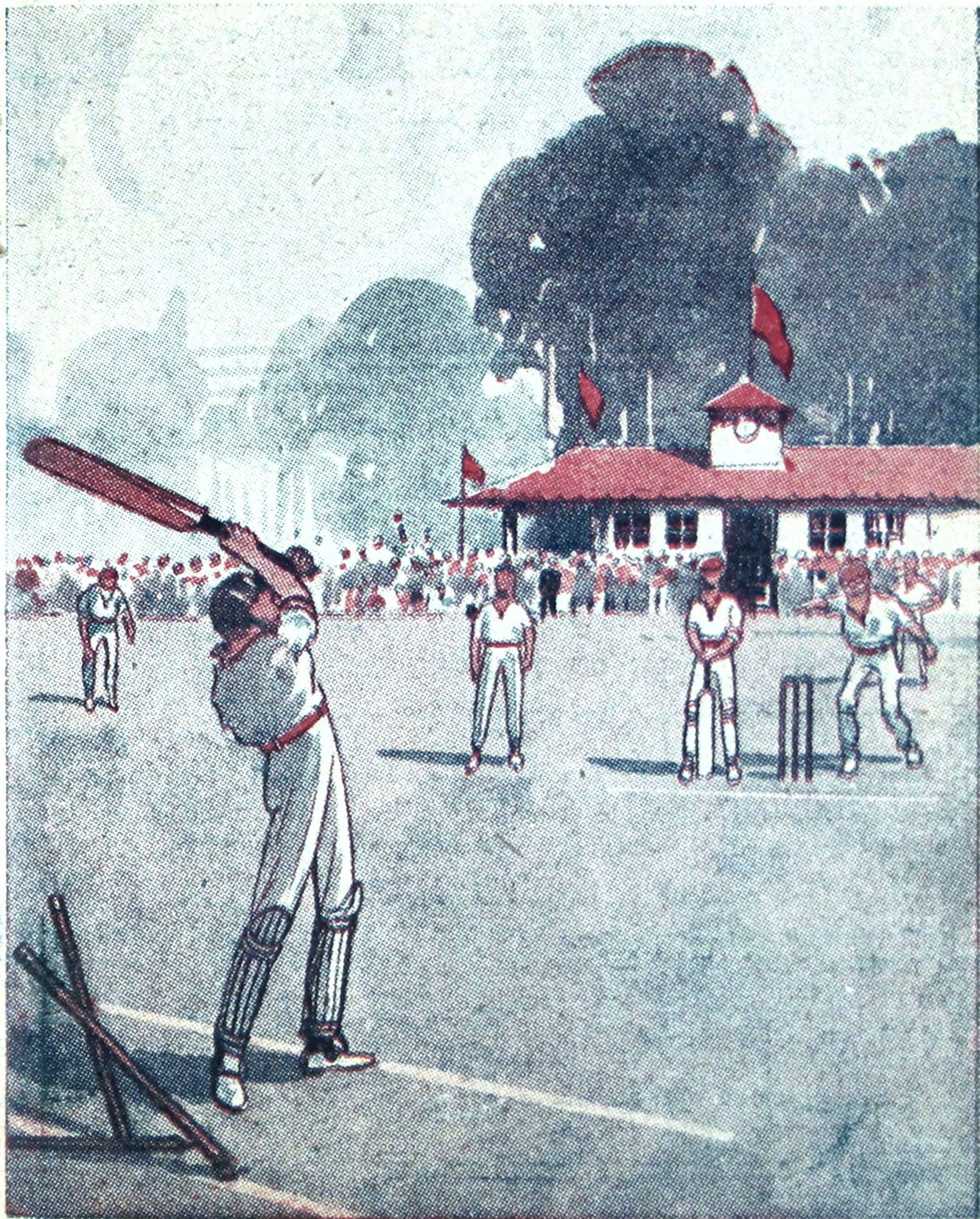


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**(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGH-
OUT BY NIPPER.)**

CHAPTER I.

DUFFERS NOT REQUIRED.

"**R**OTTEN!" I exclaimed disgustedly. I made the remark to my reflection in the mirror; or, rather, to the reflection of somebody who bore no resemblance to me whatever. For I gazed upon Algernon Clarence D'Albert, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's.

I was not referring to the quality of my disguise, either. I had been thinking about the general situation, and about cricket in particular. As Nipper, I had been skipper of the Junior Cricket Eleven; as D'Albert, I was not even allowed to say a single word. I had been told, in fact, that it was not possible for me to be given a trial at the nets.

Starke, of the Sixth, by plotting and lying, had faked up a serious charge against me, and I had been expelled from the school.

Sacked and barred from the school in my own character, I had returned in disguise, and I had managed to hoodwink the whole school, from the Head downwards. I was D'Albert, of the Remove, and the only fellows who knew the real truth were my two particular chums—Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. I had let them into the secret almost at once. And I was established again in Study C.

The arrangement was only to be temporary, of course. I was working my hardest to prove my innocence. When I succeeded in getting to the bottom of the mystery I should lower my false colours and fly my own.

But just at the moment my efforts to unravel the problem did not concern me. I was thinking about cricket.

In the character of Algernon D'Albert I was a spectacled simpleton, and I had played the part so thoroughly that the fellows had

come to regard me as a duffer of the first water.

Cricket, therefore, was useless to me. In vain I declared that I was anxious for a trial. De Valerie, the new Remove skipper, would not listen to me. He was a decent enough fellow; but, like the others, he judged by appearances. He considered that it would be a sheer waste of time to place me in front of a wicket. And he had told me so in plain language.

It was evening now, and my two chums were on Little Side, practising, with the rest of the Eleven. I was out in the cold, but I meant to end it all. At once, too. I was fed up with inactivity.

I sallied out into the Triangle and strolled across to the playing-fields. The "clack!" of bat meeting ball came pleasantly to my ears, and my spirits were somewhat revived.

The big match with Helmford College was due to come off on the Saturday, and it seemed that I should be a spectator; and I knew very well that St. Frank's needed every available man. That was the exasperating part of it.

If I could only show De Valerie what I could do, all would be well. He knew what I could do, of course, but he didn't know what D'Albert could do. And I was D'Albert at present.

I was tolerantly regarded in the Remove as a harmless idiot; and I had really myself to thank for that. For I had played my part so thoroughly that the fellows were all hoodwinked.

It was now my task to prove that I was not a harmless idiot, so far as cricket was concerned, at all events.

Little Side was looking glorious in the evening sunlight. The fellows in their white flannels; the neatly cut grass; the perfectly stretched nets. I felt that I was out of it all.

"Hullo! What do you think you're doing here?" demanded Owen major, staring at me. "Why don't you play hop-scotch in the Triangle?"

"Or marbles in the common-room?" put in Hubbard, grinning. "That's about your mark, D'Albert. Buzz off!"

I smiled with difficulty.

"Really, I see no reason why I should buzz off," I said mildly, in my assumed voice and manner. "And I dislike the game of marbles, and have no knowledge whatever of hop-scotch."

And I walked away, and approached a group of fellows which included De Valerie, Tregellis-West and Watson, and several others. Handforth and Co. were near by, and I noticed that several juniors looked at me with expressions which were almost hostile.

"Chuck that chap off the field!" shouted somebody.

The fellow who uttered that remark was not vindictive; he simply looked upon me as an intruder. If Fullwood or Teddy Long marched on to the cricket field they would be treated in the same manner. I was regarded as a duffer who had no right in the vicinity.

Somerion was at the wicket, and he was testing Jack Grey's bowling—a severe test, too, for Grey was what the Remove termed "mustard."

De Valerie broke away from the crowd and approached me.

"Look here, D'Albert, you're quite welcome here, but I hope you won't make yourself a nuisance," he said bluntly. "Stand about and watch the practice, if you like—but don't try to butt in, there's a good chap."

He spoke to me as he would speak to a Second-Former, and I didn't quite like it. But I had created the character of D'Albert, and I had to stick to it.

"But you do not seem to understand, De Valerie," I said mildly. "I am quite interested in cricket, and if you will only give me a trial——"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned De Valerie. "You said all this a day or two ago. Don't trot it up again."

I nodded my head.

"Really, it is necessary for me to trot it up again," I said grimly. "You do not seem to realise the unfairness of your attitude. I may as well inform you that I am considered to be quite good at cricket——"

"What?" yelled De Valerie.

"I am considered to be good at cricket——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The captain of the Remove yelled. That statement of mine seemed to strike him as being extremely humorous.

"Who considers you to be good?" he grinned.

"I do not care to tell you," I replied stiffly. "It is not my intention to boast, or to blow my own trumpet, but I assure you that I can play cricket equally as well as Watson or Owen major—or yourself."

"Why, you—you cheeky ass——"

"Perhaps I can even play better," I added calmly.

This was not a boast, because I knew that

I could play better. De Valerie himself was the first to admit it. But he didn't know that I was Nipper—and that made all the difference.

"And if you will only give me a trial," I went on, "I will soon show you that my talk is not idle——"

"You'll get off this giddy field!" interrupted De Valerie tartly. "I've had quite enough of your rot, you cheeky new kid!"

"Hallo! What's the row?"

"D'Albert again!"

"Give the ass a punch on the nose!"

Several fellows came crowding round, and De Valerie pointed to me, and grinned.

"Please take stock of this chap," he said. "He has just stated that he can play cricket better than I can——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's jolly rich!" chuckled Owen major.

"And better than you can, Owen——"

"What!" yelled Owen wrathfully. "This ass says that he can play cricket better than I can? Why, I'll—I'll——"

"You'll do nothing," cut in De Valerie. "It's a bigger insult to me than it is to you—if it can be regarded as an insult. But D'Albert happens to be something like Handforth."

"Eh?" said Handforth, turning his head.

"He thinks he can play cricket, but it's a delusion," went on De Valerie calmly.

Edward Oswald Handforth looked black.

"If you want a thick ear, De Valerie, I'll soon oblige you with one!" he roared. "I'll tell you that I can play cricket in the best style. The First Eleven would have me if I was old enough. It's only jealousy in the Remove that's kept me in the background."

"We won't go into an argument," said De Valerie. "And I'm not wild with D'Albert, because he doesn't seem to know any better. But after what he's said I'm hanged if I'll give him a trial!"

"Why not?" demanded Watson warmly. "It might be true."

"Rot!"

"Talk sense, you ass!"

