sir," I promised. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, boys!"

He walked away into the snow and gloom.

"What a ripping sort!" said Watson admiringly. "My hat! Fancy a master allowing us to go on with an affair like this! I thought we were going to be caned and gated, and all the rest of it!"

"I didn't!" I grinned. "The guv'nor's one of the best, my sons—and he's not the man to take advantage of a chance discovery like this. He'll pretend to forget it. And he knows we're bent on aiding the suffering, too!"

"Dear old boys, hadn't we better be gettin' on with it?" suggested Montie.

"Yes, rather!" I said briskly. "We shall have to buck up, too. I'll take the big bundle, and you can bring the others—and go steady, my sons! The ladder's awfully slippery."

I seized a big package as I spoke, and commenced mounting the ladder. It was strong and solid, but, as I had said, the rungs were treacherous. The ladder had been lying in the snow, and the rungs were coated with frozen snow and icicles. It was necessary to be extra cautious.

But I reached the roof all right, and my chums arrived shortly afterwards, safe and sound. The roof was an ideal one for our purpose, for it was flat, with heavy stonework copings on either side. There was no possibility of falling off the roof, or Nelson Lee wouldn't have allowed us to continue the job.

It was cold up there, and the snow lay thick and undisturbed. On one side it was banked up by the wind; but on the other only a thin layer of whiteness lay on the leads.

We walked on for a few feet, and then I called a halt.

"Here we are!" I murmured. "Lend a hand with this giddy thing."

I brushed the snow away from a heavy wooden trap-door in the flat roof. It was a

massive thing, fitted with bolts on the outside. I suppose it was used occasionally by builders and plumbers when any repairs needed doing. At all events, it was very handy for us.

The united efforts of the three of us were successful in raising the door, and a dark cavity lay at our feet. It wasn't dark for long, however, for I flashed the light from my electric torch into the depths.

But the space was only shallow, really. We found ourselves gazing down upon the rafters of the upper rooms—the attics. There was an empty space between the attic ceilings and the roof proper. This, of course, is usual in most houses. The ceilings of the upper rooms cannot be right against the roof.

We had brought some rope, but this wasn't necessary. By hanging my full length I touched the rafters with my feet, and was soon standing firmly, flashing the light about. At the far end of the shallow space there stood a great water-cistern, with lots of pipes leading to it and from it. I suspected that it had something to do with the hot-water supply, or something like that.

But my interest was centred upon four trap-doors, which were plainly visible. Each one led into an attic, and I knew that the third trap-door was the one belonging to Bob Christine's prison.

"Come on, you chaps!" I breathed.

Montie and Tommy were soon beside me, having handed down the parcels first.

"It's a good thing for Christine that there's a door in his ceiling," murmured Watson. "But doesn't it seem silly to make a cell out of such a place?"

"Christine can't reach the trap-door," I replied. "Even if he piled all the furniture up, he couldn't manage it. Besides, what would be the good of escaping? He'd only be collared again at once, because he could only get away by dropping into one of the other attics. And I'll bet their doors are locked. No, my sons, Christine's as much a prisoner as if he was in Brixton Gaol. The only way of getting at him is by the roof—and that's what we've done."

We picked our way over the rafters until we reached the third trap-door. There was no fastening, and it was easily lifted. I flashed my light down into the room below, and knelt against the opening.

"Poor chap!" murmured Watson feelingly.

Bob Christine was in the little camp-bedstead which had been provided. The blankets, however, were limited to two—and two blankets were absolutely inadequate in that icy-cold weather.

The prisoner had laid his clothing on the bed, but it was clear that he was still cold, for he was huddled up in a bunch, his head almost buried in the pillow. The bed was situated almost exactly beneath the trap-door. The other furniture in the "cell" consisted of a deal table and a kitchen chair.

For an attic the ceiling was unusually high—and this perhaps was why the colonel had

chosen the top rooms for prisons. He had never imagined that access could be gained from the roof.

But our object was not to rescue Christine; there was nothing to be gained by getting him out of the attic. He would only be recaptured and given worse punishment. Our idea was to make the poor chap's imprisonment easier.

"Hi! Christy!" I whispered softly.

The College House junior moved slightly, but did not look up.

"Christine!" I hissed. "Wake up, you lazy boulder!"

