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The next second Christine was sent reeling and spinning across the thin ice, propelled by all the strength of Donnell's great arms.

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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," "Discipline Let Loose," "Under the Heel," etc., etc. February 1, 1919

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS BASKETS.

A MATEUR theatricals!" said Handforth firmly.

"Eh?"

"Amateur theatricals," repeated Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove. "All those baskets can't mean anything else. Just look at 'em. I expect the Sixth is getting up some dud show or other. 'The Merchant of Venice,' or some rot like that, I suppose."

"Shakespeare isn't rot!" said McClure stoutly.

"My dear chap, I'm not saying it is," explained Handforth, smiling in a superior kind of way. "Shakespeare produced properly is top-hole; but Shakespeare as presented by the Sixth is too pitiful for words."

Church and McClure grinned.

"You're not far wrong, Handy," said Church. "I remember the last show the Sixth gave. That was one of Shakespeare's plays, and it was simply murdered. Some of the fellows said that the actors ought to have been murdered too!"

The three chums of Study D, in the Ancient House, were standing at their window, gazing with interest across the Triangle towards the gates. It was midday, and the dinner-gong would soon sound.

The recent frost had broken, and now the Triangle was muddy and sticky with half-thawed, slushy snow. The carrier's van was standing outside the gates, and a number of huge dress-baskets were visible in the vehicle. Indeed, it seemed to contain nothing else.

As Handforth and Co. watched, the van was pulled into the Triangle, and it ground its way towards the College House, coming to a halt against the wide steps. A crowd of juniors soon collected round.

"Cheek!" growled Handforth. "Those things ain't for the College House, are they? Great pip! I wonder if Christine and Co. are getting up a play of some sort?"

"Oh, talk sense!" snapped McClure.

"Eh? Look here, Arnold McClure——"

"Do you think the Remove chaps would have all those baskets of costumes?" de-

manded McClure tartly. "Christine and Co. couldn't afford to hire such a lot; besides, they haven't time for amateur theatricals nowadays. Colonel Clinton is keeping the poor chaps too busy—to say nothing of that beast, Donnell."

Handforth sniffed.

"It's their own fault," he said. "They ought to revolt against it."

"Well, they did revolt——"

"And meekly surrendered within a couple of hours!" snorted Handforth. "A fine revolt that was—I don't think!"

"It's easy enough for us to talk," said Church, shaking his head. "We're in the Ancient House, and we've got Mr. Nelson Lee for a Housemaster—the best the school's ever had. The Monks are having a rotten time with the colonel—what with his military discipline, and his drills and parades and route-marches. It's almost impossible to keep up a revolt where there's such cast-iron discipline."

Handforth wouldn't acknowledge it, but Church was quite right. Colonel Clinton's rule was harsh and severe, and the juniors of the College House were at present passing through an ordeal.

The colonel was a capable man, and he had distinguished himself honourably while at the front. But he was useless as a schoolmaster now; his ideas were all of the mailed-fist variety; he seemed to be imbued with a type of Prussianism, for his one aim was to subdue the boys under his control until they were like so many parts of a machine.

Christine and Co., of course, resented the treatment vigorously—not that it did them much good. For any hint of dissatisfaction was immediately met by prompt and severe punishment. The unfortunate Monks were in a sorry plight—and not the least of their troubles was their drill-instructor, Sergeant Donnell.

This man had been introduced to St. Frank's by the colonel, and he was a bully, a blackguard, and of a far harsher nature than Clinton himself. On one occasion, now famous, he had been rolled in the snow, but the fellows were not likely to have another opportunity of indulging in such a pleasure.

The arrival of the dress-baskets was a subject of much discussion in both the College House and the Ancient House. Handforth and Co. sallied out in search of information—but found none.

They joined a group of juniors who were watching Warren, the porter, assist the carrier to carry the baskets indoors. I was a member of that group, and Sir Montie Tregellis-West was with me. Pitt and Grey, and one or two others, comprised the rest. We only shook our heads in answer to Handforth's inquiries.

"An amateur play of some kind, I suppose," said Handforth.

"That's hardly likely," I replied. "Of course, the seniors may be getting up a huge spectacle of some sort—nothing else would account for all these baskets—but I've heard nothing about it. And when the Fifth or Sixth get busy on theatricals they generally let the whole school know."

"Perhaps Christine will be able to tell us something," remarked Grey. "He's just coming out, I see. Hi, Christine!"

The leader of the Monks strolled over towards us, with Yorke and Talmadge. There was a puzzled expression on his face, and it was reflected in those of his chums.

"What's in the wind, Christy?" I asked, nodding towards the van.

"Blessed if I know," said Christine, shrugging his shoulders. "Some more of the colonel's rot, I suppose. But I'm jiggered if I can see what these baskets can contain. Nobody knows anything about 'em."

"Not the seniors?" asked Handforth.

"No; Donnell's inside, and he's superintending things," replied the Monk's leader.

"All the baskets are being taken into a room in the private part of the House; it's been specially cleared for the purpose, I believe. They're going to be locked in, so Parry tells me."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince nez.

"It looks rather significant, to my mind," he observed. "Dear boys, there's something ain't prepared. I don't know what it is, but I shall be surprised if those baskets don't make you College House fellows feel bad before long. The colonel has something up his sleeve—he has, really."

Bob Christine grunted.

"He's always got something up his sleeve," he exclaimed. "Hardly a day passes without a fresh trial for the Remove. We're getting fed-up, and there'll be another revolt before long. I can feel it in my bones."

"It's no good feeling it there!" said Handforth, with a sniff. "Why the dickens don't you snap your fingers in Clinton's face?"

"Because it's too jolly dangerous!" said Christine grimly. "If you'd been flogged like I was, Handy, and chucked into a beastly cell, with nothing but bread-and-water to eat, you wouldn't talk so big!"

"How can you eat water?" asked Handforth humorously.

"Oh, rats!"

Bob Christine turned away crossly, and I couldn't altogether blame him. He was being chipped constantly about that ill-fated revolt, which was now a thing of the past. Only a

few fellows appreciated the difficulties with which the Monks had to contend. I could sympathise with them—and I did.

"Look here, Montie," I said, drawing my chum aside. "Perhaps the guv'nor knows something about these baskets. I'm not a curious chap as a rule, but I should like to know what's on the board now. I think I'll pop along and ask Mr. Lee if he knows anything. You go and join Tommy in Study C; I sha'n't be long."

"Just as you like, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West obligingly.

My noble chum, I believe, was inclined to disapprove of my seemingly undue curiosity; but I wanted to be in a position to give Christine a helpful tip, if I could manage it. Besides, I was anxious to have a word with the guv'nor on another subject, and this provided a decent excuse to go to his study.

Nelson Lee was just entering the passage as I turned the corner. He gave me a nod and a smile, and we both entered his study together.

"Well, Nipper?" he inquired.

"Seen all those baskets, sir?" I asked.

"Baskets? What are you talking about, young 'un?"

"I thought you were observant, guv'nor," I remarked. "The carrier's van is in the Triangle, disgorging piles of big dress-baskets. They're addressed to Colonel Clinton. I understand, and I thought you might know what's in 'em."

Nelson Lee regarded me sternly.

"And why should you think that I might know what some baskets addressed to Colonel Clinton contain?" he demanded. "I am afraid, Nipper, that you are developing an unhealthy curiosity——"

"Oh, come off it, guv'nor!" I groaned.

"That is no way to address your Housemaster!"

"Perhaps not," I said. "But I'm addressing you just now, sir—Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective. I only recognise you as my Housemaster during school time. We're ourselves just at present. And I'm not unhealthily curious, either. If the colonel means to adopt some fresh tyranny, I'd like to give Christine a warning."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Oh, so that is the little plan?" he said drily. "Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, Nipper. I have not the slightest knowledge of these baskets you refer to; indeed, I did not know they had arrived. I have a better way of spending my time than gazing out into the Triangle. You will have to curb your curiosity and await events."

"What about Stowe Lodge, sir?" I asked. "Any further development?"

"None, so far. And we must not allow our imaginations to run riot, Nipper. The appearance of things is somewhat sinister. But the whole affair may be easily explained."

I grinned.

"That won't work, guv'nor," I said, shaking my head.

"Eh? What won't work?"

"Trying to put me off the scent," I ex-

claimed. "I know jolly well that Colonel Clinton isn't so innocent as he appears to be while he's at St. Frank's. That business at Stowe Lodge is thundering suspicious. I don't forget that I was nearly gassed."

"Owing to your rashness in burgling a strange house," reminded Nelson Lee.

"Don't put it that way, guv'nor," I said. "If anybody overhears us I shall end up at the Old Bailey, or something. I simply investigated, but I didn't expect that there'd be a roomful of poison gas in Stowe Lodge. It's a good job you yanked me out when you did. My throat still feels a bit wonky even now."

"I am sorry to hear that, young 'un," said the guv'nor smoothly. "I am quite sure it must be most distressing to be troubled with a 'wonky' throat! I hope you don't teach the other boys these slang expressions?"

"They don't need any teaching, sir," I grinned. "Well, as you don't know anything I shall clear off. But I thought you might be able to put me on the scent. So long, guv'nor!"

I strolled out of his study, thinking about Stowe Lodge and the adventure we had experienced there a few nights since. The Lodge was a fairly modern house situated close to the river on a lonely spot near the school. It was occupied by a man named Hardy—the sole occupant.

This chap was closely associated, somehow, with Colonel Clinton, and it was quite evident that some secret work was on hand—of a criminal nature, too. Everything pointed that way, and I had an idea that Colonel Clinton would be revealed in his true colours soon.

On more than one occasion Nelson Lee had seen the colonel wearing a mask, and he was in the habit of visiting his colleague at Stowe Lodge in secret; he was most anxious that not a soul should know of his visits, and they were mainly undertaken after the boys had retired for the night.

Just recently I had broken bounds after lights-out, accompanied by my chums, and I had succeeded in getting into the lonely house while it was unoccupied. But I had paid for my recklessness. In attempting to enter an inner room I had been overcome by some choking fumes, and Nelson Lee had fished me out just in time to prevent me being collared by Colonel Clinton and the mysterious Hardy.

My investigation had fizzled out, in a way of speaking, but I knew a few more details, at all events. And that experience had not altered my conviction that the colonel's connection with Stowe Lodge was a dishonest one. I couldn't see how all the facts could be satisfactorily explained away. Perhaps the truth would become known fairly soon now. The College House fellows, I knew, would cheer with delight when Colonel Clinton shook the dust of his feet from St. Frank's for ever. The general opinion in the ranks of the Monks was that thumbscrews and boiling oil were altogether too good for the tyrant of the College House.

The main fault about the colonel was that he wanted to convert his House into something approaching a military training establishment. What with sentry duty, saluting, drilling, and a hundred other ordeals, the ordinary placid life of the juniors was changed into a continuous nightmare.

And the arrival of the dress-baskets, although apparently innocent, left as uneasy impression in the minds of most fellows that some new absurdity was about to be perpetrated.

For the colonel was not only harsh, but comic in his ideas. He had been known as a freak almost since his first hours at St. Frank's, and his Gilbertian system of rule had been the talk of the whole school until the fellows got used to it.

Perhaps normal times would soon return. Mr. Stockdale, the former chief of the College House, had been unable to return this term, owing to a grave attack of pneumonia, and so the colonel had filled his shoes.

Just recently, however, news had arrived that Mr. Stockdale was mending far more rapidly than had been reckoned upon. There was every likelihood that he would be able to take up the reins again at the commencement of the next term. For the present, however, Clinton held sway.

It was nearly dinner-time when I arrived at Study C. Sir Montie and Tommy Watson were not there, and I searched for them in the Triangle, running them down against the gymnasium.

I was walking over to them when Colonel Clinton emerged from the College House, and stood lighting a cigar upon the steps. Quite a number of juniors stared at him in mild astonishment. The colonel's expression was most unusual. He appeared to be in an extremely good humour, and beamed round him just for the sake of beaming. He even looked quite pleasant.

"Looks as if he'd backed a winner," remarked Fullwood, who was standing near. "Nothing else would bring such a scrappy smile to his chivvy."

Fullwood, the leader of the Nuts, always imagined that when anybody looked especially contented, it meant that he had backed a winner, or something of that kind. Fullwood's mind was generally engaged in matters of horse-racing and gambling.

The colonel's expression, however, undoubtedly called forth many comments. And Grayson, of the Fifth, who was about to enter the College House, decided that he might venture to ask the Housemaster a question. Grayson was the "Major" of the Remove, having been appointed to that farcical rank by the colonel.

"I beg your pardon, sir—" began Grayson.

"Well, my boy?" said the colonel genially.

"I was just wondering what all those baskets mean, sir," said Grayson, gathering courage. "Have they anything to do with us, sir?"

Colonel Clinton's expression changed.

"I have no intention of answering that question, Major Grayson," he said curtly.

"Has it ever occurred to you to mind your own business?"

"I—I——"

"You may go indoors, Grayson!" snapped the Housemaster.

And the Fifth-Former went, feeling rather sore. He had been snapped up before a crowd of juniors, and Grayson didn't like it.

But one thing was certain—Colonel Clinton had something up his sleeve.

CHAPTER II.

A REGULAR ROTTER.

AFTERNOON lessons were nearly over in the Remove Form-room, and we were busily putting our books away and clearing up before being dismissed. Mr. Crowell, the Form-master, was in rather a good temper, and he was indulging in a few witty remarks, at which the Remove dutifully grinned.

Mr. Crowell turned as the door opened, and his smile vanished, to give place to an impatient frown.

"Well, Sergeant Donnell, what do you want?" he asked sharply.