"It not only might be true, but it is true," I said quietly. "You are the skipper, De Valerie. Surely it is your duty, as a careful cricket captain, to get the best men you can. And, really, you cannot get them unless you give everybody a fair trial. I claim it as a right to be tested at the nets. If you wish, I will also give an exhibition of bowling——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd simply yelled—they refused to take me seriously.

"All this laughter is quite amusing up to a certain point," I went on. "But it is rather exasperating to be ridiculed. A person who deserves ridicule must put up with it. Would it not be better to reserve the laughter until I have made a fool of myself at the nets?"

"Begad! Well said, dear fellow!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I entirely agree with D'Albert, you disbelievin' bounders."

"I thought you had more sense, Tregellis-West," said De Valerie. "If D'Albert wants a chance he'd better go over to the Third-Form nets. They might have him there, although I doubt it. Young Heath is rather particular."

I was quite impatient by this time.

"If I borrow Watson's bat, will you allow Watson to bowl to me?" I asked tartly.

"No!" said the skipper.

"We'll do it without your permission," said Watson. "Hang it all, De Valerie, don't be a beast! Give the chap a chance!"

But De Valerie was obstinate.

"I'm not going to be made a laughing-stock of," he said. "Everybody will grin if D'Albert goes in to bat—and I shall be held responsible. It's no good—I'm skipper, and my word goes. If D'Albert hadn't boasted, I might have given him a chance."

"As I said before, I have not boasted," I exclaimed. "And you may seriously regret this gross unfairness, De Valerie. Really, I am surprised at you. It is not sportsman-like."

De Valerie frowned.

"That's enough!" he said sharply. "Any more of your cheek, you new kid, and I'll get wild!"

"Let me warn you that this refusal might recoil upon your own head," I said grimly. "If so, don't blame me afterwards—there are witnesses here to prove that I have given you a fair word of warning."

"Oh, the chap's loony!" snapped Owen major. "It makes me sick! He doesn't know a giddy thing about cricket, and he starts preaching."

"You've been warned, De Valerie!" grinned Armstrong. "Don't forget that, you know. It may recoil on your head. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, and so it may!" shouted Tommy Watson. "I believe that D'Albert can play cricket really well——"

"You silly ass!"

"Dry up!"

"Don't talk out of your hat!"

Watson turned his back on the crowd indignantly, and went off with Tregellis-West. They were both considerably upset, for it seemed that I was not to be given any chance whatever.

It was not policy on their part to be too pally with me in public. That is why they went away. And Handforth, winking at his two chums, Church and McClure, strolled over to me and smiled at me genially.

"I think you're in earnest, kid," he said kindly. "If you want to know all about cricket, you couldn't come to anybody better than me. I don't mind coaching you—and you might know a few things after a year's teaching."

The crowd grinned, and Handforth was encouraged. He didn't see the dangerous light in my eyes. Chipping me was regarded as an amusing pastime by the great Edward Oswald.

"Cricket," went on Handforth, with the air of a lecturer, "is a game that must be given very close attention. As a favour, I

don't mind telling you the rudiments of the game."

"Go on!" I said grimly. "As it happens, I know about three times as much concerning cricket as you do, Handforth——"

"That's purely your imagination," interrupted the leader of Study D. "Cricket is played on grass, and there are generally two elevens—one eleven against the other. Is that clear?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The batters go in to bat singly," went on Handforth. "A batter, by the way, is not a Yorkshire pudding——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"In this case, a batter is a fellow who holds a bat—that thing with a black handle," continued Handforth, warming to his work. "The black handles are caused by cord being bound round in order to obtain a good grip. The wickets are three in number, and if the ball happens to hit the wickets, a batter is out. Is that all clear?"

"Quite," I said. "It is also clear that a particularly absurd specimen of humanity, who is standing immediately before me, is making a somewhat pitiful attempt to be humorous. I am sorry to witness such a regrettable scene."

There were many chuckles, and Handforth turned red.

"Are—are you talking about me?" he asked.

"Yes, I am!" I shouted, thoroughly exasperated. "And, what is more, I am quite tired of your nonsense. You will oblige me, Handforth, by accepting this!"

Biff!

My knuckles landed upon Handforth's nose with great force. I hit hard, because I felt like it at that moment. I felt like punching every nose within reach. And Handforth's was the nearest.

He sat down in the grass with a howl.

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured McClure.

"Well, I must say you asked for it, Handy!"

"He did!" grinned De Valerie. "Bravo, D'Albert!"

Handforth scrambled to his feet, looking dazed.

"That ass punched my nose!" he gasped blankly. "Fetch a stretcher, somebody. He's going to be slaughtered!"

And Handforth proceeded to slaughter me. He charged with all his might, with the full intention of avenging the deadly insult. The other fellows looked on, grinning—expecting to see me wiped out of existence.

They saw something very different.

Somehow, Handforth was quite slow in the slaughtering business. He hit out hard enough, and his fists were of enormous size. But they simply beat the air, not one blow was allowed to arrive home.

At the same time Handforth received quite a number of hard knocks, and after a minute he sprawled in the grass again, gasping.

"I—I must be dreaming!" he panted dazedly.

"Didn't you see D'Albert wipe up those River House cads the other day?" grinned McClure. "You ought to have remembered that, Handy. And perhaps you other chaps will believe what we said about D'Albert now."

Handforth sprang to his feet.

"I'm not done yet!" he roared. "Take that, you cheeky bounder!"

"I'd rather not, thanks," I said, parrying his blow. "But you will kindly oblige me by taking this."

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth.

My left crashed upon his nose, and Edward Oswald fell to the grass once more, dimly wondering if the age of miracles had returned.

CHAPTER II.

RATHER MYSTERIOUS!

"WELL, I'm jiggered!"

"Great Scott!"

"That was a hard one, Handy!"

The juniors were all taken rather by surprise; but their surprise was nothing compared with Handforth's. He sat up, looked about him in a dreamy kind of way, and then blinked.

"Groooooh!" he exclaimed, rising dizzily to his feet. "Who—who threw that brick at me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was D'Albert's fist, you ass!" grinned McClure. "Your nose is getting swollen, Handy——"

"D'Albert won't have any nose at all by the time I've done with him!" roared Handforth suddenly. "I'll knock it into his face—— By George! No, I won't! I believe I deserved that whack!"

Handforth was always most erratic in his actions. Everybody was expecting him to fly at me again. But he put out his fist frankly, and I took it.

"Really, I regret having hurt you——" I began.

"Hurt me!" said Handforth, with a snort. "Rot! I'm not made of jelly, you duffer! I can take as many punches as you like. But I must say you're pretty handy with your giddy flippers!"

And Handforth, quite amiable again, marched off with Church and McClure. I strolled with Tregellis-West and Watson in the direction of the river—where we could talk privately.

"Look here, something will have to be done," said Watson firmly. "We simply can't go on like this, you know. De Valerie ought to be boiled in oil for being such an obstinate ass. Why not ignore him, and practise——"

"No; he's junior skipper, and it wouldn't be square," I interrupted. "He's so certain that I'm a dud that he thinks it would be a waste of time to test me. I don't altogether blame him, but it's rotten."

"Well, we'll put in a word for you——"

"No, you won't," I said. "You haven't got to be very friendly with me, remember;

you simply accept me as your study-mate. De Valerie might get suspicious if you went and pressed him to give me a trial. Just leave it to your uncle; I'll find a way out of the difficulty. And now there's something else I want to jaw about."

"What's that, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"Starke—and that chap Beckett," I replied grimly. "We know well enough that Starke was bowled over by a motor-car; and that car is owned by Mr. Millford, of Midshott. But it was being driven on that night by Mr. Millford's chauffeur, a chap named Beckett."

"Yes, we know all this," said Watson. "You went over to Midshott, and made some inquiries on the Q.T. You were expelled for assaulting Starke; but he was really made unconscious by a blow on the head from that car."

"We've got to prove it," I said. "You remember I told you about that note I found in Starke's study? It's from Beckett himself, and he asked Starke to go and meet him on Tuesday evening—that's to-morrow. Well, I think the best thing I can do is to follow Starke, and to find out what his game is."

"It sounds all right," said Watson. "But you've already seen Beckett."

"Yes—the other evening, when that blue-grey car came along," I replied. "I tried to get the beggar to admit that he knocked somebody down on that night. But he wouldn't say a thing. A dark-looking chap, with a black moustache—I should know him again in a minute. Starke's arranged to meet him to-morrow evening, and I'll keep my eyes open—and my ears!"

"Dear fellow, I do not pretend to understand all this," said Tregellis-West mildly. "Perhaps my brain is not capable of grasping so many details at once, begad! But will you please tell me why Starke should want to meet the fellow who knocked him down? Wouldn't it be rather more appropriate if he prosecuted him?"

I laughed.

"We don't know all the facts," I said. "That's where we're handicapped, Montie. Starke swore that I assaulted him—and he'll have to stick to that yarn, or else be bowled out as a liar. It's my belief that he knows how he got injured; and that's why he wants to meet Beckett."

"I am still horridly confused, dear old boy," confessed Montie.

"There's no reason why you should be," I said. "Starke knows that Beckett hit him with the car, and he's probably afraid that Beckett will tell people about the incident. That would be fatal—for Starke. Having made up his yarn, he must stick to it, and it's my opinion that he wants to warn Beckett to keep mum."

"How you do all this reasonin' is really beyond me—it is, begad it is!" declared Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and eyeing me with great interest. "Dear boy, I shouldn't have thought of that, you know—Starke wantin' to meet that frightful

bounder to give him a warnin'. An' supposin' you follow them an' hear all about it? Your word won't be any good."

"I might be able to pick up something of importance—there's no telling," I replied. "When you're on detective work you can't make positive plans beforehand; it's necessary to trust to luck to a certain degree. Nelson Lee and I have found that out many a time."

"It's a pity Mr. Lee isn't here now," said Watson.

"It's more than a pity," I agreed grimly. "But that's always the case—just when you want anybody particularly, they're not at hand. While I'm in this awful hole down here, the gov'nor's spending his time in Italy, or Spain, or somewhere, on secret service business! There's no telling when he'll get back. But I'd like to have the whole mystery cleared up before he returns; I'd like to be back in my own character."

And for the time being the subject was dismissed. I was not feeling very content that evening; I watched the cricket for some little time, wondering how on earth I could get a look in.

I had made it a practice, in the Form-room, to be somewhat dull. I was capable of rising to the top of the Form—the position which was really mine—but, as D'Albert, I thought it wiser to be regarded as a bit of a slow-coach.