This time Bob Christine turned over, opened his eyes, and then sat up with surprising suddenness.

"Who—who's that?" he gasped dazedly.

"Keep your hair on, old son!" I whispered. "And don't jaw too loudly. I'm Nipper, and Tregellis-West and Watson are with me. We've got in through the roof, and we've only got about two minutes."

Christine stared upwards amazedly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "How did you get up there? And what's the idea? I can't get out, Nipper. Clinton will skin me if——"

"We haven't come to rescue you," I interrupted. "But you're in for a rotten time. I've heard—bread-and-water, nobody to speak to, nothing to do all day——"

"That's right," said Christine, red in the face with excitement. "It's solitary confinement for seven days. I'm sore all over from the whacking that Hunnish beast gave me. I'm as hungry as a hunter, too—didn't have any supper. And only a slice of bread and a glass of water in the morning! Clinton ought to be kicked half across Europe!"

I grinned.

"Look here," I said rapidly. "There's no carpet on this floor, but there's a big mat over by the window. You'll have to get up one of the floor-boards—two of 'em, if necessary. It'll be easy enough, and you've got hours of time on your hands before morning——"

"But what's the idea?" demanded Christine blankly.

"You've got to have a secret cupboard," I explained. "Clinton won't think of looking under the mat and under the floor-boards—even if he suspects anything, which he won't. We're going to diddle the rotter."

"But how?" asked Christine. "And what do I want a secret cupboard for?"

"You'll see in half a tick," I said cheerfully. "We can't stop long, old son, so you'll have to excuse us. Stand clear of the bed."

Christine jumped out on to the floor. The next moment a parcel bounced down upon the bed. A second one followed, and then a third. They were big and bulky, and Christine eyed them wonderingly.

"What the dickens is all this?" he asked.

"All sorts of things," I replied. "Blankets—enough to keep you warm. Books to read, so that time won't hang on your hands. In

the other parcels there's heaps of grub—potted fish, meat, sardines, biscuits, cakes, pastry—and all sorts of good things. In three days' time we'll come with another supply, and you can hand us the empties. See the idea?"

Bob Christine's face was glowing.

"I say!" he exclaimed warmly. "You're—you're real pals!"

"Of course we are, dear old boy!" said Montie. "We may be rivals, an' all that, but we're friends, begad! We want to relieve your sufferin'."

"Why, this bread-and-water business will be a farce," grinned Christine, almost overcome with delight. "And I sha'n't care tuppence about being up here on my own, now that I've got books to read. Oh, you're bricks!"

"Be careful, that's all!" I warned. "Hide the things away, and don't allow a single crumb to be seen. If you can't get up any of the floor-boards, you'd better shove the stuff in that cupboard and chance it. We've done our best, anyhow, and I hope you'll have a better time than you reckoned on."

"I'll remember this, Nipper," said Christine, looking up earnestly. "By jingo! You've beaten my own study-chums, even!"

"They're in this House, and couldn't get out like we could," I said. "I'll bet Talmadge and Yorke are having bad dreams about you, and they'd give anything to come to your rescue. Well, so-long, old son! We'll try to come again the day after to-morrow, but we can't absolutely promise. Look out for us, anyhow."

"Rather!" said Christine. "Thanks tremendously—all three of you. Just wait until I get out of this, and then I'll be able to tell you what I think——"

"Rats!" put in Watson. "You'd have done the same for us, wouldn't you?"

We all bade the prisoner good-night, and I was just about to switch off the light, when I remembered something.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" I called down. "You're in the dark, aren't you?"

"I shall be when you turn that light off."

"Well, here's half a dozen candles and a box of matches. They may come in useful; but you'd better be jolly careful."

"You bet I shall," said Christine, nodding.

We closed the trap-door, and once more emerged upon the outer roof. Three minutes later we had reached the ground and were carrying the ladder through the snow to the place where it belonged. Snow was still descending, and we were very glad of this, for no tell-tale trail would be visible in the morning.

Colonel Clinton had been nicely "dished." His prisoner, instead of suffering as the colonel intended him to suffer, would really have quite a decent time. At all events, his confinement would be less irksome.

And Sir Montie and Tommy and I reached our own dormitory and slipped into bed, feeling that we had performed a really praiseworthy task.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SMOULDERING FIRE!