It was the drill-instructor who had entered the room, and I noticed the College House fellows eyeing one another uneasily.

"I have orders from the colonel, sir, to march the College House section of this Form into the Triangle immediately after lessons," explained the sergeant stiffly. "They are to be drilled, sir."

"Oh, rats!" grunted Christine audibly.

The frown was still upon Mr. Crowell's face.

"I strongly disapprove of these continuous drills, Sergeant Donnell," he said, half-angrily. "It is most unfair to the boys, and I shall make it my duty to speak to Colonel Clinton himself on the subject."

"Oh, good old Crowell!" murmured a dozen voices.

"Sorry, sir; but I'm only obeying orders," said Sergeant Donnell shortly.

His tone, however, was one of great satisfaction, and the Monks understood. The sergeant liked nothing better than parading the juniors at a time when they most detested it. He was a bully by nature, and it gave him pleasure to inflict suffering at all times.

Mr. Crowell was a mere Form-master, and he had no say in any matters concerning the College House. But he took a great interest in his boys, and protested when he thought fit.

Not that his protests were of much use. Christine and Co., much to their disgust, were marched out into the Triangle when the Form was dismissed. To the Ancient House fellows this dismissal meant freedom for the rest of the day. But not so with the Monks.

Sometimes, they would not be interfered with for two or three days in succession; then would come a spell of drilling and parading. Christine and Co. never knew where they were. Perhaps it all depended upon Colonel Clinton's mood. At all events, he was decidedly erratic.

On this particular afternoon the Removites of the College House were obliged to fall in and stand at attention. They glowered at

Sergeant Donnell with no great affection in their looks.

"The colonel's orders are a bit stiff to-day, boys," said the sergeant pleasantly. "Don't blame me—And don't glare like that, Private Yorke, or I'll clip your dirty little ear!"

"My ears are cleaner than yours, anyhow!" retorted Yorke hotly.

"Don't give me any lip!" snapped Donnell. "You'll be reported later on, you insolent young puppy! You're going on a route-march—five miles—understand?"

"Before tea?" asked a dozen voices.

"Yes, before tea. You'll get a good appetite," said the sergeant. "Now then! None of that grumbling—and don't let me hear any sauce! Right turn! Mark time!"

The Monks reluctantly obeyed. They were feeling rebellious and furious. But to disobey orders would be to bring fresh hardships upon themselves. It was this thought which always kept them in check; they had been forced to realise that they were under the heel of the colonel, and there was no getting out of it. The punishments for insubordination were terribly drastic, and the juniors always submitted rather than face the music.

The march commenced at once, Sergeant Donnell striding along at the side of the column, and Grayson of the Fifth bringing up the rear—in order to prevent any stragglers from falling out. The Fifth-Former was in a savage mood, for he detested these marches as heartily as the juniors themselves. But he, like the Removites, was compelled to obey orders.

Christine and Co. marched sullenly. They were hungry, and eager for tea. And yet they would have to cover five miles before returning to St. Frank's! Over an hour before they could even prepare their study meal! It was at moments such as these that the fellows were most ripe for revolt.

The sergeant took his "troops"—as the colonel liked to term them—over the playing-fields, and then along the towing-path by the river, intending to strike the road by the bridge. The evening was a miserable one, and did not tend to improve the feelings of the sufferers.

The frost had gone, and an icy, cutting wind was blowing with considerable force. It was a raw, damp wind—and perhaps "icy" isn't quite a correct term to use—and it chilled the juniors to the marrow in spite of the exercise.

The going was slushy and uncomfortable. Half-melted snow lay everywhere, and the clouds were banking up for rain, by all appearances. It had been generally noticed that the colonel always chose vile weather for route-marches. The juniors believed that Clinton did it deliberately.

The squad ploughed on sulkily, grumbling amongst themselves, and there were many uncomplimentary remarks passed regarding the sergeant—and not always out of Donnell's hearing.

The instructor turned round sharply on one of these occasions.

"I don't want any more— Whoa! Hang the thing!"

He had broken off savagely, for his hat suddenly lifted from his head, and was borne on a gust of wind right over the column of juniors, and came down almost in mid-stream, on the ice—which still covered the river from bank to bank. The sergeant swore to himself, his hair waving wildly in the wind.

"We'd better go back, sergeant," said Talmadge casually. "You can't go on a five-mile march without a hat."

Donnell took no notice of the advice.

"Halt!" he roared. "Stand at ease, the lot of you!"

He marched through the boys to the edge of the river, and stood looking out across the ice to the spot where his hat was lying. It was quite twenty feet away, and the ice didn't look particularly safe. Two days ago it had been as firm as a rock, but the thaw had cracked it up dangerously, and it was now extremely treacherous.

Donnell's hair was still blowing about in the chilling wind, and he was getting very cold.

"Private Christine!" he snapped. "Step forward!"

Bob Christine obeyed.

"Run out over the ice and get my hat," ordered the sergeant.

"No, thanks!" said the junior firmly.

"What the thunder do you mean? No, thanks?"

"What I say," replied Christine. "Do you think I'm going out on that ice? It's too dangerous—"

"Afraid?" sneered Donnell.

"No, I'm not afraid!" shouted Christine hotly. "But I'm not a fool! If I went out on that ice I should break through. If you think it's so safe, why don't you go and get the hat yourself?"

Donnell scowled.

"I don't want any back answers!" he growled. "If you don't obey orders, I'll report you to the colonel. Go on that ice and get my hat!"

"Don't you go, Christine!"

"Stand where you are!"

"Ignore him!"

"Silence, you young dogs!" bellowed the sergeant, glaring at the boys. "If there's any more lip I'll make the march ten miles instead of five!"

This threat effectually silenced the Removites—although there was not much prospect of Donnell carrying the threat into execution. Still, there was a possibility of it, and the very thought was appalling.

Bob Christine still remained on the bank. The order was a most unwarrantable one. Donnell must have known that the ice was dangerous—although it looked so whole. After such a thaw the ice was no longer bound securely together, and it might crack up and float away at any time.

Moreover, Donnell's action was cowardly and brutal in the extreme. To order a boy on the ice when he was at perfect liberty to go himself proved that he thought the mission

unsafe. And to risk Christine's life for the sake of a hat was absolutely villainous.

"Didn't you hear me, hang you?" shouted Donnell.

"Yes, I did," said Christine quietly.

"Then obey orders!"

"I won't!"

"You—you refuse?"

"Yes!"

"Good for you, Christine!" exclaimed Yorke warmly.

"You insubordinate whelp!" shouted Donnell. "If you don't obey that command within five seconds, I'll use force! Do you think I want to stand here and catch my death of cold?"

"That's your look-out," retorted Christine. "You can go and fetch your hat if you think it's safe. I'm not stopping you. But you ought to be downright ashamed of yourself to give me such an order when you know it's dangerous. I'm not going to obey it—and you can report me to the colonel fifty times, if you want to. He won't uphold you in this conduct, I'll bet!"

The sergeant nearly choked.

"I'll give you one more chance!" he snarled. "Are you going over that ice to fetch my hat, or not? If you hadn't given me that sauce I might have changed my mind. But now you're going."

"I'm not!" declared Christine fiercely. "We've rolled you in the snow once, Sergeant Donnell, and if you're not jolly careful the chaps will be ready to do it again. You're going the right way to work for it."

"Hear, hear!"

"Chuck him on the ice!"

"Hold your tongues, hang you!" bellowed the sergeant furiously. "Major Grayson, I appeal to you."

The Fifth-Former shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't do that," he said. "I'm not going to advise you, Donnell. But I'll tell you one thing—that ice isn't safe, and you'd better not be such a fool! Leave your hat where it is!"

This, from a fellow like Grayson, was fairly conclusive. The Fifth-Former was a rank bully, and he was ever ready to persecute the Removites. But Grayson had sense enough to see that the sergeant was now acting dangerously. His temper had got the better of him—for Donnell himself had been half-hearted at the very beginning.

Now he was out of control.

"A set of young cowards—that's what you are!" he stormed. "It's no good you saying that the same applies to me. I'm twice your weight, and what would be dangerous for me will be safe for any one of you. You heard what I said, Christine? Those five seconds are up, long ago."

"And five hours will be up before I risk my life for the sake of your rotten hat!" said Christine fiercely. "Are you mad, sergeant? Can't you understand that the ice would give way—"

"You're going!" roared Donnell. "Obey my order at once!"

The man looked terribly fierce, and Christine involuntarily shrank back.

"Don't go, Christine!"

"Rather not!"

"Stand your ground, old man!"

Christine turned his back, intending to walk away. But the action deprived Sergeant Donnell of his last shred of reason. He seized Christine's shoulders, roaring with fury, and swung the junior round like a top.

The next second Bob Christine was sent reeling and spinning on to the ice, propelled by all the force of Donnell's great arms.

"Oh!"

"You brute!"

But there were only a few shouts; the majority of the fellows were anxiously watching Bob Christine. The junior had fallen over, and had slithered over the slushy ice on his back for the last few feet. He sat up, rather dazedly, and then got to his feet. Even as he did so there came a sound of ominous cracking.

"Get that hat!" snarled the sergeant, pointing.

The headgear was lying some distance beyond Christine, but the junior completely ignored the order, and commenced picking his way gingerly towards the bank.

"If you don't go back for that hat, I'll chuck you on the ice again!" thundered Donnell. "I'll——"

He broke off, his voice faltering. For, at that very second, while Christine was still far from the bank, the ice cracked with several sharp reports, and there was a dull splintering.

For one second Christine stood still. Then, as he attempted to rush forward to safety, his right foot went clean through, and he stumbled on to one knee.

Crash!

It happened in a flash. The ice broke up everywhere in Christine's vicinity, and he plunged through with a wild cry, and disappeared into the black, icy water!

CHAPTER III.

THE HEAD ASSERTS HIMSELF.

"GOOD Heavens!"

"Oh!"

"Christine's gone!"

"He'll be drowned!"

A perfect roar of alarm and fury broke from the juniors on the bank. Sergeant Donnell himself, sobered in a second, uttered a hoarse cry. Bob Christine had vanished, and he had not yet come to the surface.

"I—I didn't think——" began Donnell, white to the lips.

"You cur!" shouted Yorke desperately.

"You murderous coward!"

"Kick him out of the way!"

The juniors were in a dangerous mood, and they were roused to a pitch seldom before reached. Without the slightest ceremony the frightened Donnell was shouldered out of the way—roughly and without compunction. The crowd of boys lined the bank, and a gasp of relief went up as Christine suddenly appeared above the surface.

"Hold tight, old man!" gasped Yorke. "Thank goodness, you've come up! We'll haul you out!"

"Who's going in?" roared Talmadge. "Quick! We shall have to form a line, hand in hand, and then we can——"

"It's all right!" panted Christine, with chattering teeth. "The water's shallow here, and I'm standing on the bottom. I was trapped under the ice for a moment or two, and I thought I was never coming up. But I'm all right now—and you needn't worry."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Christine!"

The relief of the juniors revealed itself in the sudden storm of cheers; but many fellows had a kind of sob in their voices. The tension had been terrific, and for one awful moment they had thought that Christine was drowned.

But now, it seemed, he was in no danger, and he commenced floundering towards the bank, smashing the ice as he came. But Sergeant Donnell's criminal action was every whit as bad.

Christine might well have been drowned—for it was only by sheer luck that this particular stretch of water was shallow. Again, shallow though it was, Christine might have remained trapped beneath the ice. It had been a very near thing, and nobody knew it better than the victim himself.

At last he reached the bank, and willing hands pulled him to the grass. His coat was torn off as he stood there, and four or five others were piled round him and buttoned up tight, another being finally thrown right over his head.

"You'll have to run!" said Yorke, husky with excitement. "It's the only way to prevent dangerous results, old man. Run like the dickens, and keep warm. We'll all come with you."

In the tenseness of the situation Sergeant Donnell had been completely forgotten. And Donnell himself had stood by, recovering his composure. The knowledge that Christine was safe restored his confidence, and the man was insane enough to interfere. If he had possessed one grain of sense he would have left the juniors to themselves.

"Making a lot of fuss over nothing!" he rasped out savagely. "The boy's not hurt. I knew he wouldn't be. Private Yorke—Private Harron! You two boys will take Christine back to the school. The rest will fall into line——"

"Keep quiet, you scoundrel!" roared Yorke passionately.

"What! How—how dare——"

But the sergeant's attitude was the last straw. A good many fellows were already rushing Christine off. The rest, however, hurled themselves upon Donnell with utter fury. The man's brutality had aroused them to a highly dangerous pitch, and the next second the sergeant realised it.

"Stand back, you young cubs!" he gasped frantically. "Stand—— Yaroooh!"

The oncoming wave struck him with great violence. He was howled over, and the enraged Removites piled upon him and knocked

every ounce of wind out of his body. The sergeant was rolled in the snow and mud until he couldn't speak. It was a drastic revenge, but every bit deserved. The mud was thick and horrible, and it was stuffed into Donnell's mouth and ears, and his hair was filled with it. For all this, however, the man was only superficially hurt. The boys didn't go too far with their revenge, but just made Donnell understand, once and for all, that his authority was a thing of the past.

"Now, you rotter!" panted Talmadge. "You can crawl back when you like! But we give you fair warning that you'll be hissed and hooted out of the school! Not a single order of yours will be obeyed in future! You're a criminal!"

Donnell was left upon the ground, spluttering weakly and quite incapable of speech. Then the crowd of muddy juniors—for they had succeeded in ruining their own clothes as well as Donnell's—raced after the party which had taken charge of Bob Christine.

They caught up with it near the school playing-fields, and the whole crowd of them surged into the Triangle together. Christine, by this time, was warmed and in a glow. He hadn't been allowed to take a chill.