The next day, at morning lessons, I paid little attention to Mr. Crowell, for I was thinking on several subjects. However, I managed to do fairly well, and that was all that mattered.

In the evening tea in Study C was over quickly, and then I stationed myself in a corner of the Triangle, watching and waiting. Starke had arranged to meet Beckett, and I wasn't sure how he would go—on foot, or on his bicycle. If the latter, my task would be more difficult.

And this proved to be the case.

I had not been waiting long before Starke came out with his trousers clipped up. He made for the bicycle-shed, and soon emerged with his machine. Before mounting he glanced at his watch, and then rode off.

"This is going to be tricky," I told myself.

Watson, who was acting as a confederate for the time being, had been in the bicycle-shed—pretending to clean his machine. He came hurrying out now, wheeling it. I strolled over to meet him, and leisurely rode away on Starke's track. Anybody observing the incident could not have been suspicious.

Starke had turned to the right—away from the village, and the road in that direction led towards Bannington moor. I wondered where the meeting-place could be, and hoped that it would not be on the moor itself. For there would be no cover whatever for me.

I caught sight of my quarry as he coasted down the hill towards the moor. I kept quite a long distance behind. A glimpse now and again was quite enough for me. If Starke knew that I was on his track there would be trouble.

I was very glad to discover that he did not go across the moor, but turned off down a side lane. Nothing could have been better, for this lane had high hedges, and was winding, with scarcely a hundred yards stretch of straight road. To follow Starke under these conditions was quite an easy matter.

I wondered where he could be off to, for this lane merely led into the Bannington Road, a mile from the town, and was a much longer way to the town than by passing through Bellton.

Obviously, therefore, Starke's destination was not Bannington.

I met with success sooner than I had expected, for just over a mile further on a few cottages were passed at intervals, and then a tiny country inn hove into view. This little place stood all by itself, and was really little more than a cottage.

Thick, leafy trees grew all round—so close to the inn, in fact, that it was almost impossible to see the building until one was right upon it. I caught a glimpse of the rear, between two trees, and saw that there was no garden there, but an extensive orchard.

Observation is a good thing, and I was glad that I had noted the geography of the place.

Starke dismounted from his machine in front of the inn, and I swerved to the side of the lane and pulled up—just out of sight. Then I pushed my machine through the hedge, and left it hidden in a fern-choked ditch.

Then I crept forward, and took a small pair of binoculars from my pocket. I was able to see the front of the inn distinctly. Starke was still standing there, talking to a stout woman in an apron.

Then he looked up and down the road, and glanced at his watch.

"Mr. Beckett hasn't turned up," I murmured to myself.

This was obviously the case, for Starke did not enter the inn, but hung about outside, waiting. I saw that the sign above the doorway was that of a fox. And I remembered that this little place was a tiny hamlet known as Edgemore, and was right out of the usual track of things.

As it happened, Starke did not find it necessary to wait long. For after ten minutes a man came striding down the road, and nodded as he saw Starke. I looked at him closely through the binoculars.

"That's not Beckett," I told myself.

It certainly was not the man I had encountered in the blue-grey car—and whom I had taken for Beckett. This fellow was slim and wiry, with a clean-shaven face; totally different from the man I had seen.

But the letter making the appointment had been written by Beckett; it was therefore only natural that Beckett should come. Had I made a mistake? Was the man I had seen some days earlier another person altogether? Which of the two was the chauffeur?

I had been so certain of seeing the man I

knew that I was considerably surprised, and hardly knew what to do for the moment.

At all events, I was helpless there.

My best plan, I decided, was to creep along behind the hedge and to attempt to get into the orchard. Once there, I might be able to overhear something of value. So I moved forward.

I found plenty of cover, and finally reached the orchard without being seen by a thing save an old cow in a meadow. There was no back door to the building. The back door, to be somewhat Irish, was at the side. Therefore I had a clear field.

To my further satisfaction, I saw that many thick bushes grew against a window, making it possible to approach quite closely without even being seen or heard. I edged my way forward, and at length arrived at a spot so near that I could hear a murmur of voices, and could see wreaths of blue smoke curling out upon the still evening air.

My shot had proved true, for Starke and Beckett were in that room. At least, Starke and the man I assumed to be Beckett were there.

I remained perfectly still, listening.

"Quite sure we're private here, sir?" I heard the man say.

"Of course it's private," came Starke's voice. "There's nothing outside there—except an orchard. It's empty and deserted, and we can talk quite freely. The fact is, Beckett, I want to have a private talk with you."

"Yes, that's what you said, sir."

"I meant it, too," said Starke.

I was no longer in any doubt. The man actually was Beckett—which proved that the other fellow I had seen was not. My calculations were somewhat upset, and I found myself wondering who on earth the man in the car could have been.

And just then something occurred which made me irritable.

Quite distinctly I heard the sound of somebody moving amongst the bushes on the other side of the window. I was quite invisible, but I realised that my position was very unsafe.

To be discovered there would be a real disaster, for Starke would know in a second that I was not such a simpleton as I made myself out to be. Had I been seen? And was somebody searching for me?

I determined not to leave the matter to chance.

And, very stealthily, I edged my way back without making a sound, and slid quietly and gently down a bank into a dry gully. I knew it was there, because I had been compelled to climb it a few minutes earlier.

From this position I could hear nothing of what was said in the room. But I could see the window quite easily, and the trees which grew in proximity. I watched anxiously, and the moments ticked by.

"Ass!" I muttered at last. "I needn't have retreated at all! I expect that sound was made by a dog, or a chicken——"

But I was quite wrong.

For, as I watched, I saw the head and shoulders of a man edging forward slowly and deliberately through two bushes. The man was a stranger to me, for he was elderly, and decidedly ragged.

And then, to my astonishment, he settled himself against the bush in a listening attitude. He was, in fact, overhearing the conversation between Starke and Beckett. And occasionally he jotted down a note or two in a little pocket-book.

This was certainly mysterious.

Who could the man be, and why should he be interested at all? I was decidedly puzzled, and more than a little annoyed. For this intruder, butting in like this, had completely spoilt my own little game.

All I could do was to lie there and watch—and know nothing.

It was aggravating and irritating. But I did not shift from my position. Even if I had to wait an hour—two hours—I would see the finish of the incident. And, if possible, I would follow the ragged stranger.

And so I lay there, with the sunlight trickling through the foliage overhead upon me. The evening was quite early, and there were several hours to spare before locking up.

I was unable to know what took place within the back parlour of the Fox Inn—at that time; but there is no reason why I should not set the full facts down here. For, of course, I learned everything ultimately.

It is my intention, therefore, to change the scene.

CHAPTER III.

A WORD OF WARNING!

JOE BECKETT lay back in his chair and leisurely filled his pipe. He was regarding Starke with curiosity and interest.

"Well, Master Starke, what's the secret?" he asked.

"I think you know exactly why I've arranged this meeting," said Starke grimly. "You performed a particularly dirty trick, Beckett——"

"Here, I say, sir!" protested the man.

"You can say what you like," continued Starke. "One night, not so long ago, you were out with your master's motor-car, and you knocked somebody down. Yet you drove on without even waiting to see if you had killed the fellow."

The chauffeur rose to his feet.

"I'm not one of that sort, Master Starke," he said huskily. "I've been drivin' a car for years, an' I never played a dirty trick yet. On that night you're speakin' of I'd been with a pal in Bannington——"

"Drunk, eh?" suggested Starke.

"No, I wasn't drunk," replied Beckett. "I'd had one or two, I'll admit, an' they rather upset me. I don't drink much as a

rule, an' I s'pose that's why I was a bit unsteady. You seem to know all about it——"

"Know all about it!" snapped Starke. "It was me you knocked down!"

"Yes, I know that, sir," said Beckett. "I found that out the next day—by makin' a few inquiries. But you didn't seem to be hurt much, so I thought I'd better keep mum. But how did you know?"

"I recognised your car," replied Starke. "I've seen it about often, and you've got a novel kind of head-lamp on that car—I couldn't mistake it. So when I recovered my wits I knew you were the culprit."

"But it might have been Mr. Millford himself——"

"Your guv'nor isn't the kind of man who'd ride on after knocking somebody down," interrupted Starke. "I guessed you were the fellow—and I guessed that you were alone in the car at the time. I was right, too."

Beckett nodded.

"Yes, Master Starke," he said. "I was in a bit of a hole. I don't mind admitting it, either. You see, the master was away, and I took the car out without orders. If I'd said anything about that accident I should have got the sack."

"It's what you deserved!"

"Maybe, sir. But we don't all get what we deserve," replied Beckett, with a slight smile. "And when I found that you weren't particularly hurt, I decided to say nothing."

"Yes, I can understand that," said Starke.

"I don't want you to think I'm a bad lot, sir—I'm not," said the chauffeur. "An' if you don't want to harm me, please say nothing to Mr. Millford. You're well again now, so why rake it up?"

"I'm not going to rake it up," said Starke. "Just the opposite, in fact. That's why I wrote to you, and told you to arrange this meeting."

"I was real scared," declared Beckett, striking a match. "If I'm sacked, it'll be a rare trouble, Master Starke. I've got a wife an' two children, an' jobs aren't plentiful nowadays. Mr. Millford's a good master——"

"My dear man, I don't want to hear your family troubles," interrupted Starke. "I want to talk this affair over with you fully——"

"But there's nothin' to discuss, sir," said Beckett. "I'm more than sorry that I hurt you that night, an' I can't say no more. If I'd really hurt you I'd have gone to the police at once—straight, I would!"

"Perhaps!" exclaimed Starke, with a slight sneer. "But what I want to impress upon you is that you've got to keep absolutely quiet."

"You can trust me to do that," said Beckett. "What surprises me is that you didn't say anything. For the first three or four days I was expectin' to be bowled out every hour."

"That's because you don't know the actual facts," said Starke, lighting a fresh cigarette. "I needn't go into full details, but I

can tell you that a junior of St. Frank's was found near me after the accident. He was suspected of knocking me down with a stick. Nobody even guessed that a motor-car had done the trick."

"Poor little chap!" said Beckett, with concern. "I expect you cleared him as soon as you came to your senses?"

Starke laughed.

"That's just where you're wrong," he said. "When I recovered I heard that Nipper was accused—the fellow's name was Nipper. Well, I simply hated the little worm, and I saw an opportunity of getting my own back in a particularly neat way."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the chauffeur, removing the pipe from between his teeth, and leaning forward.