BOB CHRISTINE'S chums, and the Monks generally, know nothing whatever about the nocturnal expedition indulged in by Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. But in the morning I took Yorke and Talmadge aside and told them what had been done.

They were both enormously pleased.

"I say, that's ripping of you, Nipper!" said Yorke. "Poor old Bob won't have half such a bad time now. But I don't think we'd better tell the other fellows."

"Not a word!" I said warningly. "We five can keep it to ourselves, but I wouldn't think of trusting the Remove as a whole. Somebody would let the truth out; it would be all over the school in an hour, and Clinton would get wind of it. Don't say a word. After all, the colonel's brutality is just as bad; Christine will have an easy time because of what we've done. I dare say you College House chaps are feeling pretty wild, and I think it's better to let that feeling grow. If everybody knew that Christine was O.K., they'd do nothing."

"That's what we shall do, anyhow—nothing!" growled Talmadge.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, I know what I'd do, if I was in the College House," I said grimly. "I don't want to preach sedition, but I'll give you a hint at least. I wouldn't stand Clinton's rot for twelve hours. Just think it over—and if he continues his brutality—act!"

I walked away with my chums, and Talmadge and Yorke looked at one another.

"What the dickens did he mean?" asked Talmadge.

"It was plain enough," said Yorke. "He was suggesting that we should revolt—mutiny! By Jupiter! I'm not sure that we sha'n't!"

Yorke spoke grimly; and his words were only an echo of the feeling which was rampant in the junior section of the College House generally. The whole thing was getting too thick, and something would certainly have to be done.

This was all the more imperative after breakfast. For Yorke was flogged unmercifully by the colonel—unmercifully and unjustly, for the chap was not in the slightest degree to blame for the "dummy" incident of the previous evening. We Ancient House fellows had engineered the whole thing.

And this injustice aroused the Monks to a dangerous pitch. The colonel's harshness was unbearable. Added to this was the brutality of Sergeant Donnell. Life was impossible under the conditions which prevailed.

But the discipline was so strict that any attempt at organisation amongst the juniors was out of the question. Discipline, indeed, seemed to be let loose—it was running riot.

After morning lessons the Removites were drilled ruthlessly until dinner-time. They hadn't a minute to themselves. After dinner they were drilled again and paraded in the

Triangle. The whole thing was scandalous, and it could only be assumed that the colonel was working off his temper for the incident which had occurred during the previous evening.

Meetings were banned. If half a dozen fellows collected together in one study a prefect would come along and distribute them. And Sergeant Donnell was on the alert the whole time. The fellows were spied upon and literally shadowed.

But, after all, it was quite impossible to have everybody watched. The result was that secret meetings were held, in spite of the rigid watch. And these meetings passed a resolution that Colonel Clinton should be appealed to.

"We don't want to put ourselves in the wrong," said Yorke to a group of fellows who had managed to find the sanctuary of the Ancient House lobby. "If we mutiny straight away we should be justified, but I think it'll be better to approach Clinton first."

"What for?"

"We'll demand the release of Christine," said Yorke firmly. "And if the colonel ignores us we'll refuse to do another stroke of work or to do any further drilling. If we only stick together we shall hold the upper hand."

"Good!" said Clapson. "But who's going to Clinton?"

"I'll be the leader," said Yorke quietly.

"And I'll back you up," remarked Talmadge.

Clapson and Billy Nation at once agreed to accompany the pair. But the other juniors hung back, fearing that a heavy punishment awaited them.

Yorke and his followers were not feeling quite so bold when they marched to "headquarters"—Colonel Clinton's study. Colonel Clinton was seated at his desk, and he was talking with Sergeant Donnell.

"You impudent young rascals!" he exclaimed harshly. "What do you mean by entering this room—"

"We represent the Remove, sir," said Yorke, rendered courageous by the knowledge that he was backed by all the Monks. "We wish to protest against—against—"

"Well?" said the colonel coldly. "Go on."

"Against all this discipline, sir!" burst out Yorke. "It's—it's shameful! And we want to ask you to set Christine free—"

"We demand it!" put in Talmadge fiercely. Clinton rose to his feet.

"Sergeant Donnell," he said, his voice harsh and cold. "Take these four wretched boys straight to the gymnasium and give

them two hours' hard drilling. Do not allow them one minute's respite!"