Without the slightest pause he was rushed into the College House, rushed upstairs, and plumped into a hot bath as quickly as it could be prepared—which was within about three minutes. There wasn't much fear of Christine coming to any harm. He was breathless, exhausted, and tired—but he hadn't caught cold.

Half a dozen fellows were his willing attendants. The remainder were collected in the Triangle, shouting excitedly, and gloating over the punishment which had overtaken Sergeant Donnell so swiftly.

Naturally the commotion attracted considerable attention. Nearly all the Ancient House juniors were at tea, but the meal was soon abandoned, and crowds surged out into the open.

I was amongst the first, and Sir Montie and Tommy were with me.

"Something's happened, dear old boys," declared Montie sagely. "I don't know what it is, but it looks very much like another revolt, begad!"

"Good luck to 'em!" I exclaimed heartily.

"What's happened?" bawled Handforth, appearing like a whirlwind.

"Better ask the Monks," I replied. "They seem pretty excited, anyhow. Clinton will be out here soon, tearing his hair and foaming at the mouth."

But it was Dr. Stafford, the Head of St. Frank's, who appeared first. Before we could ask any questions the Head came striding on the scene. He was looking angry, for he probably suspected what this commotion meant, and there was an immediate hush as he strode in amongst the College House juniors.

"Boys," he exclaimed sternly, "what is the meaning of this—this most unusual disturbance?"

"Sergeant Donnell is a villain, sir!"

shouted Talmadge, who had just rushed down from the bathroom to report that Christine was all right. "We've rolled him in the snow and mud—and we're proud of it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

"He deserves prison!"

"You are forgetting yourselves, boys!" shouted the Head, in amazement. "How dare you talk in this manner? Talmadge, come before me, and tell me exactly what has occurred. I demand to know the absolute truth!"

Talmadge was feeling bold—in the full knowledge that right was on the side of the excited Removites.

"Certainly, sir!" he said quickly. "I'll tell you the absolute truth in next to no time. We've all positively finished with Sergeant Donnell, and we're never going to take an order from him again!"

The Head set his lips grimly.

"Are you aware, Talmadge, that you are speaking in a very extraordinary manner?" he demanded curtly. "Sergeant Donnell is your drill instructor, and your Housemaster has given you strict orders to obey Donnell—"

"The colonel can't keep it up after he's heard what's happened, sir," replied Talmadge quietly. "Sergeant Donnell came into the Form-room, just before lessons were over, and marched every one of us—every College House Remove fellow—off for a five-mile march."

"I will grant that the order was somewhat harsh," said the Head, "but you have no excuse in rebelling—"

"Talmadge hasn't finished yet, sir!" shouted several voices.

"Tell the Head the rest, Tally!"

"That's what I mean to do," declared Talmadge. "We didn't think of revolting, sir, and we should have completed the march if Sergeant Donnell hadn't acted like an absolute murderer."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Dr. Stafford.

"I'm not exaggerating, sir," went on Talmadge firmly. "Sergeant Donnell's hat blew on to the ice while we were marching, and it fell almost in mid-stream. The sergeant ordered Christine to go and fetch it."

The Head's expression changed.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, in a hard voice. "I shall certainly reprimand Donnell severely. The ice on the river is most unsafe, and I have already forbidden all boys to venture upon it. Christine, I am sure, objected to obeying the order?"

"Christine refused to go, sir," said Talmadge hotly. "And then the sergeant abused him in the most awful language, and shouted that if Christine didn't go on the ice for the hat, he would be thrown on by force."

"The utter rascal! I am astounded—"

"But there's worse to come, sir," Talmadge hastened to say. "Poor old Christine was spun round before he could dodge, and the sergeant pitched him on to the ice and sent him slithering out yards from the bank. Even as Christine was getting to his feet

we heard the ice cracking—and that brutal scoundrel actually ordered Christine to fetch his hat even then."

"But what of the boy, Talmadge—what of Christine?" asked the Head anxiously.

"Why, he went through, of course—"

"Great Heaven!" gasped Dr. Stafford, horrified.

"But the water wasn't deep, and he managed to get to the bank; but it would have been a tragedy if the water hadn't been shallow at that spot," said Talmadge, his voice quivering with furious indignation. "Even as it was, Christine was trapped under the ice, and only just managed to get to the surface by chance."

Dr. Stafford had not lost all his angry expression, and his face reflected the indignant looks of the crowd. But there was a grim glitter in his eyes too.

"This matter will be entered into fully later on, boys," he said quickly. "For the present I must telephone for Dr. Brett—"

"Oh, sir, there's no need for that!" interrupted Talmadge. "Christine's as right as rain. As soon as he came out of the river we piled our overcoats on to him, rushed him home so fast that he couldn't catch cold, and dropped him straight into a hot bath. He'll be down soon—as well as ever."

"Boys, you have acted in the most praiseworthy manner," said the Head, taking a deep breath. "The first consideration was to get Christine into a hot bath, and it appears that you have performed first aid duties with singular expedition and thoughtfulness."

"And I don't mind saying, sir, what we did to Donnell," went on Talmadge boldly. "After that murderous act of his he tried to order the chaps about. They were so furious that Donnell was knocked over, rolled in the mud, and we told him that his orders would never be obeyed again. We've finished with him, sir, and it'll be a crying shame if he's allowed any further authority."

The Head looked grave.

"Under the circumstances, boys, I cannot possibly blame you for your violence towards the sergeant—indeed, you were fully justified in giving the brute prompt punishment," he said quietly. "I shall certainly inflict no imposition upon any of you, and you may be quite sure that Donnell will leave the school at the earliest possible moment—"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the Head!"

The juniors were shouting and yelling in a second. Dr. Stafford's attitude took them rather by surprise—just as their cause was, they had half believed that the Head would condemn them for punishing Donnell with their own hands. But the Head had turned up trumps.

And while the excitement was at its height a fresh shout sounded at the outskirts of the crowd. I looked round, and grinned with joy as I observed Sergeant Donnell running across the Triangle from the direction of the playing-fields.

"The band's going to play now," I re-

marked cheerfully. "My hat! What a sight! The Monks did the job thoroughly, anyhow!"

Sergeant Donnell was almost invisible beneath his coating of mud. And he was half-mad with fury. A storm of booing and hissing greeted his appearance, but he came straight on until he halted before the Head. It was only the presence of the latter which prevented the juniors from seizing the man a second time.

"These—these young cubs have rebelled, sir!" gasped the sergeant hoarsely. "They attacked me, and—"

"I want to ask you one question, Donnell," interrupted the Head harshly. "Did you, or did you not, throw Christine on to the ice?"

The sergeant gulped.

"The young dog refused to obey orders, sir!" he snarled. "I simply told him to fetch my hat, and as he wouldn't go I used force. The ice was safe enough, but the young fool deliberately stamped about and broke through. He knew the water was shallow, and it was all a plant against me—"

"Oh!"

"You awful liar!"

"That will do, boys!" said the Head sharply. "You need not think that I shall credit this man's preposterous statement. Sergeant Donnell, you have acted in a manner which can only be described as villainous. That you could order a boy on to the ice in its present condition—"

"The ice was safe, I tell you—"

"Keep silent, sir!" thundered the Head. "You may consider yourself very lucky that you are not handed over to the police on a charge of gross and unwarranted assault. You will leave this school within twenty-four hours, and you will have no further dealings with the boys."

"You—you old fool!" screamed the sergeant madly. "You don't know what you're talking about! These little devils—"

Crack!

The Head performed an action which surprised himself as much as anybody. His hand slapped Donnell's face with all his strength, and the man reeled under the blow. He uttered a string of oaths, and threw himself at the Head like a madman.

"Collar him!" yelled Talmadge huskily.

It was not only the College House fellows who rushed to the rescue. I was amongst the first to reach the sergeant, and he was pulled back and thrown to the ground in a second. Donnell disappeared completely beneath a pile of excited juniors.

"Thank you, boys!" said the Head, rather unsteadily. "Perhaps it was my own fault for foolishly giving way to a moment of passion. But I have never before suffered the indignity of being called an old fool to my face. Release the man, and I will deal with him as I think fit."

Very reluctantly we allowed Sergeant Donnell to get up. He was frightened now, and stood silent, panting heavily. And just then a further diversion occurred, for Colonel Clinton appeared on the scene.

"Good gracious, sergeant!" exclaimed Clinton. "Have these wretched boys been attacking you again—"

"I've been sacked, sir!" shouted the sergeant violently.

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrel!" cut in the Head. "This man, Colonel Clinton, will leave the school within twenty-four hours. He is utterly unfitted for his post, and I realise that I have been extremely unwise in allowing him to remain for so long."

"Kick him out now, sir!"

"We'll do the job!"

"Just say the word, sir!"

"Silence!" roared the colonel furiously. "Dr. Stafford, I cannot permit this scene to continue—"

"You cannot permit it!" snapped the Head angrily.

"That is what I said," retorted Clinton. "Sergeant Donnell was appointed by me, and he will remain until I choose to dismiss him. You may rest assured, sergeant, that you may remain in your present position—"

The rest of the colonel's sentence was drowned in the indignant howl which arose on every side.

"You will please come to my study at once, Colonel Clinton," said the Head quietly. "I have no wish to discuss this matter before the boys."

"Going to your study, sir, will make no difference," raved the colonel. "I have no objection to saying what I mean in the presence of this disorderly rabble. And I can tell you at once, Dr. Stafford, that you have no right to dismiss a man who was appointed by me! Sergeant Donnell will remain!"

There was a tense silence for about five seconds.

"I have already dismissed the man, and you will please understand that I am absolutely firm, Colonel Clinton," said the Head, breathing hard. "You have forced me to speak here, and I will do so. You apparently overlook the fact that I am the headmaster of this college, and your behaviour is utterly insupportable. I have said all that I intend to say, and under no circumstances whatever will I allow this scoundrel to remain in a position of authority under this honourable roof. You will doubtless offer me a full and complete apology when you have learned the exact facts of the case."

The colonel was nearly boiling with anger.

"Whatever Sergeant Donnell has done—whatever his offence—it was for me to inflict punishment!" he shouted. "I tell you straight out, Dr. Stafford, that Donnell will remain—"

The Head adopted the only course open to him. He turned on his heel without another word and walked away, followed by a ringing cheer. The sergeant displayed some common-sense, for he streaked into the College House as fast as his legs would carry him. He knew that even the colonel's presence—after what had occurred—would not save him from further attacks by the juniors.

The colonel shouted and stormed, but he was absolutely ignored. The Monks, in their

present mood, cared not a snap of the fingers for him. And at last Clinton realised his helplessness and retired—but his grim expression hinted that he meant to have revenge.

Meanwhile, Dr. Stafford walked straight to Nelson Lee's study, and found the House-master there, standing at the window. The Head sank into a chair wearily.

"Did you witness the disgraceful scene, Mr. Lee?" he asked, passing a hand over his brow.

"Yes; and I heard, too," replied Nelson Lee.

"The position is unbearable, Mr. Lee—utterly impossible!" declared the Head, with sudden vehemence. "I have borne with the colonel until my patience is completely exhausted. This incident is the last straw."

"I am hardly surprised, Dr. Stafford," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Donnell, I understand, threw Christine on to the ice?"

"That is so, Mr. Lee—an action which stamps the man as a scoundrel," replied the Head. "He is dismissed, and the colonel may rave for hours on end, but I will not alter my decision. It would be a lasting disgrace to St. Frank's if Donnell remained—and my own position would be hopeless. I have come to a final decision."

The Head rose to his feet, with a set expression.

"To-morrow morning, Mr. Lee," he went on, "I shall journey to London, and I intend to lay the full facts of the case before Sir Rupert Manderley, the Chairman of the Board of Governors. Either Colonel Clinton leaves, or I sever my connection with St. Frank's. I certainly refuse to remain a day longer under the present conditions!"

And Nelson Lee knew that Dr. Stafford was in grim earnest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIMIT!

EXCITEMENT still ran high in the College House the next morning—that is, amongst the juniors. The downfall of Sergeant Donnell was an event which called for much celebration and jockeying.

Christine and Co. were in high glee, and the scene in the Triangle, between Colonel Clinton and Dr. Stafford, was remembered with great delight. For the colonel had undoubtedly got the worst of that encounter.

"Things are looking up, my son," said Christine cheerfully, as he dressed in the Remove dormitory. "That awful beast, Donnell, is as good as dead—so far as we're concerned."

"It's a jolly lucky thing you ain't dead, Christy," remarked Yorke feelingly. "By the way, you don't seem any the worse for that ducking."

"Me?" said Christine ungrammatically. "My dear chap, I'm as right as rain! The matron wanted me to have hot bottles and gruel, and goodness knows what else; but I wasn't having any beastly gruel—"

"It would have been gruelty to make you have it, Christy," grinned Talmadge.

"Oh, dry up!" said Christine, glaring. "We don't want any rotten puns, you ass. The way you chaps rushed me home last night prevented me catching a chill, and I feel as fit as a fiddle now. Still, the sergeant acted like a Hun, and he ought to think himself jolly lucky that he's not in prison!"

"Rather!" agreed Yorke. "He'll leave to-day, of course—the Head only gave him twenty-four hours. I expect the cad will try to slip away unobserved; but we'll see that he doesn't!"

"I vote we groan him out of the school," suggested Talmadge. "And if he shows his ugly face in the Triangle this morning, we'll hoot him until he can't hear himself speak."

Bob Christine nodded.

"Donnell's disposed of," he remarked thoughtfully, "but what about the colonel? I shouldn't think he can stay at St. Frank's after that scene with the Head. In any case, he'll be jolly subdued."