"I mean that I accused Nipper of knocking me down," said Starke, with a grin. "I didn't say anything about a car, and the proof was absolutely positive against the kid. Neat, wasn't it?"

Beckett rose to his feet.

"Neat?" he repeated slowly. "It was a low-down trick!"

Starke scowled.

"You'd better be careful what you're saying!" he said sharply. "I'll——"

"One moment, sir," interrupted Beckett. "Hasn't that youngster been cleared of suspicion?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'm goin' to St. Frank's at once," said the chauffeur. "Hang my job! I can get another, perhaps, even if I do get the sack. I'm goin' to tell your Headmaster that that youngster was innocent——"

Starke jumped up in alarm.

"Don't be a fool, Beckett!" he exclaimed. "If you breathe a word I shall be sacked from the school myself!"

"That makes me all the more determined," said Beckett angrily. "A young rascal like you deserves to be sacked. Why, I never dreamed you wanted me to tell me all this."

"I don't care what you dreamed!" snapped Starke. "You'll stay here, and you won't say a word. If you do, I'll see that my pater prosecutes you, and you'll find yourself in prison! Besides, the whole thing's idiotic. There's no reason why we should quarrel. That kid, Nipper, was expelled from the school weeks ago. Everybody's forgotten him by now, and if you bring the whole thing up again you'll do more harm than good."

"But I can clear his name, and then he'll be able to come back again," said Beckett.

Starke laughed harshly.

"The kid's in another school by this time, as happy as ever he was," he declared. "And once a fellow has been sacked from St. Frank's, he can't come back—not even if he's innocent. That's one of the rules. So you wouldn't do any good by opening your mouth now."

Beckett, who didn't know much about public schools, accepted Starke's fanciful statement as the truth. He sat down again,

looking decidedly ill at ease. He lit his pipe again.

"If I'd known this I should have spoken up the very next day," he said, eyeing Starke contemptuously. "But I expect that is too late now——"

"If you do say anything, you'll be sacked from your job, and my pater will prosecute you," said Starke. "Don't forget that, Beckett. You're in this thing as deeply as I am, and we're quite safe if we keep mum."

"Yes, I s'pose so," said the man slowly.

"I've told that yarn, and the tale must be kept up," continued Starke. "If you're questioned by anybody, be absolutely ignorant of any accident. Say that you weren't out with the car that night at all."

"Lying may come easy to you, sir, but it's not my way," interrupted Beckett coldly. "I'll keep quiet, if you like, but I'm not goin' to tell any lies."

"But perhaps you'll have to, you fool!" snapped Starke. "If the truth comes out, I shall be branded as a liar, and be expelled! You've got to be mum—understand? We're both safe then."

"You'll keep your job, an' I shall keep mine," said Beckett drily. "Well, seein' that the damage has been done, an' it can't be undone, I'll agree to what you say. An' I think I might as well be goin' now."

"There's no hurry," said Starke. "I want you to promise me, Beckett, that you'll keep quiet. Perhaps I've got more to lose than you have, because, even if the truth would benefit Nipper, it would do me a darned lot of harm. So here's something to keep your mouth shut."

And Starke tossed two pound notes upon the table.

"Thank you, Mr. Starke," said Beckett.

He picked them up, folded them neatly, and handed them back.

"I don't want any money from you, sir," he said quietly. "I can keep my tongue still without bein' bribed. As you say, my job depends on it, so I'm not likely to talk."

Starke took the money back in astonishment.

"You must be mad, Beckett," he said. "Still, if you won't take the money, all the better. But you're the first man I've known to refuse two quid for nothing. You're a bit squeamish."

Beckett said nothing, but reached for his cap. And Starke, feeling quite satisfied with the result of his interview, tossed his cigarette end out of the window and turned away.

But both he and Beckett twirled round a second later. A slight but unmistakable gasp had sounded. Or it might have been a sigh. The pair were not quite sure which.

At all events, the sound had been caused by something human.

"There's somebody outside listening!" hissed Starke tensely.

"I don't think so, sir."

"Didn't you hear that sound?" snapped the prefect. "Come outside, quick! We'll catch the spying rotter red-handed!"

Starke scrambled hastily through the window, and he was followed by Beckett. I, of course, saw them distinctly, for I had the window in view. The pair burst through the bushes and stared round them.

It was not necessary for them to look far.

For almost at their feet lay the figure of a man under the bush. He was lounging back in luxury, his head resting in his hands. And after giving one or two sighs, he moved slightly and continued his slumbers.

For it seemed obvious that he had been asleep. I repeat, it seemed so. For a moment earlier he had been very wide awake, as I was in a position to see. Starke and Beckett, however, knew nothing.

"An infernal old tramp!" muttered Starke. "He's asleep!"

Beckett smiled.

"He heard nothing, sir," he remarked.

"I'd say he's been sleepin' here for the best part of the afternoon an' evenin'. Fellows like this prefer to doss in a quiet spot, especially where there's some beer near. If they can't buy any, they like to get the smell of it!"

Starke bent down.

"I suppose he is really asleep?" he asked in a low voice. "Give me that pipe of yours, Beckett."

The man handed it over, and Starke placed the hot bowl within a sixteenth of an inch of the sleeping man's left eyelid. The heat must have been considerable for a moment, but the eyelid did not flicker.

"He's dead asleep, sir," murmured Beckett.

"No doubt about that," agreed Starke, satisfied. "Well, let's get back. And don't forget, Beckett, that everything depends upon us keeping quiet. One incautious word, and you lose your job and I get sacked. We're absolutely safe if we both forget that incident. So, from this moment, I've forgotten it. Have you?"

And they passed out of the inn—having re-entered the parlour—and went their various ways: Beckett walking, and Starke on his bicycle. I was left in my hiding-place, and I was greatly interested in the movements of the ragged stranger.

For fully five minutes after Starke and Beckett had gone the man lay perfectly still, apparently asleep. Then he rolled over, stretched himself, and yawned. I was sure that he had not slept a wink.

His actions were a mere pretence, in order to deceive anybody who might be watching. But the man thought that he was alone, for he took his little pocket-book out again, and made some more notes.

I knew well enough that he had been surprised into making a short ejaculation by having a glowing cigarette end come into contact with the back of his neck. I had seen it bounce off and drop to the ground.

And the elderly stranger slowly and cautiously rose to his feet. There was a grim smile upon his face as he commenced to move off.

And I wondered.

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE PRACTICE.

I HAD lost interest in Starke for the moment, and gave my attention to this remarkable stranger. He was quite a new factor in the case, and I couldn't find him a place anywhere.

What he was doing I couldn't understand. But a little careful thought assured me that he had followed Beckett to the Fox Inn—exactly as I had followed Starke. We had come to the place with the same object, it seemed.

And the old chap had had all the luck. He had listened while I merely watched. Under no circumstances was this satisfactory. There was only one advantage on my side.

I had remained hidden all the time, and I knew exactly what was in the wind. The stranger on the other hand, had revealed his cards to me, all unconsciously. I decided that it would be profitable to follow the man.

And this I attempted to do.

I say attempted deliberately, because I failed.

Exactly why I failed, I don't know. I've always prided myself upon being quite a decent shadower. I kept the old fellow in view until we were both clear of the orchard. I was on his track when he passed through a belt of trees. I saw him jump down into the lane.

But three seconds later, when I arrived in the gap, he had vanished.

In order to do this he must have streaked across the road like a flash of lightning. I was bewildered for a moment, so unexpected was the surprise. And I jumped down into the road and looked up and down.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I murmured.

I seemed to have the whole world to myself. No sound came to my ears except the twittering of some birds in the trees. And there was no sign whatever of the ragged stranger.

To search for him now was hopeless. A thick wood grew on the other side of the road, and if I attempted to explore it I should simply give myself away. Even then I had an inkling that my own game had been spotted.

And this inkling became a certainty almost immediately afterwards, for when I went to fetch my bicycle I received a bit of a shock. It was still there, amongst the ferns, almost completely hidden.

But when I hauled it out I noticed something white on the saddle. It was a square piece of paper—a leaf torn from a miniature book. And it was fixed to the saddle by means of an ordinary pin.

"Well, this is the limit!" I muttered blankly.

Upon the paper were just the seven words: "Very good, but not quite good enough!" In other words, the ragged individual had known that I was following him. Just at first I was alarmed.

But then, after due thought, I became more comfortable.

If the fellow had meant any harm he would have confronted me. And there was a slight touch of humour in his message; it was almost as though he were on my side. But who he could be was quite beyond my powers of comprehension.

I gave up thinking at last and mounted my machine. Then I rode off in the direction of Bannington.

I didn't want to go back to St. Frank's yet. There was plenty of time before locking up, and a nice spin round in the cool of the evening would help me to think more clearly.

The lane was winding and hilly, and extremely narrow for the most part. I didn't meet a living thing before I arrived upon the main Bannington road. Once there I cycled into the town.

I passed through, feeling fit for anything. I had decided to put Starke and Beckett and the mysterious stranger completely out of my thoughts for the time being. And I did so, too.

The welcome sound of a leather ball meeting a cricket bat drew my attention, and I glanced enviously over a low hedge which I happened to be passing. Then I suddenly realised that I was near Bannington Grammar School.

And a second glance told me that I was in close proximity to the junior playing-fields. Cricket practice was evidently proceeding. I dismounted, with the intention of watching the white-clothed figures.

I didn't know the Grammarians particularly well, but I was well acquainted with the junior skipper—a very decent fellow named Elliott. But, of course, he would not recognise me in my present guise, and I was not in a position to recognise him. Under the existing circumstances, we were strangers.

I stood upon the bank against the hedge and watched. The last rays of the setting sun were slanting across the green velvet of the cricket ground. There were a good many Grammarian juniors at practice. One fellow was in Etons, however, and he was not wearing the Grammar School colours. He turned his face in my direction, and I recognised him at once.

The fellow was Barlowe, the junior skipper of Helmford College. He was a stranger within the gates, and I wondered what he was doing in Bannington.

"Arranging a fixture, I suppose," I told myself. "By gum! I wish I could go over and chat with the two bounders!"

Fate was particularly kind that evening. For I had scarcely allowed the thought to pass out of my mind when the batsman at the nets gave a terrific swipe and sent the ball soaring high into the heavens.

"Too high, you ass!" yelled somebody.

The leather was coming right in my direction. More by instinct than anything else I leapt the hedge and caught the ball neatly

as it dropped. Smack! It entered my right palm with precision.