"But, sir—" began Yorke.

"Another word, Private Yorke, and you will be flogged!"

Yorke's fury burst forth in a flood.

"I don't care if I am!" he shouted. "We're not going to stand this rotten brutality! If that bully touches me I'll—"

"Seize that boy, Donnell!" roared the Housemaster.

Yorke was gripped by the powerful sergeant. But Talmadge and Clapson and Nation couldn't see their chum beaten about before their eyes. They rushed the sergeant, howled him over, and pulled Yorke away.

"Run!" gasped Talmadge.

The deputation streaked out of the doorway like rabbits—a most ignominious exit. But they were panic-stricken for the moment, and only thought about escaping. They were met by the rest of the Monks, and the story was quickly told.

Capture was inevitable, and the four juniors were soon rounded up and marched off straight into the gymnasium. The colonel, apparently, had decided to drop the flogging. Perhaps he suspected that the Remove was in a dangerous mood.

But the deputation was drilled cruelly—for two solid hours. When the ordeal was over they were fit to drop from exhaustion.

But Colonel Clinton had finally proved that he would stand no interference with his authority. Appealing to him was useless. And the feeling which was running riot amongst the College House juniors was not merely dangerous, but absolutely grim. If the colonel had been less arrogant and pompous he would have read the danger-signals.

But he was so positive that the Remove was subdued that the very thought of mutiny did not enter his head.

The smouldering fire was still smouldering at present. But it was likely to burst into flame at any moment. The boys would stand brutality up to a certain pitch, but there was no telling what would happen afterwards.

Bob Christine was still a prisoner, and the prospect immediately before the juniors was one which filled them with rage and consternation. Human flesh and blood couldn't stand all this harshness.

And trouble—big trouble—was certainly brewing!

How that trouble developed, and exactly what became of it, deserves to be recorded in quite a separate episode—and that's what I intend to do. There was a great deal of excitement in store for St. Frank's generally, and the College House in particular!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

OUR POPULAR SCHOOL SERIAL!**The Chums of Littleminster School.****A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.****By ARTHUR S. HARDY.*****The First Chapters.*****BASIL HOOD** is a new boy at Littleminster School.

On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Challis takes Hood fishing in a punt, which gets cast adrift. Later on Grainger, the Captain, sees Challis at the nets, and asks him to play for the next sixteen against the eleven. Meanwhile Basil suspects Myers of casting the punt adrift, since he found a coin belonging to him near the spot. Unsuspectingly he puts the coin in a drawer in his cubicle. It vanishes, and Basil suspects Myers. Challis is chosen to play for the School against Ragley. Myers is left out, and turns up to look on at what he believes will be Challis's downfall. Four wickets are down for 15, and Challis is called upon to face the Ragley fast bowler, Rylands. Challis scores 40 runs in a whirlwind style, and Littleminster's innings closes for 79. Grainger and Andrews then dismiss Ragley for 53, and Littleminster wins a sensational match. Joe Smart comes on the ground, and Mr. Evans orders him away. (Now read on.)

BASIL WATCHES MYERS.

"MYERS had no right. Leave the ground at once"

"But, look 'ere——"

The master was not in the mood to argue with such a man. Seizing him by the scruff of the neck and twisting his arm, he marched him away.

Smart, expostulating, turned, and, finding that he was not a match for the master, kicked at him.

He regretted it. With a twist of the arm, Mr. Evans hauled him away at a run, and what happened after the boys never knew. But Joe Smart did not come back.

Basil, marvelling and wondering at all these things, edged away from the crowd when the school went in to bat a second time, and, taking up a position from which he could keep an eye on Myers, watched that peculiarly unsatisfactory lad.

Myers sat watching the game until Grainger and Challis got set and the attention of all the boys was directed at the play.

Then Basil saw him rise and walk away, slowly at first, quickly afterwards.

The fag, impelled by an instinct he could not resist, followed.

It was not in a boy of Basil's sunny nature to act the spy on another.

He would sooner have died than done such a thing, generally speaking, and yet, on this occasion, something told him that he ought.

As he had feared, Myers made straight for the school-gates, and passed them. Basil, intending only to see which direction he took, passed to the gates also, looked out when Myers had got some distance along the road, and to his amazement saw Joe Smart waiting for him.