"Why not refuse to obey any orders?" suggested Clapson. "It worked with Donnell, and it might work—"

"No; we haven't got sufficient excuse," interjected Christine firmly.

"But we defied him last night—"

"You were all jolly excited then, and reckless enough for anything," said Christine. "You simply couldn't defy him this morning—you wouldn't have the nerve. The Head supported us over the Donnell affair, but he'd come down heavy if we defied Clinton. No, my dear chaps; we've got the Head on our side now, and we want to keep him on our side. My advice is to stick the colonel without jibbing. He can't last much longer, and we don't want to do anything discredit-able."

The rest of the juniors knew that Christine's advice was sound, and they adopted it. By defying Colonel Clinton now they would hinder their cause rather than help it. It was for the Head to get rid of the awful Housemaster—not for the boys. And by open defiance they would alienate Dr. Stafford completely.

"In any case, Clinton will be as mild as milk," said Yorke, with satisfaction. "I expect he'll drop all the drilling rot, and he might not appear to-day at all. Let's hope not, anyhow."

But if the rest of the Monks shared Yorke's view, they were destined to suffer a big disappointment.

For Colonel Clinton was by no means mild.

It was soon evident that he had risen from his bed that morning with the intention of fulfilling Sergeant Donnell's duties as well as his own. For immediately after breakfast the College House Removites were assembled in the Triangle, and were there put through a series of exhausting drills which were far worse than those inflicted by Donnell.

The animation amongst the juniors subsided, and they began to fall back into their former state of sullen obedience—complying with orders reluctantly and almost savagely. Colonel Clinton was fully making up for Donnell's inactivity.

And, in spite of the set-back he had

received, Clinton was detected smiling with inward satisfaction on more than one occasion. He had something hidden up his sleeve, and Christine and Co. were troubled by an uneasy feeling that an unpleasant surprise was to be sprung on them before long.

The boys weren't far wrong.

Just before being dismissed, in order to go into their Form-room, the colonel addressed a few words to the crowd.

"This afternoon is a half-holiday, boys," he said, almost pleasantly. "I have prepared a little surprise for you—no; you need not look dismayed. It is a surprise which, I am quite sure, will both interest and delight you."

The juniors were not much impressed.

"We've got some football practice on, sir," ventured Christine.

"Ah! Quite so—quite so," said the colonel, adjusting his eyeglass. "Well, I am afraid there will be no football this afternoon, for I have decided otherwise. You will find that the half-holiday will be spent in a much more interesting fashion. I need no telling that you have greatly disliked the drills which I have thought fit to impose, but this afternoon's programme will be very different, and I will go into further details when you assemble in the lecture hall."

"But it's a half-holiday, sir!" protested Yorke. "We've always had half-holidays to ourselves—"

"You will please be silent, Private Yorke. I wish to hear no objections," snapped the colonel curtly. "Every boy here will present himself in the lecture hall at two-thirty precisely. The Third Form will receive similar instructions, and I may as well point out at once that I will stand no nonsense. All absentees will be court-martialled and sentenced to confinement to barracks—and possibly to a flogging. That will do for the present. You may dismiss."

The colonel turned on his heel, after the juniors had saluted—Clinton insisted upon that formality—and marched into the College House. A few minutes still remained before lessons, and the fellows forgot to grumble about the recent drilling in their speculation regarding the surprise which awaited them.

"Some new rot, I'll bet," remarked Christine grimly, relating what had occurred to an interested group of Ancient House fellows—in which I was included.

"I can see you being interested and delighted!" I grinned. "I expect the colonel's dodge is to get you all together, and then march you off to Caistowe and back—just for a stroll. Anyhow, I wouldn't change places with one of you just to satisfy my curiosity. I shall learn all about it when the frightfulness is over."

Bob Christine grunted.

"Lucky hounder!" he said. "You fellows don't know what it is to suffer as we've been suffering. When the colonel's gone, and things become normal again, we shall be like chaps released from slavery!"

"Dear fellow, I'm frightfully sympathetic—I am really!" said Sir Montie. "And you mustn't think, when you see me grinnin',

that I'm unfeelin'. But there is quite a comic side to the colonel's goin's on, you know."

"Is there?" said Yorke. "I wish I could see it! Oh, my hat! Comic isn't the word. It's more like a tragedy!"

Dozens of wild guesses were indulged in with regard to the surprise for the afternoon. But nobody hit on the truth—although Christine vaguely suggested that the numerous dress-baskets were in some way connected with the colonel's new scheme. That guess was the nearest of all, but it was only a guess in general terms.

At half-past two all the Monks were in the lecture hall—there wasn't a single absentee. Colonel Clinton's methods of punishment were so drastic that no junior thought it worth while to play truant.

Grayson and Shaw and Parry, of the Fifth, were present, too. They were looking very fed-up and impatient. For they disliked having their half-holiday interfered with as greatly as the juniors. The Fifth-Formers were finding out that their duties as "officers" of the Remove were irksome and irritating. At first Grayson and Shaw had been very delighted, for they were bullies, and the new order of things gave them licence to indulge in their petty spite to their hearts' content. But, as Grayson growlingly remarked, too much of a good thing was inclined to pall.

The colonel appeared upon the platform a minute after the half-hour, and he was looking unusually pleasant. Considering the disgraceful episode of Sergeant Donnell, it was rather surprising that Clinton should have recovered his composure so rapidly. The only explanation was that his "surprise" overwhelmed all other matters.

"I am glad to see, boys, that you are all here," said the Housemaster, after looking round searchingly. "Now, I intend to say just a few words with regard to the system of discipline which I have instituted since my advent. It has displeased you, and there have been many expressions of discontent, and one or two minor disturbances. However, my object in drilling you so strenuously was to knock you into shape, and to change you from a rabble of disorderly boys into an efficient company of trained troops. I am glad to say that I have been successful in bringing about that transformation."

There was a dead silence.

"Don't you be too sure, you old rotter!" thought Christine grimly.

"Your rebellious, independent spirit has been quelled, and you are now so well-trained that you have lost your individuality, and have become so many parts of one machine," went on the colonel pleasantly—and apparently believing what he said to be true. "You have not reached the stage of perfection that I intend to bring you to, but that is only a matter of time. I have decided that it is quite impossible for you to even approach perfection while you are still attired in the absurd clothing which you now wear. No troops can appear digni-

fied or imposing while dressed in civilian garments."

The juniors listened with growing surprise.

"But we've always worn Etons, sir," said Christine. "It's one of the rules of St. Frank's—fellows are bound to wear Etons—"

"Hitherto, that has been the case, but I intend to make an alteration forthwith," interrupted the colonel, rubbing his hands together. "In short, boys, the surprise I hinted at this morning is simply that you are to wear uniforms in future—not only on parade occasions, but always. You will hail this announcement with keen pleasure, I am quite sure."

But only dismay was visible in the Monks' expressions.

"Uniforms, sir!" repeated Christine blankly. "But—but we're not cadets, sir! And even cadets only wear uniforms on special occasions——"

"Tut-tut!" interrupted the colonel. "I do not regard you as cadets, boys—you are far superior," said Clinton. "And it is necessary that you shall walk abroad in an attire which befits you. This afternoon there will be a complete transformation—that is my little surprise. I, too, shall wear the new uniform, and so will your officers."

"Eh?" ejaculated Grayson, starting. "You—you don't mean that I've got to dress up like a silly guy—I—I mean——"

"You will dress as I order you, Major Grayson," said the colonel curtly. "As for the rest of you, you will retire to your dormitories forthwith, and you will change your clothing and assemble in the Triangle at three-thirty."

"But where are the uniforms, sir?" asked Yorke wonderingly.

"Everything has been prepared," replied the colonel. "Each boy will find his uniform neatly folded upon his own bed. There may be some slight discrepancy in fit in one or two cases, but these will be remedied as soon as possible. Every boy has been supplied with a full kit, and I will inspect you when you have assembled in the Triangle. Dismiss!"

The juniors crowded out of the lecture hall in a state of wondering astonishment. They weren't exactly averse to donning uniforms, but it struck them that it was a perfectly preposterous notion.

However, it was a change, and anything in the way of a change was welcome. Besides, "swanking" about in uniforms would be rather decent, the Monks decided, and they would be able to take the shine out of the Ancient House fellows.

But Christine and his immediate chums were rather inclined to resent the new innovation. Uniforms were all very well now and again, but the colonel had plainly stated that they were to wear them always—and that would be too much of a good thing.

And then came the shock.

The fellows hurried up to the dormitory to find out the nature of the uniform. They pictured to themselves a neat khaki cloth

and a style of uniform similar to the usual service outfit.

But how different was the reality!

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Bob Christine faintly.

He was the first in the Remove dormitory, and his amazed eyes fell upon a bundle of clothes upon each bed. The most prominent colour was a staring, vivid red! Christine rushed forward, and held up the various articles of attire, too astounded to make any comment for the first moment or two.

The uniforms were freaks—unthinkable creations, which could only have been designed by a man in a fit condition to enter a lunatic asylum. They were brilliant red, broadly trimmed with a blue just as brilliant. And the design was staggering.

The tunics were preposterously short, contained no pockets, and appeared to be a cross between a sailor's jumper and a waistcoat! There was a huge collar, which went to a point at the back, and from this hung a gold tassel!

Two other similar tassels depended from the front part of the tunic, so that they would dangle against the legs. The lower garments were not breeches, but trousers, and they were practically as tight-fitting as pantaloons and shaped to the leg. This, in itself, was not so very weird, but the trousers ended above the ankles, and the bottoms were surrounded by a dazzling series of smaller tassels, like those of the tunic! To cap the whole matter, the blue stripe of the trousers did not run down the sides, but straight in front.

"Oh, my only grandmother!" gasped Yorke faintly.

"We—we're not going to wear these mad things!" snorted Christine. "Why, we should be howled at the very instant we showed our faces! I always thought the colonel was dotty, but this absolutely proves it!"

"They're like the uniforms in a comic opera—only worse!" exclaimed Talmadge, holding up a garment in a dazed kind of way. "My eyes are aching already! We'd better go on strike at once, you chaps. I'm not going to wear these idiotic things!"

"Rather not!"

"Let's chuck 'em out of the windows!"

There were many similar shouts, and it is quite likely that the gorgeous uniforms would have met with an untimely fate but for the immediate arrival of Jesson and Carlisle, of the Sixth. Both were prefects, and they did not seem to be in the best of tempers.

"Now then, hurry up, you young asses!" snapped Jesson.

"Look here, Jesson, we're not going to wear these fatheaded things!" roared Yorke indignantly.

"We've been instructed by the colonel to see that you juniors get dressed quickly and properly," said Carlisle. "You'd better not waste time—Oh, greatthunder! What are those red-and-blue horrors?"

"Our uniforms!" yelled Christine.

"Eh?" gasped Jesson, staring. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny, isn't it?" roared Christine.

"Ha, ha, ha! I should think it is!" laughed Carlisle uproariously.

"I expect you'll have to wear 'em next!" snapped Yorke.

The two prefects ceased laughing abruptly.

"Eh?" said Jesson, with a start. "Don't you be such a silly young ass! If you think I'd wear a uniform of that sort you're on the wrong track. Clinton may force you juniors to act the fool, but he can't play about with the Sixth. These uniforms are about the limit, though."

"We're not going to wear 'em!" snorted Christine.

"My dear kids, you have my sympathy, but you've got to put those freak things on," said Carlisle. "It's no good butting up against it; you'll only get flogged, and you'll have to wear the uniforms, after all. Better submit quietly now."

"But—but we shall be yelled at by everybody!" complained Yorke. "Oh, I say, Carlisle, it's impossible!"

"We've had orders to see you dressed, and we're going to carry out those orders," said the prefect. "Mind you, I don't agree with this rot, but there it is. We don't want to have a thundering row with Clinton, and my advice is for you all to get the thing over as quickly as you can. If the other chaps laugh, they'll laugh at the colonel—not at you. You can't help yourselves."

"Can't we?" said Christine grimly. "We're going to revolt in earnest this time—and you two seniors won't stand in our way. We could chuck you out of this dormitory if we wanted to; and in a revolt it doesn't matter how we handle prefects, does it?"

Carlisle and Jesson looked at one another significantly. If they had been bullies they would have become very angry at this outburst. But they weren't bullies. They were in complete sympathy with the Removites.

"Of course you could chuck us out," said Carlisle pleasantly. "If you mean to revolt, Jesson and I won't wait for any chucking out—we'll go. And we'll wish you luck. But consider the position, you young asses. A rebellion would simply make the position ten times as bad. You can't get the better of your Housemaster. You might start off with a bang and do great things, but in the end you'd have to surrender. Listen to words of wisdom, and take my advice. Get into these awful uniforms as quickly as you can, and go through the ordeal. I'll guarantee it won't last long. Decide what you're going to do quickly, because Jesson and I don't want to hang about here all the afternoon."

"Well, it's jolly decent of you, Carlisle," said Christine. "I think you're right, after all. We'll wear these uniforms, you chaps, and suffer the fate of martyrs. But if nothing happens by this evening, I'm jiggered if we'll put the awful things on again tomorrow!"

All the other Monks were in agreement; Carlisle's calm words had reduced their excitement and indignation. And the two



The colonel stalked forward—something like a proud cockerel in the full splendour of his plumage. "I fail to understand you, Dr. Stafford," he said.—(See page 15.)

prefects stood by, grinning broadly, while the juniors struggled into their ridiculous uniforms.

Upon the whole, the fit was fairly accurate in the case of every junior, but the clothes themselves were horribly uncomfortable. Not a single boy dared bend forward abruptly, or disaster would have occurred. And the gold tassels dangled from every point, shivering and glistening.