I don't think it was a particularly good catch, but the Grammarians appeared to think it was.

"Oh, good!" went up a shout. "Good catch!"

"Chuck it over here, please!"

I was thrilled with the very joy of having a cricket ball in my fingers, and I swung my arm round and pitched the leather into the air. It was an unusually good throw for me, but I was exuberant.

"My hat! That wasn't bad!" exclaimed Barlowe. "Who's the merchant, anyhow?"

Elliott came running over towards me.

"I thought I recognised your colours," he remarked. "St. Frank's chap, ain't you?"

"Yes," I replied, pretending to be timid. "Yes, thank you!"

"That was a jolly good catch you made just now," said Elliott, regarding my spectacled visage curiously. "A thundering good catch, in fact!"

"Really?" I murmured.

"I don't think I've seen you before," went on Elliott, as Barlowe and some of the other Grammarians came up. "What Form are you in?"

"The Remove, please."

"You weren't in the Remove the last time I was at St. Frank's," put in the Helmford fellow.

I smiled.

"Perhaps you didn't see me," I said meekly. "I only arrived at St. Frank's a week or two ago, you see. My name is D'Albert—Algernon Clarence D'Albert."

The Grammarians grinned.

"Oh, is it?" said Elliott. "Well, I don't know about your name, and I must remark that you don't look like a cricketer," he added frankly. "But if you caught that ball by a fluke, it was a mighty good fluke!"

"Oh, it wasn't a fluke," I said quickly.

"But you can't play, can you?" put in Barlowe curiously.

"I—I think I can," I replied. "Boasting is hateful, so I shall say nothing. Cricket is a wonderful game, and my only sorrow is that I am not allowed to play it at St. Frank's."

"How's that?"

"They seem to imagine that I am a duffer," I said plaintively.

Elliott grinned.

"Dash it all, you can't blame them!" he said. "De Valerie's the skipper now, isn't he, since Nipper left? A pity they lost that chap; one of the finest cricketers who ever handled a bat."

I wanted to bow at the tribute, but merely looked silly.

"Yes, De Valerie is the captain now," I said. "I requested him to give me a chance, but he assured me that I should be wasting his time. It is most unfortunate, because I love cricket. And I feel, within me, that the St. Frank's eleven is missing a good man."

"I thought you didn't like boasting?" grinned Elliott.

"Really, that is not a boast," I protested.

"You can have five minutes at the wicket here, if you like," said Elliott generously. "We've practically finished for this evening. What do you say?"

I beamed through my spectacles.

"I say thank you—thank you very much," I replied.

"I'll bowl for you," went on Elliott, with a wink at the others.

They chuckled, and I understood why. Elliott was a good batsman, but he was a super-excellent bowler. He was the finest bowler in the Grammarian team. And it was obviously his intention to rip out my middle stump with the first ball. He desired to take me down a peg or two.

"Come on, kid!" he said briskly.

I followed the group across the smooth grass with a feeling of great joy and exultation within me. For the first time since I left St. Frank's in disgrace I was to handle a bat.

To a fellow who loves cricket, and who had been unable to play for weeks, my feelings can be readily understood. And I took hold of the bat which was given to me, and fingered it lovingly.

But when I took my place at the wicket I saw no reason why I should not have my own back upon these sceptics. I took up a position which made everybody grin. I looked about as awkward as a fellow who had never handled a bat in his life before.

"What about your specs?" asked Barlowe.

"Oh, yes," I said, removing them. "Thank you; I had almost forgotten."

"But can you see all right now?"

"Quite well, thank you," I said.

"Play!" yelled Barlowe. "Look out, you ass!"

Elliott was just taking his run, and he sent down a swift ball which was far more deceptive than it looked. It was calculated to send my wicket in every direction. But it didn't.

I swung my bat up quickly.

Clack!

The ball went soaring away to the boundary, low over the ground. And there was a general murmur from the Grammarians. They regarded me with renewed interest, and Elliott was quite surprised.

"That wasn't bad," he said, nodding.

He didn't like being defeated in his design, and the next ball he sent down was one of his very best—a lightning ball which was calculated to defeat the best batsmen.

But I was feeling at the top of my form that evening; I felt that nothing could upset me.

Clack!

Away went the ball again—another boundary. Two or three fellows tried to catch it, but it was just beyond their reach.

"I say," exclaimed Barlowe, "you can handle that bat like a County man! Have you played cricket a lot?"

"A fair amount, thank you," I replied meekly.

"Well, I must say that you're a nut!" said Barlowe admiringly. "You'll excuse my frankness, but you certainly don't look a cricketer. And even now I can't believe that those two hits weren't flukes!"

"Fool's luck!" murmured the Grammarians.

"Thank you!" I said, beaming.

The junior flushed, and turned away to hide his confusion.

Then Elliott got busy again. He did his utmost. He used every style of bowling with which he was acquainted. And I proceeded to knock the leather all over the field. Every hit was a success. After I had been going for about ten minutes the fieldsmen were decidedly puffed.

And the Grammarians—and the Helmford skipper—were no longer in doubt regarding my ability as a batsman.

"My dear chap, you're as hot as mustard; you're pepper!" declared Barlowe enthusiastically. "Ye gods! And you're not in the eleven! I breathe again!"

"How's that?" asked Elliott.

"Why, I'm going to take my team to meet St. Frank's on Saturday," said Barlowe. "If D'Albert's playing, I shall have a fit. We shall get the biggest licking of the season!"

"You are flattering!" I murmured. "But I do not think you need have any fear. I can get no chance at St. Frank's."

"But one of these chaps might let the cat out of the bag," said Barlowe, glaring at the Grammarians.

"Not likely," said Elliott. "We've got a fixture with St. Frank's in a week or two, and we'd rather have this phenomenon out of the team. I've never known a batsman like him! He's even better than Nipper used to be!"

Elliott was quite right there. That evening I was in better form than I had ever been before. I simply couldn't help myself. And I had not felt so contented for weeks past.

"Well, I hope we shan't see you on the field—except as a spectator—on Saturday," said Barlowe. "By the way, can you bowl?"

"I think so," I said modestly.

"He thinks so!" gasped Elliott. "That's what he said about his batting!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why not try him?" suggested Barlowe.

"He can try to bowl me if he likes," said Elliott.

I was quite game, for I knew that Elliott was not absolutely strong at the wicket, although, if it came to that, I was prepared to bowl to the best man they could put on the field.

Elliott took his bat, and placed himself on the crease. And I walked easily to the other end of the pitch, and turned.

It is my habit when bowling to give only a short run. Some fellows prefer to execute a war-dance before throwing the ball, but I don't believe in that sort of play, and I don't run half a mile, either.

I took three quick strides, and the leather left my fingers. It shot down the pitch, broke when Elliott was not expecting it to, and neatly took out his middle stump.

I chuckled inwardly, for I had not hoped for such a success.

"Well, I'm hanged!" roared Elliott.

He glared at his wicket dazedly.

"I'm bowled!" he gasped. "Did you see that, you chaps?"

"We did!" grinned Barlowe. "I thought you could bat, old son."

"You—you ass!" yelled Elliott. "You have a try!"

Barlowe took the bat, and set himself sturdily before the wicket. I hoped against hope that I should be able to repeat my first performance, but I did not feel very confident. Luck wouldn't last so long.

But I put all I knew into that ball, and sent it down as cunningly as I could manage. It seemed to go slowly, and Barlowe raised his bat with supreme confidence.

Swish!

His bat whizzed down, but only hit the air. And a crash behind him told its own tale. The stumps were spread-eagled.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Elliott. "I thought you could bat?"

"I thought I could, too!" panted Barlowe. "I—I say! This chap must be a County cricketer in disguise! He looks such a frightful duffer, too! Did you see that ball he sent down?"

"A jolly easy one!" said one of the others.

"Was it!" roared Barlowe. "It looked easy, but the giddy thing went off at right angles when I wanted to hit it, and then twisted back again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Barlowe's description was somewhat comic, and I joined in the laugh. The Grammarians collected round me, and I found myself eyed from all sides, just as though I were some extraordinary specimen of zoology.

"And he's not in the eleven!" said Elliott, with a deep breath. "Look here! I don't believe it! This chap is trying to bluff us, just so that we shall get a shock when we turn up at St. Frank's!"

"But, really, I give you my word of honour that I'm not in the eleven," I protested.

"Not in the Junior Eleven?" asked Barlowe suspiciously.

"Not in any eleven."

"They must be mad—stark dotty!" declared Elliott.

"You see, they wouldn't even give me a trial," I explained. "They regard me as you regarded me when I first came on the field—"

"As we regarded you?" interrupted Elliott.

"Precisely!" I said, nodding. "You thought I was quite hopeless, and you would have yelled with laughter at the very thought of my playing cricket, if I had not happened to catch that ball."

"He's right, old man," said Barlowe. "You'd have kicked him off the field but for that catch."

"Perhaps so!" admitted Elliott, looking me up and down.

"And that is exactly what the St. Frank's cricketers do," I said. "I can't even show my—er—"

"Prowess!" said Barlowe. "You've got racks of it!"

"Furthermore, I have no intention of attempting to get myself tried," I went on. "When you bring your men on Saturday, Barlowe, I shall still be regarded as a hopeless duffer."

"Rats!" said the Helmsford man. "You'll be in the eleven by Saturday!"

"I assure you I will not," I replied. "I don't want to be. They have scorned me, and I am somewhat piqued. They will have to find out what I can do for themselves now; I shall certainly not ask again. And you will greatly oblige me, Barlowe, by saying nothing about me when you arrive on Saturday."

Barlowe stared.

"My dear man, do you think I should be such a cross idiot?" he asked blandly. "Do you think I want to commit suicide? Why, if I told De Valerie what you could do before the match, he'd give you a trial, and then we should be kicked to nothing! If you don't say a word, you can rely on me keeping mum."

"Thank you," I said, smiling.

"But why don't you want us to say anything?" went on Barlowe. "That's the question, D'Albert."

"Because— Well, I should prefer not to tell you just at present," I replied smoothly. "I shall be most delighted to see you on Saturday. And please allow me to thank you, Elliott, for your kindness in allowing me to use this excellent ground this evening."

"Don't mention it," said Elliott politely.

"And possibly, when you bring your team over to St. Frank's, I shall have the pleasure of playing against you," I added sweetly.

"Pleasure!" exclaimed the Bannington skipper. "You may think it's a pleasure, but we shall wish you at Timbuctoo!"