The two joined company, and walked on together in the direction of the town.

"Phew!" whistled Basil. "There's something up!"

He hesitated at playing the spy no longer. He felt, somehow, as a Littleminster boy, that he ought.

And so he followed them along the road that led to the town.

A COWARDLY ACT.

NO boy in Littleminster had a greater horror of spying and sneaking than Basil Hood. This abhorrence may be said to have been born in him. Soon after his arrival at the big school, when he had settled down, he realised that it was a part of the discipline, a sort of unwritten law, that boys should not spy and sneak upon one another, that the offenders who did were punished, and remained for ever unpopular.

True, some of the seniors—Myers was one—encouraged their fags to spy for them, but, luckily, Basil had escaped from his clutches, and often and often, when they had got to know each other well, John Challis would read the small boy moral lectures which did him a wonderful amount of good.

So it was that Basil hesitated when he reached the gates of the school, and glanced after the retreating figure of Myers, feeling ashamed that he had even followed him thus far. But when he witnessed the meeting of Myers and Joe Smart his scruples vanished.

A flood of suspicions swept across his brain, and, with a catch in his breath, he followed them. Again he remembered the coin he had

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

found and Myers's eager desire to regain possession of it.

That coin, stolen from his cubicle, had been recovered in the passage by Ponsonby. Surely it must have been Myers who had stolen it?

And what was there between the senior and this cad from the other side of the town? Surely the fellow must have a strong hold over Myers, to dare to trespass in the school grounds as he had done?

Well, Basil determined he would follow them, watch where they went to, and then confide in John Challis. John, with his fine, broad nature and splendid uprightness of character, without a trace of malice in his disposition, would advise him what to do.

And so the fag followed the two along the pretty, winding country road, until a bend overhung with trees hid them from view.

Beyond this bend, on the left-hand side of the road, there was a wood, bordered by a stiff hedge of thorn. The wood was private property, part of Sir Thomas Merson's estate, but sometimes the boys would enter it and roam its wilds for the sheer joy of the thing.

At a break of the hedge Smart, who was strolling along, hands in pockets, and pulling at his pipe, stopped abruptly.

"Look 'ere," he growled, eyeing Myers with a sulky stare, "there's a school-kid follo'ing us. Did you put 'im up to that? If so, what's the game?"

Myers started and halted, his face white, his eyes staring wildly.

"I've nothing to do with it, Smart," he faltered. "You'll get me into trouble; you know. Wait! I'll see who it is."

He doubled back, keeping close to the hedge, and, peering from his cover, saw Basil walking towards him. Swiftly he rejoined his disreputable companion.

"It's young Hood," he muttered. "He's Challis's fag."

"What, the big fellow you nearly drowned?" sneered Smart.

"Oh, stow it! Don't keep on about that. Yes, he's his fag."

"Set on to watch us, eh? Well, I'll soon get rid of him. 'Ere, follow me."

With a backward glance, Smart saw Basil's figure emerging from behind the turn in the road. Good! Making for a gap in the hedge, he wormed his way through, and called upon Myers to follow him.

This the schoolboy did. Myers had lost all initiative, and all his courage with it.

Onward through the wood the rascal led the way, until, halting behind the cover of a big tree, he motioned to Myers to join him.

Behind them came an echoing crackle of fallen leaves.

Basil, having given them time to get ahead, had followed them, wildly excited now, wondering what business they might have in the wood.

Having lost sight of them, he hurried on at a swifter pace, anxious not to lose them.

And so he blundered on till he reached the big tree, from behind which Joe Smart suddenly emerged. With a hoarse laugh, and

a dive of his strong hand, the cad seized the junior by the collar.

"Now, kid," he jeered, "p'r'aps you'll explain what you're follo'ing us for?"

Myers stood, trembling, behind.

For a moment Basil stood inert in the grasp of his captor. He hadn't bargained for this.

"Let me go!" he cried hoarsely, as he regained the power of speech. "Let me go, I say! Myers, make him!"

But Myers stood afraid.

Smart then shook the boy savagely, his face set and fierce.

"You're a nice sort of schoolboy, you are!" he cried. "I don't allow nobody to spy on me. Out with it. Who sent yer? What do you want? Better own up. If you don't, you'll be sorry!"