"I feel like some ass going to a fancy-dress ball!" groaned Christine. "Oh, rats! Let's get down and go through it! It's just upon half-past three already."

"You look topping!" grinned Carlisle. "I've never been so dazzled in all my life. But I wouldn't give a ha'penny for those tassels after you've been for a walk down a muddy road!"

The juniors marched downstairs, almost in a state of terror. They were afraid to let themselves be seen. But their feelings were greatly improved upon reaching the lobby. For here, standing in silent misery, were Grayson, Shaw, and Parry, of the Fifth. The three unhappy seniors were attired similarly to Christine and Co—only more so. Their uniforms were the same in design, but absolutely startling. Masses of silver braid bespangled their breasts, and they had about three times as many tassels as the juniors. Christine and Co. felt that life was not so very hard, after all. Onlookers would certainly give the "officers" far more attention than the "privates."

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Christine, trying to grin.

"I don't want any sneers!" snarled Grayson fiercely. "You juniors are looking awful enough, so you needn't jeer at me! If it wouldn't lead to a ton of trouble, I'd chuck the whole thing up now!"

The lobby was thronged with the uniformed boys, and many others were overflowing into the Triangle—Third-Formers. The fags were not half so indignant as the Remove; indeed, they almost appeared to like it, and evidently thought it was a huge joke. But of course their dignity was nothing like so great as that of the Remove, who considered themselves almost seniors.

The caps which went with the uniform were as weird in design as the rest of the outfit. In general design they closely resembled ordinary toppers, minus the rim. But they were decorated with red and blue stripes, and round the top there hung many miniature tassels. The colonel, in fact, had apparently been rather mad on tassels—if he had designed this uniform.

Without further ado the juniors were marched out into the Triangle. The Third Form and the Remove were lined up smartly and stood at attention. By this time a considerable crowd of spectators had gathered. A great throng was regarding the proceedings with huge delight—much to the confusion of Christine and Co.

When the gorgeous array first lined up in the Triangle I was on the playing-fields, with the majority of the Ancient House Removites.

It was De Valerie who brought the news that something unusual was occurring in the Triangle. After that Hubbard was seen gesticulating and heard yelling.

There was general move off Little Side, and we arrived in the Triangle just in time to see the unfortunate Monks being marched round past the colonel.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "What is it?"

"Dear old boy, it's no good askin' me," said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and shading his eyes. "The colours are rather too blindin' for me, you know. Are they supposed to be uniforms?"

I whistled.

"So this is the secret of those giddy dress-baskets—eh?" I said. "Poor chaps! Fancy being forced to wear an outfit like that!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody was laughing—except the sufferers. Sixth-Formers, fags, the school servants—in fact, everybody who could find time to be a spectator, was on the spot. It was the most extraordinary scene ever witnessed at St. Frank's.

I noticed Mr. Crowell at his study window. His expression was one of almost dazed astonishment and indignation. Christine and Co. themselves were glaring enough, and their "officers" were even more brilliant. But the colonel himself fairly took the cake.

He positively scintillated. From a distance he seemed to be a mass of gold, with just a touch of red and blue showing here and there. The uniforms were not only preposterous, but the work of a madman. For the colonel to have allowed the boys to wear them was simply astounding.

"It's a shame!" declared Handforth grimly. "How the dickens are the chaps to sit down! Those trousers won't stand bending——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The colonel took no notice of the roars of laughter, but paraded his troops about until they fervently hoped that the ground would open and swallow them. And then came the final blow.

The boys were ordered to march to the gates, with Clinton at their head. They were, in fact, destined to parade through the village! There was nearly a mutiny on the spot.

The thought of striding through the village in that insane get-up was altogether too much. The ordeal was quite bad enough at St. Frank's, but to become the laughing stock of the whole district was rather too awful.

And a mutiny certainly would have occurred, but for one fact. Even as the boys were preparing to break ranks and flee into the College House, Dr. Stafford walked briskly in through the gateway.

The Head came to a dead-stop. The amazed expression upon his face rapidly changed to one of grim anger, and I knew that a fresh conflict between the Head and Colonel Clinton was imminent. It was quite a tense moment.

CHAPTER V.

THE ORDER OF THE BOOT!

UPON my soul!" The Head uttered the exclamation in a tone which expressed indignation and shocked amazement. He stood just inside the Triangle, gazing at the weirdly attired Monks as though he couldn't believe the evidence of his own eyes.

It wasn't surprising that the Head was startled. Coming upon that array of gaudily-attired juniors so suddenly must have given him quite a turn. And I fancied myself a bit as a thought-reader, for I guessed pretty well what was going on in the Head's mind. His gaze wandered from the juniors to the three seniors, and from them to Colonel Clinton himself.

And with each change the Head's expression became more indignant and more grim.

"Colonel Clinton," he exclaimed at last, his voice quivering slightly, "will you kindly tell me what is the meaning of this—this farce?"

The colonel stalked forward—something like a proud cockerel in the full splendour of his plumage. The Ancient House fellows—myself included—drew nearer instinctively, and I noticed that Bob Christine and his unhappy chums were wearing hopeful expressions.

"I fail to understand you, Dr. Stafford," said Colonel Clinton pleasantly. "How do you like the new order of things? Rather a surprise—eh? I thought you would be pleased——"

"Pleased!" repeated the Head, nearly choking. "Good gracious me! Do you realise, Colonel Clinton, that you are making an—an insufferable exhibition of those boys and of yourself? Never in the whole course of my career have I beheld such an absurd spectacle!"

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth loudly.

"Shurrup, you ass!"

Handforth glared, but nobody took any notice of him. Interest was all centred upon the Head and Colonel Clinton. Dr. Stafford had returned rather earlier than he had anticipated; he had been to London, in order to see Sir Rupert Manderley. And there was something in his manner which told me that he had not been to town in vain. He was far more confident and self-possessed.

The school, of course, would have to pay for these preposterous uniforms—and the bill would most certainly be a formidable one. Clinton had ordered them on his own initiative, but the contractors would undoubtedly present the bill to the Head for payment.

"Again I must say that I fail to understand you, Dr. Stafford," said the colonel grimly. "You apparently overlook the fact that these boys are under my control, and that they are merely arrayed in the uniforms which will, in future, be their habitual attire. I confess that I am rather disappointed. Why you withhold your approval is surprising."

The Head compressed his lips.

"I have borne a lot from you, colonel, but

this episode has tried my patience to the utmost!" he exclaimed. "Under no circumstances can I allow the boys to wear these Gilbertian costumes for another moment. You will kindly order them to go indoors and change into their customary Etons."

"Hurrah!"

It was a wild cheer from the relieved Monks.

"Indeed, sir, I shall do nothing of the sort!" snapped the colonel angrily. "You will oblige me by attending to your own business and leaving me to attend to mine." The colonel turned fiercely. "Mark time!" he bellowed. "You are going through the village at once! March!"

"Oh, my hat!" I muttered. "Now for the fireworks!"

The Head simply couldn't stand that insult. Clinton had told him to mind his own business and had simply ignored him! And Dr. Stafford was not the man to be ignored—under any circumstances.

"Boys," he exclaimed loudly, "you will disregard the colonel's order and enter your House at once. Change your clothing——"

"Halt!" shouted Clinton, as the juniors broke ranks on the second. "You subordinate young scoundrels——"

"Sorry, sir, but we're only obeying the Head's orders!" said Christine sweetly. "We always obey the Head first, sir!"

"Halt, I say!" raved Clinton furiously. "If another boy moves an inch I will flog him mercilessly!"

All the juniors paused—but not because they cared for the colonel's order; they wanted to see what the Head would do.

"I have already given you instructions, boys, and you will carry them out," said Dr. Stafford, with quiet dignity. "Discard those preposterous uniforms at once and hand them all to Warren, who will be up in a few minutes. It pains me to give you orders over your Housemaster's head, but I have no alternative."

The colonel simply shook with passion.

"Am I to be flouted before my own boys?" he screamed. "Am I to be openly insulted and belittled? These juniors are under my control, Dr. Stafford, and you have absolutely no right to interfere. I repeat, every boy must fall into line again——"

"Not to-day, thanks!" shouted Yorke recklessly.

And the rest of the Monks gave a terrific cheer for the Head, and then they streamed away at the double towards the College House—utterly regardless of the colonel's shrill orders. The Monks were wildly anxious to get into rational attire and to have the farce ended.

But a dramatic scene was being enacted in the Triangle.

Colonel Clinton was so furious that he could hardly speak for some moments. He could hardly believe that the boys had gone indoors in defiance of his orders. The colonel seemed to believe that he was of far greater importance at St. Frank's than the Headmaster himself.

"How dare you?" he thundered. "How

dare you make me appear ridiculous in this outrageous manner?"

"It was not necessary for me to make you appear ridiculous, Colonel Clinton," said Dr. Stafford grimly. "I am utterly amazed to see you standing before me in a costume which has been apparently designed for the express purpose of causing absurd amusement. You will please go indoors——"

"I will go indoors when I choose!" shouted the colonel savagely. "What is more, I intend to have those boys out here again—every one of them! They will wear those uniforms until it pleases me to give further orders. I will not allow you to interfere—so please understand that, finally!"

For the Head to be spoken to in such a manner was an outrage, and I was intensely curious to see what would happen next; the other spectators, too, held their breath with wonder and consternation.

"I have no intention of quarrelling with you, Colonel Clinton," said the Head, breathing hard. "Your attitude, however, compels me to adopt a course which is most distasteful. You will leave St. Frank's this very day!"

Clinton laughed harshly.

"What nonsense are you talking——" he began.

"After this disgraceful scene, I cannot possibly allow you to remain in a position of authority in this school," continued the Head curtly. "You will leave to-day, Colonel Clinton, and from this moment you cease to have the slightest authority!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth.

"Three cheers for the Head!"

Dr. Stafford turned sharply.

"You will please keep silent, boys!" he exclaimed. "I have no wish——"

"I have one answer for you, Dr. Stafford!" roared the colonel, his face purple with fury. "It is this!"

He snapped his fingers in front of the Head's face.

"Be careful, sir!" thundered Dr. Stafford. "I have suffered more indignity from you than from any other man! My patience is at an end, and unless you can control yourself you will not have the rest of the day in which to make your preparations, but one hour only. My decision is final—from this moment you cease to be in any way connected with the College House, and you will remain until this evening at my sufferance. That is all I have to say."

Colonel Clinton simply trembled.

"Then perhaps you will allow me to speak?" he roared, hardly able to articulate his words. "By what right do you dismiss me? You may be the Headmaster of this school, but you have no authority——"

"You will pardon me," interrupted the Head curtly. "I have this morning interviewed Sir Rupert Manderley, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and he informed me that I might use my own discretion. I have done so, Colonel Clinton, and you will leave the school you have done your best to disgrace."

And the Head, without another word,

turned on his heel and strode away. Not a sound came from any of the fellows; they were rather awed by the altercation which had just concluded.

Colonel Clinton had asked for it—and he had got it!

The Head disappeared, and then the spell seemed to break. Clinton still stood in the Triangle, as though dazed. And he did not recover himself until a series of hisses and hoots came from Handforth and Co. and a crowd of others.

The colonel turned like lightning.

"Silence, you young dogs!" he panted violently.

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "You've got no authority now! You're an outsider! It's a wonder to me they ever had you in the British Army!"

"Yah! Hun!"

"Go back to Colney Hatch!"

"Who's your tailor?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Just for one breathless moment it seemed as though the enraged colonel was about to throw himself at the boys; but, luckily for himself, he checked the impulse, and stormed across to the College House.

"Sacked!" I said wonderingly. "That's about the first time a St. Frank's House-master has been given the order of the boot before a crowd of juniors! But the colonel deserved it."

"Dear fellow, he asked for it—he did, really," said Sir Montie. "Fancy tellin' the Head to mind his own business! Begad! I felt ready to boil, you know. But do you think he'll go?"

"He'll have to go, you ass!" snorted Handforth. "Christine and those other Monks will be ready to jump for joy. Let's buzz over and tell them; perhaps they're still in the dark."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" protested McClure. "Clinton will jump on us——"

"Oh, will he?" I cut in grimly. "Clinton doesn't possess the power; he's a mere nobody at St. Frank's now. We're not obliged to take any notice of his beastly orders."

Quite a crowd of us went over to the College House. The juniors wouldn't have dared to invade the domain of the arrogant colonel an hour earlier; but now it was very different. Clinton's authority had ended.

Only the necessity to assert his own authority had prompted the Head to sack the colonel in public. Clinton had brought it on himself, or Dr. Stafford would never have made him suffer the indignity.

In the College House lobby we met Bob Christine and several other Removites—again attired in Etons.

"Thank goodness we've got those frightful things off!" said Christine thankfully. "What happened after we came indoors, you chaps? I expect Clinton will be forced to drop all his military rot——"

"Don't you know what's occurred?" yelled Handforth.

"Not exactly," said Christine. "And you'd better not yell like that; the colonel is in a tearing rage. And if he hears you——"

"I don't care for the colonel!" shouted Handforth. "Rats to him!"

"You—you silly ass!" hissed Yorke, in alarm.

"It's all right, my sons," I grinned. "Your beloved Housemaster has been sacked—kicked out—presented with the honourable push!"

"Dishonourable push, you mean," said Watson.

Christine and Co. stared.

"Sacked?" repeated Yorke faintly.

"Too good to believe, isn't it?" I chuckled.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" said Christine, his face flushing with delight. "Clinton sacked! It's the end of all this drilling and parading and— Oh, crumbs! I want to yell! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" roared the other Morks excitedly.