"That is extremely charitable of you, I am sure," I smiled; "but I quite understand what you mean. Thank you, again. I must now hasten back, or I shall be late for locking up. I wish you all good-evening!"

And I strode away, leaving the crowd of cricketers looking after me.

"Queer beggar, if you like!" somebody said.

"He may be queer, but he's the No. 1 goods—gilt-edged and hall-marked!" said Barlowe distinctly. "I wish we had a chap like him in our team!"

I waved my hand when I reached the hedge, and every hand was waved in response. I won't deny that I took great pleasure in making such an impression. And as I rode back to St. Frank's I chuckled again and again.

For a plan had entered my head.

I had given De Valerie a fair, honest warning—a warning which he had seen fit to scoff at and ignore. Well, De Valerie wouldn't be able to grumble if I turned the tables on him.

It was my intention to give him a lesson.

CHAPTER V.

A NEAR THING!

TOMMY WATSON looked up from his prep. as I entered Study C.

"Late!" he said briefly.

"Yes, worse luck," I replied. "Reported, too. Still, it can't be helped; and I don't care a fig—not a giddy fig!"

Both Tregellis-West and Watson ceased their work and regarded me with interest.

"Somethin'," said Sir Montie—"somethin'" has put the dear fellow into a frightfully good humour. Tommy, old boy, observe the sparkle in his eye; take note of the flush in his cheeks; look at his amiable grin."

"He's been successful," said Watson. "Starke came in over an hour ago, but Nipper's been up to something else. He must have been following Beckett."

I sat down, and grinned.

"I'd forgotten all about that business," I said.

"Forgotten it?" said Watson, staring.

"Yes!"

"But you've been out on business!"

"I've been playing cricket!" I said calmly.

"Begad! Where?"

"In Bannington," I replied. "I happened to pass the Grammar School playing-fields, and I let myself go. My dear old chaps, I've never played like it before! I simply couldn't do anything wrong! And I'll bet my best Sunday boots I never play like it again!"

"He's dotty!" said Watson. "All this detective business must have turned his giddy brain!"

"You mean it must have turned his brain giddy!" corrected Sir Montie.

"You're both wrong," I said. "But I'll tell you about Starke first. By the way, is that window closed?" I added, looking at the blind.

"No," said Watson.

"Then close it, you chump!" I said quickly. "My hat! We're getting more careless every day! It won't do!"

"Keep your giddy hair on," said Tommy, closing the window.

Sented once more, we discussed matters.

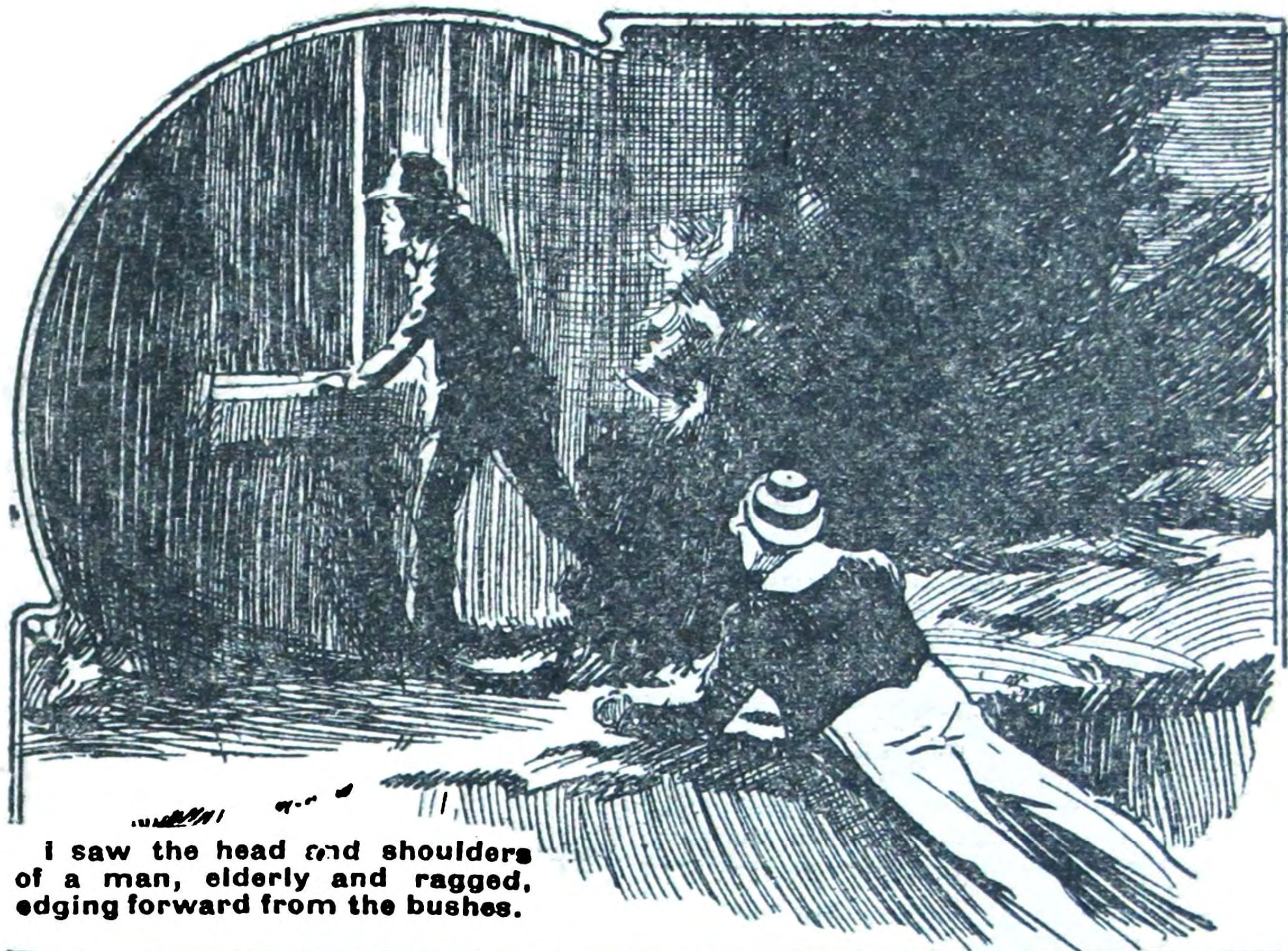
I told my chums precisely what had taken place at the Fox Inn, in Edgemore. They were rather disappointed that my efforts had not been more successful; but they agreed that an advance had been made.

"Pity you didn't hear anything," said Watson. "That old tramp seems to have had all the luck."

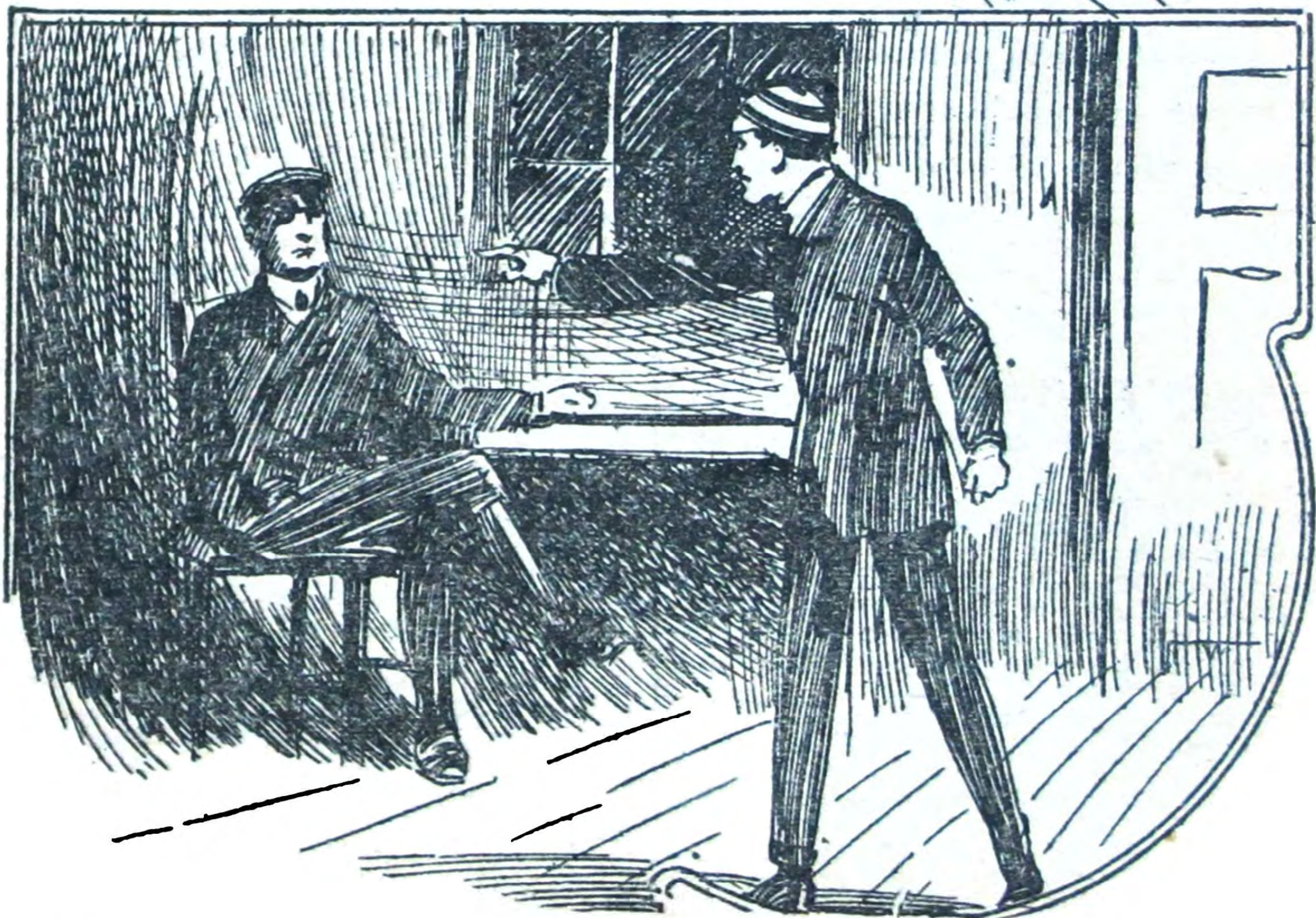
"But, really, my dear fellow, I can't understand why the tramp was there," observed Sir Montie. "What has he got to do with this interestin' little mystery? It seems to me that he has only come in to make it deeper, begad!"