In vain Basil struggled to free himself. His cheeks were flaming with shame and indignation.

This way and that he turned, and wriggled and twisted, until the cad wrenched his arm savagely to quieten him. Basil uttered a howl of pain.

Then his anger getting the better of him, he kicked at the bully's shins and began to punch at him with both fists.

"You brute! You bully! You beastly cad!" he choked. "Myers, make him let me go!"

But Myers would not intervene.

"You've brought it on yourself," he growled.

For a moment Smart took the barking of his shins philosophically. Then, as the pain made itself evident, he shortened his right arm and gave the boy a stunning blow on the head.

"Oh," moaned Basil. "Oh!"

Again and again Smart punched him, while he held him with his left hand—punched until the blood came.

Myers stepped forward.

"I say, Smart," he said, in an awe-stricken voice, "this is going too far. Don't hurt him too much!"

"Shut up! Leave him to me!" snarled the cad, "or it'll be the worse for you!"

He let go, and the maddened junior, full of pluck and fight, though the odds were so heavy against him, hurled himself upon his brutal assailant.

It was what Smart wanted. The cad could fight, especially when he carried the heavy guns. Again and again he hit the small boy in the face; but, in spite of terrible punishment, Basil went in at him.

The cad then seized him, held him by the throat, and banged his head against the tree. As soon as he was released, Basil staggered blindly forward.

"You beast! You beast!" he sobbed, hitting out wildly.

And then a crushing blow came, a blow that seemed to break his head in, and darkness swept down and claimed him.

Even then, with the body of the junior lying at his feet, the coward would not leave him alone, but kicked him as he lay.

(Continued overleaf.)

Even Myers couldn't stand that. He thrust Smart angrily backwards.

"You've killed him! You've killed him!" he choked. "I thought something dreadful would happen! Leave him alone!"

Smart, with a laugh, looked down at the huddled-up figure of the unlucky boy and grinned.

"Serve him right!" he growled. "I'll bet he won't foller me again in a 'urry!"

Myers, shuddering, bent over poor Basil.

"If you've killed him, it's murder!" he stammered, awed by the ghostly echo of his own voice.

"Bab!" snarled Smart. "E's all right! I know how far to go."

Still, he bent over the prostrate boy, felt his pulse, laid his hand over his heart, and then spurned the inanimate flesh.

"Let him lie there!" he growled. "He'll soon come round. Guess he's learnt his lesson. He won't interfere with you and me no more. And now, Mr. Myers, p'raps you'll come along o' me and have that little confidential chat as we're both longing for."

He turned and led the way out of the wood, Myers following, white-faced and sullen, at his heels.

Into the road they made their way, and along it.

And as they went, the insensible boy lay where he had fallen, without sign of movement. A squirrel, running down the tree, went to him and looked big-eyed at him, in animal wonderment.

Birds scurried between the boughs. The breeze rustled the leaves.

Minutes passed away, and still the boy lay where he had fallen, lay silent and motionless, as one dead.

MISSING.

THE ever-memorable match between Ragley and Littleminster having ended, the players returned to the pavilion and changed into their everyday attire, after which a move was made to the schoolhouse, where, later on, dinner was given to the visiting team.

John Challis, finding himself overwhelmed with praise, both grudging and otherwise, escaped to his room as soon as possible, and, throwing himself into his armchair, thought long and earnestly over the change in his fortunes.

An age seemed to have passed since that time, not so very long ago, when he had been sent to Coventry, when he was cut by nearly all the school.

And in reviewing the events which had brought about the remarkable change, it struck him, as he sought to account for it all, that Basil Hood, his fag, had had not a little to do with it. Dating from that day of the accident on the river, things had improved for him at Littleminster, and his heart swelled as he thought of the unswerving gratitude and affection of the new boy.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. Hello! Where was Basil? How came it about that the fag had not come to congratulate him with the others?

(To be continued.)

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NEXT WEEK'S STORY

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"Under the Heel!"

As the Title suggests, it is another fascinating account of Life at St. Frank's under the rule of the Tyrannical Disciplinarian, **COLONEL CLINTON**. What part **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER** play will be seen by reading

"Under the Heel!"

OUT NEXT WEDNESDAY.

PRICE THREE-HALFPENCE.