Their relief was enormous. And they let themselves go with a vengeance. The lobby resounded with their cheers—a striking indication of Colonel Clinton's intense unpopularity.

The Removites yelled just because they were at liberty to yell. The hated era of tyranny was at an end, and the boys were free once more to give vent to their jubilation.

In the midst of it Grayson, of the Fifth, appeared. He charged into the lobby, angry and frowning.

"Stop this noise, you young sweeps!" he roared.

There was silence for about five seconds; and then Christine laughed.

"Rats!" he said deliberately.

"Eh?"

"Go and eat coke!"

"Why, you cheeky rotter!" shouted Grayson. "I'll report you to the colonel for insubordination!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were under no obligation now to obey this bullying Fifth-Former. He had no more authority over them than the boot-boy. And Christine and Co., glad of the opportunity to pay off old scores, charged Grayson and bowled him over like a ninepin.

"Yow!" howled Grayson. "Lemme get—Yarooon!"

He was smothered, and the next few moments were painful ones. Grayson had been rather sick of being a "major"; but now he wished with all his heart that he had never accepted the commission.

When he finally escaped he was feeling very sore, and was as heartily thankful as anybody that the colonel had received his marching orders.

The whole College House, in fact, without a single exception, was in a fever of joy over the discomfiture of their hated Housemaster.

But the real drama was only just commencing!

CHAPTER VI.

THE QUARREL AT MIDNIGHT.

CELEBRATIONS were general at tea-time. Junior studies and senior studies were all providing a special feast for the occasion. The Fifth and Sixth had not suffered so severely as the junior Forms;

but they were hugely glad to know that Colonel Clinton was no longer their Housemaster.

In scores of little ways the seniors had been affected; the colonel's arrogance had made itself felt on every day, at some time or another. And the seniors breathed freely when they learned the news.

As for Christine and Co., and the Remove and Third generally, they nearly went off their heads. The teas in junior studies were sumptuous feasts. There was no drilling to be done afterwards—there was no drilling to be done on the morrow. The reign of military discipline was over.

Those juniors who were short of cash borrowed money freely from the Ancient House fellows—who were only too willing to advance the necessary funds. That evening I, alone, parted with two pounds ten. But I knew that I should get it all back in the course of a week or two.

I quite agreed with Christine and Co., that a big celebration was necessary. The colonel's dismissal was an event to be remembered for many a long year. Christine's only lament was that he had not been in the Triangle to see the colonel's face when he received his orders to quit.

Clinton himself was not seen by the boys during the evening. But several College House servants encountered him, and Nelson Lee ran across him once, too. I learned with great interest that the colonel was quite subdued. All his arrogance had gone; with his dismissal he had crumpled up.

He left St. Frank's quietly, without the juniors knowing of his departure. Indeed, it wasn't until close upon bedtime that Carlisle of the Sixth made the fact known to the Remove.

"The colonel's gone—for good," said the prefect, addressing the juniors in the common-room. "You won't be bothered with him again—"

"Oh, good!"

"Let's give him three groans—"

"No, you won't!" interjected Carlisle sharply. "There's been enough noise this evening, without adding to it. At present we're without a Housemaster, but everything is going on just the same—"

"What, all the drilling?" gasped Clapson, in alarm.

The prefect grinned.

"Just the same as things were before Clinton came, I mean," he explained. "I'm just as thankful as you are that he's gone. But if there's any disorder you'll be gated, or punished in some other way. Mr. Crowell is going to take charge of you, as a temporary measure—and you know he can't be played about with."

"Mr. Crowell's jolly stern sometimes, but he's one of the best," declared Christine. "If he's going to be our temporary Housemaster, we'll be as good as gold. But I wish we could have old Stockdale back."

"Perhaps you will," said Carlisle.

"Honest Injun?" demanded Christine eagerly. "But poor old Stocky is nearly dead with pneumonia—"

"He was," said the prefect, nodding. "But he's been very carefully nursed, and he's getting as strong as ever. It's quite likely that you'll see him back here before the end of this term."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Stockdale!"

This was a piece of fresh news—and very welcome news, indeed. Mr. Stockdale, the Monks' former Housemaster, had been well liked and respected by all his boys. And the prospect of his early return was one which filled the juniors with keen delight. After the colonel, Mr. Stockdale would be like a father!

The juniors went up to their dormitory, comfortable and contented. They only felt rather disappointed that Clinton had not been given a rousing send-off—in the shape of hisses and groans.

Unknown to them, however, the colonel had not yet taken his final departure. For, between half-past nine and ten Clinton returned to the school—after having been absent a couple of hours.

He went straight to the Headmaster's study, and found Dr. Stafford in conversation with Nelson Lee. Both were rather astonished to see the colonel; and they both noticed his haggard, careworn appearance. He was very pale, and his eyes had an expression of fear in them.

"Well, sir?" said the Head grimly.

"I feel, Dr. Stafford, that I owe you an apology," the colonel exclaimed, as he sat down. "Please do not imagine that I am expressing regret for my system of conducting the College House; I consider that I adopted the only reasonable course, considering the unruly nature of the boys I had to deal with."

"They were only unruly, Colonel Clinton, because of your harsh discipline," said the Head curtly.

"That, of course, is a matter of opinion," went on the colonel, his eyes glittering strangely. "I am apologising because I treated you with unwarrantable disrespect in the Triangle this afternoon. I lost my temper, and acted most foolishly. I was wondering if you would reconsider your decision—"

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"I am afraid not, colonel," he interrupted. "If that is the object of this visit I must tell you, without hesitation, that under no circumstances can I consent to your remaining in the College House in the capacity of Housemaster. Indeed, it is quite impossible for you to remain in any capacity whatever."

This was quietly spoken, but there was a note of complete finality in the Head's tone which could not be mistaken. Nelson Lee was regarding Colonel Clinton keenly and curiously. He and the Head had been discussing Clinton when the latter arrived—most unexpectedly—on the scene. Nelson Lee had not imagined that the colonel would care to show his face again on the field of his defeat, so to speak. He was not the type of man to accept disgrace with composure.

The colonel sat for some moments without replying, pulling nervously at his huge, full moustache. The previous day this had been well brushed, bristling, and fierce-looking. To-night it was drooping and untidy.

There was a rather awkward tension in the room, and the Head sought to relieve it.

"It is not my desire to cause you pain, colonel," he said quietly. "To prolong this interview would do so, I believe, and I beg of you to accept my positive assurance that no talk will be of avail now. You are at liberty to remain at St. Frank's for to-night, if you have found any difficulty in securing other accommodation. But you will please understand that you will leave early to-morrow."

The colonel made an impatient gesture.

"This is nonsense—sheer nonsense!" he exclaimed, his voice harsh with anxiety and inward rage. "Surely we can come to some better arrangement, Dr. Stafford? I thank you for your invitation, and I will avail myself of it. But it is absurd to suggest that I must leave St. Frank's to-morrow. I do not for one moment accept that as final."

The Head gave Nelson Lee a somewhat weary glance, and Lee nodded slightly. The colonel was not an easy man to argue with. He had produced a cigar now, and had bitten off the end. Outwardly he appeared calm, but Nelson Lee was quite sure that Clinton was boiling within him. The very manner in which he had bitten the cigar proved it. He was so angry, indeed, that he was all of a tremble; but this might have been caused partially by anxiety and agitation.

The colonel struck a match and held it to his cigar.

"Of course," he said, before lighting the cigar, "I want you to understand that I— Oh! Good heavens!"

There was a sizzling crackle, and the colonel leapt to his feet with a shout, clapping his hands to his mouth. Owing to his shaky condition, the hand which held the match had been more than unsteady—and one of the colonel's huge moustaches had frizzled up alarmingly.

"Confound!" he shouted furiously. "Curse the match!"

Yet it had been his own fault entirely, for he had looked up while holding the match close to his mouth. The Head had started up in his chair, but Nelson Lee remained perfectly still, looking on with something akin to amusement.

"I trust you are not hurt," said the Head, with concern.

"Hurt!" bellowed the colonel, glaring. "I am burnt, sir—burnt most abominably! And my moustache—"

He broke off, and strode across to the mirror. There he beheld himself with furious eyes. One side of his moustache was perfect; but the other was a mere ghost of its former self—a frizzled mass of short hairs.

"Hang it!" snarled Clinton, breathing hard. "And I took years and years to develop that! Bah! Why was my hand so in-

ternally unsteady? I am a sight now—a ridiculous sight!"

This little incident had served to show the extent of Clinton's fury. And he added to the exhibition, for, turning abruptly, he snatched some scissors from the Head's desk and snipped savagely at his monstache. Within a moment or two it had been removed, except for a short stubble. The man's appearance was remarkably altered—and not only in his face. For his eyes were burning with a fierce, strange light.

"Let me advise you, Colonel Clinton, to control yourself," said the Head quietly. "I really fail to understand why you should have come here in order to give vent to your temper—"

"I am overwrought, Dr. Stafford," interrupted the colonel huskily. "You must forgive me—and you, too, Mr. Lee. I feel the disgrace of this whole affair very acutely, and I am willing to pocket my pride if necessary."

This was a most surprising thing for such a man as the colonel to say, and Nelson Lee couldn't quite understand it. He felt instinctively that there was something behind this visit of Clinton's—for, on the face of it, it seemed pointless.

"I have already told you, colonel—"

"Please don't repeat all that!" struck in Clinton, interrupting the Head. "The truth is, Dr. Stafford, I wish to have a private chat with you. I am not suggesting that Mr. Lee should withdraw—I would not propose such a thing for a moment. But I do trust that you will grant me a short interview in my own study later on—at, say, eleven o'clock?"

"I am sorry, but I cannot consent."

"Do not be hasty, Dr. Stafford," insisted the colonel earnestly. "I am most anxious to have this talk. I will tell you quite frankly that I desire to retain my appointment as Housemaster. To leave St. Frank's now, under these present conditions, would be a disgrace from which I should never recover. The fault has been mine—I acknowledge it. And, in future, should you be lenient with me, I will undertake to drop all the practices you disapprove of, and will conduct the College House precisely according to your own ideas. All I ask of you is that you shall grant me a short interview—ten minutes will suffice—at eleven o'clock."

The Head was rather nonplussed.

"I respect you for your acknowledgment of fault, colonel," he said. "But why cannot this interview take place at once—here?"

"I have a special reason for desiring that it should be—confidential."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"I am quite willing to withdraw—" he began.

"No, sir—no!" put in the colonel quickly. "I will not allow that for one moment. To tell you the truth, I am not quite prepared for the interview at this juncture. There are several documents I wish to present to Dr. Stafford, and I shall greatly appreciate and esteem an interview in my own study."

The Head shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, colonel, I will grant this

request, but I can tell you beforehand that it will be quite useless," he said. "I cannot reconsider—"

"We will discuss those points later," said the colonel, rising to his feet. "I have your promise—and that is sufficient for the moment. At eleven o'clock, Dr. Stafford, I shall expect you."

And Clinton, with a brief nod, left the study. Nelson Lee and the Head gazed at one another wonderingly.

"An extraordinary man, Mr. Lee," said the Head slowly.

"I quite agree with you, doctor," nodded Nelson Lee. "But why his anxiety for an interview? I confess that I am somewhat puzzled. It does not seem consistent, to my mind. It is difficult for me to convince myself that Colonel Clinton was sincere in his protestations of regret."

"The man is feeling very sorry for himself. I have no doubt," said Dr. Stafford grimly.

"Well, this coming interview will make no difference. Clinton is totally unfitted for school work—I realised that a day after he had taken up the reins. But I could not move until I had the full authority of the governors. If Clinton imagines that he will talk me over, he is in for an eye-opener. The colonel must go, Mr. Lee—and he will go!"

The Head was quite determined upon that point, and, at a few minutes before eleven, he only went to the colonel's study because he had undertaken to do so. He mentally decided that the interview should be exceedingly brief.

The College House by this time was very quiet, seniors and juniors all being in bed.

It was not necessary for the Head to cross the Triangle, for the two Houses at St. Frank's, although separate and apart so far as the boys were concerned, were actually joined. Dr. Stafford's own quarters were situated practically at the junction between the two great buildings, and both were equally accessible. But there was no right of way for the boys—and seldom for the masters—for to pass through that way would be to invade the privacy of the Head's own residential suite.

When Dr. Stafford arrived at Colonel Clinton's study he found the ex-Housemaster pacing the room almost feverishly. The door was wide open, and the colonel came to an abrupt halt as he saw the Head in the doorway.

"Ah, you have come!" he exclaimed brusquely. "Step inside, Dr. Stafford—please step inside. Now, sir, let us have this matter out."

The Head closed the door.

"I think I warned you, colonel, that this interview would be futile," he said quietly. "To prolong it will be painful to you and painful to me. After what has occurred I cannot consent—"

"I want to see your authority for dismissing me!" interrupted Clinton harshly. "You have told me that the school governors have left the matter entirely in your own hands: but I do not accept that statement."

"How—how dare you?" said the Head angrily.

"How dare I?" snapped the colonel. "I have been dismissed—and I demand to know why! I demand——"

"Your attitude, colonel, is very different from what you led me to suppose it would be," interjected Dr. Stafford curtly. "And please let me make it quite plain that you are not in a position to demand anything. Further, I have no intention of wasting my time and breath on you."

"We will see!" shouted Clinton savagely. "I positively refuse to leave this school at your dictation!"

"What, sir?"

"I believe that you trumped up your story with regard to the school governors——"

"Are you suggesting that I have departed from the truth?" demanded the Head angrily.

Colonel Clinton laughed mirthlessly.