"Well, he certainly is a bit of a problem," I admitted. "And, somehow, I don't think he's an enemy. He was obviously on the track of Starke and Beckett, and that's what I was up to. The chap seems to be a secret ally."

Sir Montie removed his pince-nez, and polished them.



I saw the head and shoulders of a man, elderly and ragged, edging forward from the bushes.



"If you do say anything," hissed Starke menacingly, "you'll be sacked from your job."

"An' Beckett is not like the fellow you encountered in the car the other night?" he inquired.

"No; totally unlike him."

"Hasn't it struck you, dear boy, that the tramp-fellow might be the same man that you encountered before?" asked Montie. "The same fellow in disguise? That would clear things up a bit——"

"By Jingo!" I broke in keenly. "That's not a bad theory, Montie. 'Yes, it's quite likely; it's even probable, in fact. I wish I could get a hint of the man's identity; I wish I could fathom his motive. His presence only makes the mystery more obscure. In fact, without him there's hardly any mystery at all, because we know that Starke was knocked down by Beckett's car."

"Well, let's talk about something else," said Watson. "What's that you were saying about cricket?"

I explained to my chums my little adventure at Bannington. They grinned hugely as I related how I had howled both Barlowe and Elliott first ball, and how I had knocked Elliott's bowling all over the field.

"Of course, I was in extra form," I said. "I don't know why, because I've had no practice lately, but there it is. These things do happen sometimes. In a big match I've felt, now and again, like a real dud, and I've made a rotten show. A cricketer can't always be at his best."

"And you were at your extra best to-night!" grinned Watson. "Oh, you ass, why didn't you send for us? Why weren't we there? I'd have given quids to see the faces of those Grammarians!"

"Barlowe was in a bit of a stew," I went on. "He had an idea that I should be in the eleven on Saturday, when we play Helmford."

"Well, you might be," put in Watson.

"I don't intend to be," I said.

"Rot!" exclaimed Tommy. "Why, I'm going to tell De Valerie all about your stunts in Bannington, and make him promise to try you at the nets. What do you think of that idea?"

"Rotten!" I said calmly.

"Eh?"

"You're going to do nothing of the sort," I went on. "My idea is to——"

"But, my dear man——"

"Dry up! I've had enough of De Valerie's laughs and jeers," I said warmly. "He's a good sort, I know, but he's got it firmly fixed in his head that I'm no good. As D'Albert, I don't look worth a farthing; I know it. At the same time, De Valerie ought to have given me a chance."

"Quite right, dear old boy."

"He didn't give me a chance," I went on grimly. "So I'm going to teach him a lesson. If any cricket skipper deserved one, he does. I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but when I was skipper I was perfectly willing to give anybody a trial. It's the only fair way; you can't tell what a chap can do until you test him. Appearances are nothing."

"The lecturer will now discourse upon cricket in general," grinned Watson.

"I'm not lecturing, you fathead!" I growled. "Facts are facts, and you can't get over 'em. As I said before, I'm going to give De Valerie a lesson, by playing in the Helmford match on Saturday."

"But you just said you wouldn't play!" exclaimed Tommy.

"Against St. Frank's!" I added calmly.

Sir Montie nearly dropped his glasses.

"Begad! Against St. Frank's!" he ejaculated. "You are goin' to play for Helmford?"

"Exactly!"

My chums stared at me open-mouthed.

"You—you silly ass!" gasped Watson. "You couldn't do it!"

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, you'd let down your own eleven——"

"I'll risk that," I said grimly. "And we can easily fix up an extra match with Helmford on a Wednesday afternoon, to equalise things. But on Saturday I mean to give De Valerie an eye-opener. Of course, it's quite possible that I may be howled first ball. Anything can happen in cricket."

"But how are you going to get yourself in the Helmford Eleven?"

"Easily," I replied. "I shall simply offer myself to the Helmford skipper—Barlowe will accept me in a second after what he saw this evening."

"De Valerie won't let you play."

"Oh, yes, he will," I grinned. "He'll be only too pleased to. He thinks I'm a dud, and he'll welcome the idea. And afterwards, as I said before, we'll arrange an extra fixture to square things. I'm so terrifically exasperated by my treatment here that strong action is necessary. De Valerie and the rest of the eleven won't look at me."

"You are quite correct, dear fellow," said Tregellis-West, nodding. "I am beginnin' to think that this plan of yours is the only possible way in which you can secure the recognition you deserve. You are fully justified, begad! An' I wish you luck, old boy."

"And so do I," said Watson; "even though you'll probably rip out my middle stump with the first ball you send down."

I grinned.

"You'll have to take your chance," I said. "But I'm determined on this thing, and I can tell you plainly that I'm looking forward to next Saturday with real delight. You don't know the pleasure it'll give me to take those cackling asses down a dozen pegs or so."

And while this little conversation was proceeding in Study C, another conversation was progressing in the Sixth-Form quarters—in Walter Starke's study, to be exact. He and Kenmore were having a chat.

"Why hasn't Nipper shown himself?" Starke was saying. "Hasn't it struck you, Kenny, that there's something rummy about it? He's been gone for a week or two, and there hasn't been a sign."

"What the deuce did you expect him to do?" asked Kenmore.

"Well, I didn't expect him to remain in obscurity for so long," replied Starke. "He's sacked, but he's at liberty to visit the school when he likes. Yet he hasn't been near the place. He's simply passed out of our existence."

"And a good job, too!" growled Kenmore. "We didn't want the boulder here. He was too warm for us, Starke."

Starke frowned as he sat thinking.

"There's something about it I can't understand," he said. "When Nipper was sacked I expected all sorts of trouble; I expected that he would come down here and attempt to see some of the fellows. But he's done nothing. And when a fellow like Nipper doesn't show himself, it means trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Well, he's probably working in secret," went on Starke. "I tell you, Kenny, I don't like it."

"Well, that's not my fault," said Kenmore.

The two prefects fell into a silence for a time. Then, after a while, Starke glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, by the way, I was going to fetch that new Remove kid," he said. "I want him to do one or two jobs in the study."

"Who—D'Albert?"

"Yes. He agreed to fag for me, you know," said Starke. "He's a quiet fellow, and I'd rather have him than a grubby Third-Former. He won't chatter so much, and I can order him about as I like."

Starke rose to his feet.

"I'll go and fetch him," he added. "Will you be here when I get back?"

"No; I'm going along to the prefects' room," answered Kenmore.

Starke left the study and made his way to the junior quarters.

It was quite true that I had agreed to do odd jobs for the Sixth-Form bully. I didn't care for the idea at all; but I had a motive. There was a method in my madness. Starke was the fellow I was anxious to watch, and by having free access to his study I was able to keep my eye on things. Already I had learned of the appointment between Starke and Beckett because of my fagging duties.

Starke came along the Remove passage, and paused outside Study C.

He was about to enter, when he paused. A low murmur of voices came to his ears, but one voice rose above the rest, and he heard the words distinctly.

"Rats!" it exclaimed. "Don't be an ass, Nipper!"

Walter Starke gave a big start.

"By George!" he exclaimed tensely.

He burst into the study abruptly, and stared round him.

He only saw Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and Algernon Clarence D'Albert. We all looked at him in surprise.

"Don't you know what knuckles are for, Starke?" asked Watson sarcastically.

The prefect was somewhat confused.

"Didn't I hear you talking to Nipper, Watson?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you heard!" said Tommy tartly. "But if a fellow listens outside the study door, he'll probably hear lots of things he isn't supposed to!"

"You cheeky young sweep!" growled Starke. "I heard you—"

"Really, Watson, Starke is scarcely to be blamed," I said mildly. "It is not the first time that you have referred to me as Nipper—doubtless because of the boy who previously shared this study with you. In future I should like you to call me by my own name."

"I can't always remember things!" snapped Watson, taking his cue. "And what if I do call you Nipper? It's not an insult, I suppose?"

"Far from it, I am sure."

"Then why does Starke listen outside our door, and burst in like a whirlwind?" demanded Watson. "Dash it all, Starke, a prefect isn't supposed to charge into a study—"

"That's enough!" snapped the Sixth-Former.

He retired from Study C without carrying out his original intention. And he returned to his own quarters in a thoughtful mood. Certainly he had no suspicion that I, Nipper, had actually been in the study.

And he was prepared to pass over the incident. But Starke had been set thinking; and there was no telling when he would stop. An incident like that, although trivial, could do a great deal of harm.

I was really annoyed.

And after Starke had gone, and when I knew that the coast was clear, I grabbed hold of Tommy Watson and jammed him into the armchair.

"You careless fathead!" I said warmly.

"But look here—"

"You reckless, thoughtless idiot!" I went on. "The whole game might have been up if we hadn't used that whitewash."

"Whitewash!" exclaimed Watson, looking at the ceiling.

"Oh, you dense boulder!" I growled. "If we hadn't thrown dust into Starke's eyes, I mean. He nearly tumbled to the whole thing—but I think we managed to put him off the scent."

"It only shows how necessary it is to be careful at all times," observed Tregellis-West. "If we keep our voices low we are quite safe. But Tommy has a frightful habit of shoutin'."

"He'll shout with pain if he does anything like that again!" I said grimly. "I let you fellows into the secret because I knew I could trust you. But you mustn't overlook the fact that I might be howled out at any minute. And if that happened I should be kicked out of the school, neck and crop. And there would be no readmittance, no matter how hard I tried."

Tommy Watson was rather red in the face.

"I'll be more careful in future," he promised. "But there's no need for you to get into a paddy, D'Albert. How does that suit you? I'll always call you D'Albert in

future—even if we're standing in the middle of Bannington Moor without another soul nearer than five miles!"

"It's the safest way," I said promptly.

And I proceeded with my prep., dismissing the matter.

But I thought about it again afterwards, and wondered if any real harm had been done. Starke was a rotter, but he was cute, too. And I noticed that he gave me a rather straight look when he passed me in the lobby before supper.

Had he guessed anything?

CHAPTER VI.

AGAINST HIS OWN SIDE!

"HERE they come!"

It was Saturday afternoon, and a little crowd of Removeites was collected round the old gateway at St. Frank's. They were waiting for the arrival of the visiting team from Helmsford College.

The afternoon was slightly dull, but warm and fine—a really splendid afternoon for cricket. The absence of the sun was no hardship, for the sun is apt to confuse a fellow when making a tricky catch.