"I am suggesting, Dr. Stafford, that you are a liar!" he shouted, at the top of his voice. "You are not only a liar, but——"

"Stop!" thundered the Head, white with indignation. "You have insulted me enough. I refuse to remain here a second longer!"

Clinton stepped in between the Head and the door.

"You will go when I please—and not before!" he roared.

The Head was not frightened, but he was somewhat alarmed. The colonel was not exactly a big man, but he was strong and powerful, and was fully capable of keeping the Head within the study by force. And it was a most outrageous position.

"Stand away from that door, sir!" shouted the Head furiously.

"Before I let you go, I mean to tell you what I think of you!" raved Clinton, his voice higher and higher. "I fully intended humbling myself before you, and you have only yourself to thank for this scene. But you commenced by telling me that the interview would be futile. Perhaps it will be, but I have the satisfaction at least of expressing my contempt for you!"

The Head took a deep breath.

"Will you stand away from that door?" he demanded.

"No!" bellowed the colonel thickly, "I won't!"

"Control your voice, for mercy's sake!" exclaimed the Head, trembling with agitation and anger. "I have no doubt that the boys are thoroughly aroused already—and for them to overhear this quarrel, in the dead of night, is absolutely scandalous. You are a cad, Colonel Clinton. I am twenty years older than you and far weaker—or I would knock you down!"

"You would what?" sneered the colonel.

"I would knock you down, sir!" thundered the Head.

He, too, had allowed his voice to rise—quite unintentionally. But the colonel's gloating expression exasperated him almost beyond endurance. And, meanwhile, Dr. Stafford's fears were fully realised.

Seniors and juniors were awakened by the distant sound of raised voices. Bob Christine, sitting up in bed in the Remove dormitory, found that several other juniors were already awake.

"What the dickens is the matter?" demanded Christine sleepily.

"Sounds like burglars!" suggested Clapson.

"You ass!" growled Christine. "I suppose burglars start shouting at one another as soon as they break into a house? Hallo, who's that at the door?"

"It's me—Parry!" came the voice of the Fifth-Former. "Do you kids want to hear the Head and Clinton slanging one another? They're having a most unholy bust-up downstairs!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Christine.

He was out of bed in a moment, and, accompanied by several others, he crept out into the corridor.

Here they found a scene of unusual animation. Fifth-Formers, Sixth-Formers, and fags were huddled about in their night attire, some with dressing-gowns, some without. The majority of the fellows were gathered about the head of the great staircase.

"Shut up, you kids!" growled Shaw, of the Fifth. "Listen to the band!"

At the head of the stairs the quarrel could be heard distinctly. The colonel's voice was by far the louder, and many of his words could be distinctly understood. The Head's voice, raised in anger, was not so clear.

"You have called me a cad!" came Clinton's tones. "You have even gone so far as to threaten to knock me down! Perhaps you would not stop at that violence! In your present temper, Dr. Stafford, you seem capable of almost any dastardly act——"

"Stand away from that door, Colonel Clinton!" came the Head's voice.

The juniors listened with almost frightened interest. Such a quarrel as this between the Head and a Housemaster had never before occurred at St. Frank's. The whole House was aroused, and the boys were startled.

"Good gracious! What is the meaning of this?"

Mr. Crowell had arrived on the scene. The Remove Form-master had been placed in temporary control of the College House, his duties permitting him to bear the burden of this added task.

Nobody moved as he came along the corridor.

"The Head's having a frightful quarrel with the colonel, sir," explained a Sixth-Former. "We thought that Clinton had gone; but it doesn't sound like it."

"Every boy here will return at once to his bed," said Mr. Crowell sternly. "It is positively absurd for you all to leave your rooms just because Dr. Stafford is having a disagreement with the colonel. Go back at once, boys."

Mr. Crowell was instantly obeyed, but the juniors did not go to sleep again. Within five minutes, however, the angry voices died down, and it was generally assumed that Mr. Crowell had intervened—and this is exactly

what had occurred. The Form-master opened Colonel Clinton's door, and in a few brief words the Head explained. Then, trembling and agitated, Dr. Stafford returned to his own study. No further disturbance was heard, and the boys were soon sound asleep once more. But they had no suspicion of the terrible news which was destined to sweep through the school on the morrow.

CHAPTER VII.

DR. STAFFORD'S ORDEAL.

"ROT!" said Bob Christine firmly.

"I tell you that——"

"Rot!" repeated Christine. "Do you think that I'm going to believe that fatheaded yarn! I should hope I've got more sense!"

He was standing at the foot of the College House steps with Talmadge and Yorke. Parry minor, of the Third, was with the three Removites, and he was looking excited and half scared.

"Well, I'm only going by what Susan told me," he said obstinately. "She's one of the kitchen girls, and she ought to know. Didn't you notice Donnell, too? He was looking as pale as a ghost."

"I don't wonder!" said Christine. "He's sacked—and he's going away this morning. The beast ought to have gone yesterday."

"He wasn't pale last night," objected Parry minor. "If you don't believe what Susan told me, I do. There's something wrong with the colonel—he's either in a fit, or else he's dead. Susan reckons that he died in the night—a fit of apoplexy, or something, brought on by his rage."

Yorke snorted.

"Well, I'm not going to believe what a silly kitchenmaid says!" he declared. "These yarns get about——"

"I say, you kids!" exclaimed Hitchen, of the Fifth, bursting out of the lobby at that moment. "Have you heard the news?"

Christine and Co. turned and regarded Hitchen curiously. The Fifth-Former was a very quiet fellow, and not given to bursts of excitement. The morning was sunny, and Christine and Co. were waiting for the breakfast-gong to sound.

"What news?" asked Christine. "Has the colonel had another fit?"

"He's dead!" said Hitchen hoarsely.

"He's been murdered!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Christine and Co. roared.

"Oh, so it's got to murder now, has it?" grinned Yorke. "I should think suicide would be more likely—not quite so tall, anyhow. I didn't know you were given to telling fairy-tales, Hitchy!"

The Fifth-Former shook his head.

"You'll believe it later on," he said grimly. "The colonel's been found dead in his own study—murdered, and horribly mutilated!"

"Cut into inch squares, for example?" grinned Talmadge.

"Fenton told me—and Fenton isn't the chap to circulate a story of that kind if it

isn't true," said Hitchen. "He's a prefect and the captain of the school. He knows because Nelson Lee has rung up the police."

Christine and Co. lost their grins.

"Oh, I say, it's too thick!" protested Christine uneasily.

"You must have got hold of it wrong, Hitchy," said Yorke. "Men like the colonel never get murdered—they live for ever. He's finished, as far as we're concerned, however, and he'll leave St. Frank's to-day."

Hitchen didn't say any more, but walked away. And just then Christine and Co. spotted Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, over by the Ancient House. The Monks hurried across the Triangle.

Sir Montie and Tommy were both looking unusually grave.

"Have you heard anything about Clinton?" asked Christine breathlessly.

The Ancient House juniors exchanged glances.

"Why, what about him?" asked Watson, in his blunt way. "I didn't know that anything had leaked out——"

"So you do know?" interrupted Christine. "Hitchen, of the Fifth, just told us that the colonel's been found dead in his study!"

"Dear boys, I'm afraid there's somethin' in it," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head. "Nipper is talkin' with his guv'nor, Mr. Lee, an' we're anxiously awaitin' the news."

Just at that moment I emerged from the Ancient House, and the knot of Removites rushed up to me.

"Well?" demanded Watson.

"It's true!" I exclaimed huskily. "I've just heard it from the guv'nor himself—and he knows that it can't be kept secret. Clinton's dead—terribly battered about, in his own study. It's a case of deliberate murder."

"Good heavens!" gasped Yorke.

The three Monks, so hilarious a few minutes before, now turned very white, and looked at me with scared expressions. I wasn't surprised. The news was terrible in the extreme.

St. Frank's had been passing through some strange times just recently, but this was surely the climax. A murder—a shocking murder—within its very walls! It was enough to strike fear into the juniors' hearts.

"I—I can't believe it," muttered Christine. "We often wished the colonel dead, but it was only a figure of speech. He was a rotter, I dare say; but to hear that he's been murdered is awful! I tell you straight out, Nipper, I can't believe it!"

"That looks a bit significant, doesn't it?" I said grimly.

As I spoke I nodded towards the gates. A car was just driving in, and seated in it were three uniformed figures—two constables and Inspector Jameson, of Bannington. All three were looking very grave.

"Oh, my only aunt!" breathed Talmadge. "How—how did they know?"

"The guv'nor phoned the inspector up half an hour ago," I replied. "There's no bloomer about it, you chaps. The thing's a mystery, and you can bet your boots that the guv'nor will be tremendously busy before

"ong—he's busy now. A case like this is just his mark."

Christine suddenly started.

"Who—who killed him?" he muttered. "There was a frightful row last night in our House. Clinton and the Head were going at it hammer and tongs—a terrific quarrel. Do you think— Oh, rot! It's impossible."

I knew what was passing in Christine's mind.

"Dr. Stafford?" I said quietly. "My dear chap, the Head wouldn't hurt a fly. The gov'nor mentioned something about that quarrel; but it's only a coincidence. It might be jolly awkward, though."

By this time the inspector had alighted, and his arrival had occasioned general interest; the Triangle was already crowded with seniors and juniors. And the terrible news—as such news will—passed from lip to lip rapidly. In next to no time the whole school was whispering about the tragedy. It seemed impossible to talk in ordinary tones on the subject. Everybody was awed and half scared. Amongst the juniors, indeed, a feeling of terror was abroad.

The shocking discovery had been made by the College House page-boy, upon entering Clinton's study to perform his usual duties. The page-boy had been nearly fainting by the time he reported his news to the matron. And she lost no time in approaching Mr. Crowell.

The Head was still in his bedroom, so Mr. Crowell had gone across at once to Nelson Lee—knowing, also, that Lee would take command of the situation promptly and calmly. He was well accustomed to such matters.

As a result of the schoolmaster-detective's preliminary investigation he had rung up the Bannington police without a second's delay. And now Inspector Jameson was escorted straight to Lee's study.

"I am afraid a very grave crime has been perpetrated in this school during the night, Inspector Jameson," said Nelson Lee, after he had shaken hands. "I gave you a few bare details over the 'phone."

"A murder case, isn't it, sir?" said the inspector. "I understood you to say that one of the masters has been killed."

"The victim is Colonel Clinton; and he was, until yesterday, the Housemaster of the College House," replied Nelson Lee. "Yesterday, however, Dr. Stafford gave the colonel his dismissal, and he was to have left St. Frank's this morning."

"Maybe it was suicide, sir?" suggested Jameson.

"Oh, no; such a supposition is out of the question," replied Lee, shaking his head. "The colonel is in a shocking condition; his head being injured appallingly. Such terrible wounds could not have been self-inflicted. But come, I will take you to the scene of the crime at once."

"It hasn't been interfered with, I hope?"

"Nobody has entered the room except a page-boy—who made the discovery—and myself," answered Nelson Lee. "I touched nothing, and the boy fled almost before he had entered the room. I realise fully the importance

of leaving everything undisturbed until the first inquiry has been conducted. I am afraid you will have to get the London people into this affair."

"Scotland Yard, you mean?"

Nelson Lee nodded, and opened the door. Just outside in the passage the two men encountered Sergeant Donnell, who had obviously been waiting about. The sergeant was looking pale and haggard—but fierce, too.

"Well, Donnell?" said Lee curtly. "You are well aware that you have no right in this House. You should have left the school yesterday—"

"Beg pardon, sir, but I think it's necessary for me to speak," said Donnell, almost aggressively. "I want to tell the inspector that he won't have far to look for the murderer."

"What do you mean, my man?" demanded Jameson.

"It's as clear as daylight, sir," said Donnell. "Dr. Stafford killed the colonel. They was having a very fierce quarrel last thing overnight. I heard it plain, and the Head threatened more than once to knock the poor colonel down. He didn't do it, because he couldn't, and so he must have took him unawares—"

"I can't allow this," interrupted the inspector curtly. "I have no wish to hear vague suspicions of yours, my good man. If you have any evidence to vouchsafe, you'd better reserve it until the inquest. I'll see you later on."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant.

He went down the passage, and the inspector glanced at Nelson Lee curiously.

"Was that true?" he asked.

"Partly," replied the detective. "There was a quarrel; but Donnell's suspicions are utterly preposterous. However, it is early to talk of suspicions. The first thing is to examine the scene of the crime."

Within five minutes the pair had reached Colonel Clinton's study in the College House. That part of the building had been placed completely out of bounds by Mr. Crowell; but lots of juniors were standing about in the passages, talking together in low tones.

A terrible scene met the eyes of Nelson Lee and Inspector Jameson when they entered the colonel's study. The furniture was in a state of wild disorder, proving that a fierce struggle had taken place. Clinton had evidently fought dearly for his life.

The dead man lay stretched upon the hearth-rug. Jameson was greatly shocked, and trembled visibly after he had looked.

"Awful—appalling!" he exclaimed huskily. "The—the man's face has been battered frightfully! He was obviously beaten to death by some heavy iron implement. There is no face—" The inspector paused, and pulled himself together. "I suppose the doctor's pronounced life extinct?"

"Yes. Dr. Brett was up here half an hour ago," replied Nelson Lee. "He is now interviewing the headmaster, I believe."

"This is too much for me," admitted Jameson, shaking his head. "I shall wire to

Scotland Yard at once. But—but what's this?"

He picked up a right slipper from beneath the table. It was not one of the colonel's, being obviously too small, and the fellow-one was not to be seen.

"Do you know whose this is, Mr. Lee?" asked the inspector.

"Yes; it belongs to Dr. Stafford."

"The deuce it does!" ejaculated Jameson. "Oh, but he might have left it earlier— Good heavens! There's blood on it, Mr. Lee! Look at this!"

Nelson Lee was rather startled. The Head's slipper had been in the room after the—and this proved beyond doubt that the slipper had been in the room after the crime. And who would have worn it but the Head?

And then came two other terrible discoveries. In the fireplace there lay a rolled-up handkerchief, having evidently been used by the murderer to wipe his hands, for it was ominously bloodstained. And it bore Dr. Stafford's initials! Before the inspector could quite recover from this fresh shock, Dr. Brett arrived.

"I want you, Lee—urgently!" he exclaimed, in a queer tone. "You, too, inspector. I've been waiting in the Head's study. Dr. Stafford's not down yet. And I suddenly noticed that the poker in his study fireplace is—well, it's simply smeared with blood!"

"That is very terrible!" said Nelson Lee steadily.

The inspector did not take things so calmly. He immediately rushed away with the doctor, and Nelson Lee followed. The poker was in

a condition exactly as Brett had described. And it was the very weapon which could have dealt the smashing blows upon Colonel Clinton's face.

Inspector Jameson acted promptly.

In face of all the evidence—the quarrel, the slipper, the handkerchief, and the poker—Jameson was compelled to adopt a terrible course. Everything pointed to the fact that Dr. Stafford was guilty of the crime, and the inspector gave hurried instructions to one of his men—who departed in the car.

When Dr. Stafford came down he was terribly agitated, and the inspector merely questioned him with regard to the colonel's position at St. Frank's. Nelson Lee knew well enough why Jameson was delaying—he was waiting for the warrant to arrive. It came within the hour, and the headmaster of St. Frank's was arrested on a charge of wilful murder!

Dr. Stafford's very attitude was self-condemning, for he utterly collapsed upon being charged. The news was received with something like horror by the school. Boys and masters were appalled and stunned by this catastrophe.

But Nelson Lee was active.

Of course, the Head was innocent—and his innocence was proved. Nelson Lee succeeded in clearing him completely. But there was much work to be done, and many adventures to be undergone, before that welcome event took place.

These were terrible times for St. Frank's!

THE END.

"WHO KILLED THE COLONEL?"

IS THE TITLE OF

NEXT WEEK'S STORY.

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PRICE THREE-HALFPENCE.

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 plays a splendid innings for the school against Ragley. After the match Myers is seen talking to a lout named Joe Smart. Next afternoon Challis and Grainger go for a country walk. Grainger sees Joe Smart.

(Now read on.)

THE FIGHT.

PREPARE for action!" said Grainger, with a grim smile, as they sighted the cottage in which the Smarts lived. "There's our man standing at the gate. By George, he's spotted us, and he's bolted! Doesn't intend to take any chances, the brute!"

The Littleminster captain's voice rang with indignation, and the colour flooded his cheeks.

It was just as he said. Joe Smart, the hooligan, who had been standing in his shirt-sleeves at the gate, sucking at a dirty clay pipe, had turned at sight of them and gone indoors.

But when they reached the cottage they saw that the door stood open. He had evidently considered it sufficient to avoid them, and did not anticipate that they would raid his den.

"We'll act while we've got the chance," growled Challis, opening the gate. "Come on!"

Grainger gave Challis a startled glance, as the grim and determined boy made for the open door.

A wave of admiration surged over him. By George, there was nothing weak about John! But Grainger's admiration was tinged with fear.

He was glad he was present, for had Challis been alone there is no telling where he would have stopped.

But John was knocking at the door.

"Now then, what's up?" growled a surly voice from within.

"Is that Smart?"

"One of 'em. It's me, Joe Smart. Don't often 'ave a visit from the school toffs. What can I do to oblige?"

The hooligan stepped within view, his hands set in his trousers pockets, an insolent grin stretching his ugly face, defiance flashing in his eyes.

Challis stepped into the cottage.

"Close the door, Grainger," he cried; and the captain quickly obeyed, shooting the bolts home and turning the key in the lock.

As quick as a flash Challis sprang past the startled cad, and got between him and any hope of escape from the rear.

Smart was alarmed now. He darted into the front parlour, threw his pipe on to a chair, and faced them angrily.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, half afraid. "What's the game? 'Ere, if you come any of your cheek, I'll smash yer!"

Challis entered the room, and, ducking under a blow Smart dealt at his chin, he shot his right in a stinging upper-cut under the jaw.

Smart reeled backwards, uttering a bellow of rage.

"Shut the door, Grainger!" commanded John; and the Littleminster captain found himself obeying.

"Now push that table out of the way, so that I can get at him. We shall want plenty of room."

Again Grainger obeyed; with the result that the two had the floor at their disposal.

The cad's blood was up, and, rolling his sleeves above the elbow, he prepared for action.

"I'll kill yer for that!" he howled.

Challis removed his coat and his waistcoat. He didn't bother to roll up his shirtsleeves. All the while he watched Smart, whose bluff and open defiance began to ooze perceptibly.

"If you touch me," he whined, "I'll set the police on yer!"

"Be careful, or we may set the police on

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"you," returned Grainger. "Now, which shall it be? Will you make a clean breast of it, or do you prefer to take a sound thrashing?"

"Neither of you could do it!" snorted the cad. "But make a clean breast of what?"

"What hold have you over Myers?"

Smart laughed, and, assuming an indignant tone, said:

"Oh, so that's it, is it? You're all kicking up a shine just because one of your toffs makes a pal o' me. There's nothing between us—nothing that matters. 'E's only buying a fishing-rod, and I'm teaching 'im 'ow to fish—"

"Then why," said Challis fiercely, "did you set upon Basil Hood yesterday afternoon and nearly kill him? Why did Myers stand by and let you do it? Why did you force Myers to meet you? Why has he on two occasions permitted you to come to the school and enter the grounds, in defiance of the rules? Perhaps you'll explain, Smart?"

The hooligan, turning his shifty eyes from right to left and left to right, his ears acutely tuned to catch the slightest sound, hesitated.

"The kid was saucy," he muttered. "Mr. Myers didn't like 'im spying. And—I never hurt 'im——"

"You didn't hurt him, you beast?" almost shouted Challis, rage overmastering him for once in his life. "Why, the poor little fellow only managed to crawl home last night, just before the school-bell rang. I found him in my room in a dead faint. His head was fearfully bruised and cut. And you'd kicked him, you howling blackguard, as he lay. It's a mercy you didn't kill him, or you'd have been hanged for murder!"

"I didn't do it. Somebody else must have done it. You ask Mr. Myers. 'E knows. I only just tapped the kid. If he was badly hurt, it appened after we left 'im, and 'e's lying——"

"He's telling the truth!" cried John. "And now—explain——"

He advanced a step, and, with a frightened cry, Smart, who feared the boy, seized a flower-vase and hurled it straight at John's face.

But the Littleminster boy was prepared. He ducked, and, seizing the cad, began to punch him with a will.

"Ow, 'ow! Help! Dad, dad! Murder! Help! Help!"

Smart's quick ears caught the sound of a heavy tread in the scullery, and he yelled for assistance at the pitch of his voice.

Challis sent him staggering back, and, charging in with his head down, the hooligan fought with fists, feet, and cranium, hitting anywhere, anyhow, seeking only to injure or incapacitate his adversary.

Challis was slightly the taller, but he was a boy, whereas Smart was a man. The hooligan was a full stone and a half heavier, and used to dirty fighting.

But he met his match this time.

Grainger, whose first thought was to interfere and take the quarrel upon his own

shoulders, desisted the moment he saw how Challis shaped.

And for several minutes he watched while John pounded and thrashed the scoundrel until he howled for mercy.

As Smart got his first kick home a smashing hook caught him with stunning effect and felled him to the floor. He rose, and charged in more savagely than ever, when a left and right put him down again.

Again he rose, and, swinging a chair, would have brained Challis had Challis shown the slightest hesitation. But John's blood was up, and Grainger marvelled again as Challis seized the chair, wrenched it free, and sent the coward headlong against the wall with a left and right that marked him.

And then something struck the locked door and sent it flying inwards.

Across the threshold sprang a burly, roughly dressed, rough-looking man. Grainger knew him. He was Smart's father, the loafing gardener, who was always to be seen reeling drunk through the streets of the town on a Saturday night.

TWO TO LITTLEMINSTER!

"ALL right, Joe," shouted the father, as he turned his cuffs back. "In the hands of the Philistines, are yer? Wait a mo'! I'll soon settle 'em!"

Encouraged by the arrival of such a powerful ally, Joe Smart hurled himself at John once more, kicking savagely. His father hastened to join forces, but Grainger, feeling it was time for him to take a hand, got between them.

"Stand back!" he cried, in a quiet voice, though there was a determined gleam in his eyes. "It's an unequal fight as it is."

"I allows nobody to set about my son Joe," shouted the father. "Stand aside, mister, or else I'll have a go at you!"

"I should advise you not," answered Grainger.

"Stand out of the way!"

"I do not intend to——"

"Then you'll cop it, I tell yer straight!"

Seeing that Grainger did not intend to budge, and hearing his son calling for help again, the gardener, after spitting on his hands, aimed a savage blow at Grainger's body.

If ever a man was sorry for it, Smart was that man.

Grainger, captain of Littleminster, one of the best athletes the famous school had ever turned out, had twice won the school's boxing championship. He was as strong as a lion, and as fit as careful training and a healthy life could make him.

So Smart found his blows turned aside and returned with interest.

He stood up against the first few stinging punches, though he wondered why there were so many strange-coloured lights dancing about between floor and ceiling; and then he felt his legs grow weak, his knees give way,

(Continued overleaf.)

and his head swim. Then down he crashed upon the floor.

Grainger, who had had his hands full, and had fought his best so that he might render John Challis assistance should he require it, turned swiftly; but the struggle between Joe Smart and the indignant Littleminster boy was over, and Joe lay huddled upon the floor, nursing a damaged eye and rubbing like a child.

"Now, you blackmailing, cowardly bully," cried John, breathing quickly, "perhaps you'll tell us what hold it is you have over Myers. We are going to break it, me and for all!"

The bully glared up at the two boys, then glanced at his father, who was too bowed to offer any further violence. Then he burst into a bitter laugh.

"I won't tell," he muttered. "There's a secret lies between him and me. I was going to let him off, if he treated me decent. But now I won't! By thunder, I won't! I'll go and see the Head! I'll break him, smash him—aye, and smash you two as well! I'm going to set the police on yer! I'll have 'em both arrested!"

"Yes," howled the gardener, struggling up. "It's assault and battery. Fine figures you'll cut when you go into the dock at the police court! It'll mean ruin for you two! Ruin—"

Grainger checked John as he was about to reply.

"Come away, old man!" he said. "After all, you've avenged the young 'un now. We don't want any more of this silliness. Come away!"

Challis nodded, biting his underlip.

"Very well, Grainger, old man," he said.

"Let us go."

At the street door they turned.

"Of course you can please yourself about prosecuting, Smart," said Grainger, with icy emphasis. "But you'd better let 'em alone. Perhaps the police will arrest you for your cowardly attack on young Hood. And blackmailing's a dangerous game!"

They didn't stop to listen to the Smart's volume of abuse, which came to them interlarded freely with profane oaths.

Together they passed out into the sunshine, and, smoothing their ruffled feathers, made their way back to the school.

"Joe," said the elder Smart.

"Yes, dad?" muttered the bully, feeling his fast-closing eye.

"What were you about, to let that schoolboy get the better of yer like that?"

"You ought to know," snapped the beautiful son. "You tackled the other one and didn't find him easy. What's the good of jawing—"

"And—it seems to me that you won't be able to git any more cast out of that other fellow—Mr. Myers, yer know."

"I don't suppose I shall," he growled. "But I don't intend to let him down easy. I'm going up to see the headmaster. Dr. Mason's pretty strict. He'll fire 'im. And if I've any luck, I'll git these two expelled as well. I ain't beat yet, not by a long chalk. Myers will stick to me, if it's only because he looked on and let me welt that little kid in the wood yesterday. He's a white-livered skunk, and can't do anything but squeal. Yes, I'll break 'em all!"

"John," said Grainger, as he and Challis passed over the bridge that spans the Awle.

"Yes, Grainger."

"You've got grit enough for a dozen! It was a rare treat to see you set about that blackguard. If ever you want a friend, count on me. Meanwhile, I'd like to shake hands."

They gripped hands solemnly. Then, as they hurried on, the captain said:

"Have you any idea what secret it is that binds Myers and that bullying brute so closely together?"

Challis, looking at the road, paused before he replied.

"No," he said at last; and Grainger asked no more questions.

IN WHICH PONSONBY EXPLAINS.

AS soon as Grainger and Challis got back to Littleminster they inquired how Basil Hood was faring. It was to Mr. Evans they went for information, and, to their great relief, he informed them that the boy was very much better.

"He's tough, in spite of his looking so delicate; but I'm anxious about Myers now. The boy has been to Hood's room three or four times, and he looks like a ghost. The boy is in a bad way. He seems to have gone to pieces of late."

"H'm!" muttered Grainger. "He's worrying over what happened to young Hood, Mr. Evans. He didn't lift a finger to defend the boy. Quite enough to worry him, I should imagine."

And then he told of the visit he and Challis had made to the cottage beyond the river, and what had come of it.

Mr. Evans's face clouded.

"What a pity you took the law into your own hands, Grainger!" he said.

"Perhaps it was, sir; but we just couldn't help it."

"Trouble will come of it, I'm afraid."

"I hope not, sir. If it does, we are prepared to face it."

"Myers will be expelled, of course. A pity! I can't remember any such disgraceful case in the whole history of the school. I think I'd better see Myers about this. I haven't yet placed the matter before Head."

(To be continued.)