"Give 'em a cheer!"

A good many shouts were raised as the big charabanc—a motor vehicle—rolled into the Triangle. It carried the Helmsford junior eleven, a reserve, and four or five spectators, who had come just for the fun of the thing.

De Valerie, looking very neat in his white flannels and blazer, came hurrying down, and shook hands heartily with Barlowe as the latter jumped to the ground.

"Pleased to see you, old man," he said genially. "We're going to give you a good game, I think. Ripping weather, too. I warn you, we're going to knock spots off your men this afternoon."

Barlowe nodded.

"That's quite likely," he said, looking worried. "We're a man short."

"How's that? Did you only bring ten?"

"I brought twelve—counting myself," said Barlowe. "But some of the silly asses got playing the goat as we came along. Three of 'em fell headlong out of the charabanc when we were going at top speed."

"My hat!"

"Were they killed?"

"Or badly injured?"

The juniors were quite anxious to know.

"They weren't hurt much," replied Barlowe. "Smythe twisted his ankle, and Richards crooked his wrist. Both slight injuries, but the pair of 'em are useless for cricket. We've only got one reserve, so we're a man short."

"That's all right," said De Valerie. "You can borrow one of my men."

Barlowe brightened up.

"That's decent of you," he said. "But, of course, we shall still be a bit weak. Heeketh will take Smythe's place, but Richards is one of my best men. Your reserve won't be up

to his form, De Valerie—not that I'm grumbling, mind. I'm only too glad to get a substitute. But I want you to give me somebody who'll play a square game."

De Valerie grinned.

"You think he'll allow himself to be bowled?" he inquired. "I won't give you a man of that sort, Barlowe. You can have Hubbard, if you like. He's fair, and you can rely upon him to do his best for your side."

"Thanks!" said Barlowe warmly.

The cricketers streamed across the Triangle towards Little Side, carrying their cricket bags. The visitors went to their quarters in the pavilion, and soon emerged in white shoes and flannels.

I was standing some little distance off, alone. I was in Etons, of course, and looked something like a lost lamb. The time was not yet quite ripe for my move. I meant to offer myself in place of Hubbard—and I knew that I should be accepted. But events went better than I had hoped for.

It was not even necessary for me to go forward.

Barlowe gazed across Little Side, and seemed quite pleased with the prospect. His two crooked men were sitting outside the pavilion—both of them looking a bit glum. And I noticed that Barlowe stared in my direction.

I pretended not to notice him, for I didn't want him to nod.

"I say, De Valerie!" called Barlowe.

The Remove skipper, who was chatting with a group of other Helmsford fellows, turned and approached Barlowe.

"Want me?" he asked.

"Yes. Didn't you say that you were going to lend me a chap named Hubbard?" asked Barlowe.

"That's right."

"Well, is there any objection to me choosing somebody else—somebody who isn't a reserve?"

De Valerie stared.

"I wanted to give you somebody who could play cricket," he said. "You can borrow any man you like—any Remove fellow. I don't mind."

"Thanks!" said Barlowe briskly. "Then perhaps you won't object to me playing that fellow over there."

And he nodded towards me.

My heart gave a jump. Barlowe had actually asked De Valerie for my services! I was exultant! My own plan was not even necessary, for Barlowe himself had opened the subject.

De Valerie and some of the others gazed in my direction.

"Which fellow do you mean?" asked De Valerie.

"That boy with the spectacles."

"What!" yelled the Remove skipper.

"D'Albert!"

"Is that his name?" said Barlowe. "Yes; that's the chap. A new fellow here, isn't he?"

"You—you want to borrow D'Albert?" shouted Owen major.

"Exactly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The roar of laughter which went up made me boil inwardly. It was a roar of pure derision. I was steeled more than ever to give these bounders a lesson. I would show the idiots something!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The yell was taken up by the other fellows when the news got round.

"Helmford wants to borrow D'Albert!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Barlowe must be dotty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Barlowe, who knew what he was doing, and who had hardly dared to hope that his request would be granted, remained calm.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked.

"D'Albert's all right, isn't he?"

De Valerie grinned.

"I couldn't do it, old man," he said, to Barlowe's great dismay. "I couldn't play such a trick on you. D'Albert's the biggest duffer in the Remove. He knows as much about cricket as my boot does about flying!"

"How do you know?" asked Barlowe.

"Well, look at him!" said De Valerie.

"Does he look like a cricketer?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, he doesn't," admitted Barlowe. "But haven't you given him a trial?"

"I've got better ways of spending my time," said De Valerie briskly. "You'd better stick to Hubbard, old man——"

"I'd rather have D'Albert, if you don't mind," said Barlowe.

"You'd rather——" De Valerie paused, and he looked grim. "Oh, well, if you'd rather, I won't say any more," he went on.

"But don't accuse me of planting a dud man on you—that's all. You've chosen D'Albert yourself—and you're quite welcome to him!"

"It's all the better for us!" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rather!"

"Don't be such a fathead, Barlowe," put in Owen major. "You'll make yourself a laughing-stock if you include that rank duffer in your eleven. Why, I don't believe he can play marbles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were having a good many laughs at my expense. But the more they laughed the greater was my delight. Nothing better could have happened. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West looked quite calm and innocent; but they, too, were sharing my secret joy.

Any qualms they may have possessed earlier had completely vanished. They were quite anxious to see me play against my own side.

"You're not wanted, Hubby," said Owen major, as Hubbard came up. "Helmford has chosen D'Albert in preference to you."

Hubbard glared.

"Is that true?" he demanded, looking at Barlowe.

"Yes," said the Helmford skipper. "No offence, old man——"

"No offence!" roared Hubbard. "It's a rotten insult! I wouldn't play for your side

now if you begged of me! D'Albert! He'll score a duck's egg—and serve you jolly well right, too!"

Barlowe beckoned to me.

"I say, old man!" he shouted. "Just a word!"

I went forward, looking as helpless as possible, and there were many grins and chuckles.

"Did you want me, please?" I asked timidly.

"Yes," said Barlowe, grinning. "Are you willing to play for my eleven?"

"Oh, but it would hardly be right," I said, shaking my head. "These boys think that I shall make a fool of myself——"

"We know you will!" snapped Hubbard.

"And I shouldn't like to let you down, Barlowe," I went on.

"I'll risk it!" he exclaimed, giving me a quick glare in private. "Don't be an ass, D'Albert. Will you play for us?"

"With pleasure," I replied meekly.

"The pleasure won't be Barlowe's!" grinned Owen major.

I went off to change into flannels—quite a number of fellows were willing to lend me some things. Everybody was grinning, and numbers of Fifth-Formers had casually strolled on to Little Side.

The word had got round that something humorous was to take place, and the Third was there, almost to a man. The fags shrieked when they saw me making for the pavilion.

Everybody thought that Barlowe was a super-idiot to ask for my services; his action could not be understood. But the St. Frank's fellows were only too pleased to agree.

It was so deeply fixed in their minds that I was a rank fool at the game that the very thought of me playing was enough to start a yell.

And when I emerged from the pavilion in flannels a fresh roar went round. I had entered into the spirit of the thing heartily; and I had deliberately chosen some flannels which were much too large for me.

I looked quite ludicrous, and I walked awkwardly. I did not want a soul to guess anything until the game actually started. And then, by Jove, I would make those grins fade away!

De Valerie won the toss, and decided to bat first. And he chose Jack Grey to open the innings with him. They were both excellent men, De Valerie being one of the best batsmen in the Remove.

The Helmford men went into the field, and I was of the opinion that Barlowe himself would bowl the first over. I could hardly reckon a chance right at the beginning. But the Helmford skipper tapped me on the shoulder.

"Care to bowl, old chap?" he asked.

"Really, I should be delighted," I said.

"Go ahead, then!"

He tossed me the leather, and I walked towards the pitch. As I did so I observed the umpires looked surprised; I saw De Valerie and Grey exchange astonished

glances; and I heard a fresh roar of laughter from the pavilion.

"The chap's mad!" gasped Owen major. "He's put D'Albert on to bowl!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The first over, too!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Go it, De Valerie!"

De Valerie nodded, and grinned. It was his intention to open the innings by scoring a boundary at once. He would show his contempt for the outsider who had been chosen to bowl.

But I was unmoved.

I glanced down the pitch, and took De Valerie's measure without much difficulty. He was over-confident. He reckoned that there was no necessity to be careful. And no cricketer ought to get into that frame of mind.

There was slight hush as I walked away from the wicket. I did not take my usual run—for the St. Frank's fellows were familiar with it. I chose a longer run, and then sent the ball down like a shot from a gun.

De Valerie raised his bat. He mentally decided to swipe the leather into the middle of the next hemisphere.

But something went wrong.

De Valerie's bat merely swiped the atmosphere.

Crash!

The middle stump was on the ground, yards away.

"How's that?" yelled Barlowe delightedly.

"Out!" said the umpire.

De Valerie took a big gulp, and looked round him helplessly.

"But—but—I say!" he gasped. "I—I'm bowled, you know!"

"You are—you is!" grinned one of the Helmford men. "How do you like our new man, De Valerie?"

The Remove skipper tucked his bat under his arm and walked towards the pavilion. Scarcely a sound was to be heard. Everybody was looking at me as though dazed. I, the idiot, had bowled the Remove skipper first ball!

"It—it must be a dream!" said Owen major faintly.

"I don't know so much about that," said De Valerie. "That ball was a regular snorter. I didn't see the giddy thing!"

Clapson was sent in to take De Valerie's place, and his luck was not exactly stupendous. For he only managed to score five runs before his wicket went down. I had bowled my second man within five minutes!

Nation went in next, and he scarcely survived the over. He went out with a duck's egg to his credit.

"I say, this is simply frightful!" said De Valerie, alive to the stern reality of the situation. "We're three men out and only five runs up! And D'Albert has bowled the three of us!"

"It's amazing!" said Clapson gloomily.

"We've made a terrible bloomer," exclaimed De Valerie. "We laughed and

jeered at that chap, and he's a living terror! If he bowls like this, what the dickens will he be like when he goes in to bat for Helmford?"

"You silly ass!" growled Christine. "What the dickens did you lend him to Helmford for?"

"You yelled as much as anybody else, anyhow!" snapped De Valerie.

Watson came forward.

"It's your own fault, De Valerie," he said.

"Don't you remember that D'Albert warned you last Tuesday? You refused to give him a trial—you jeered at him—and he told you that you were warned. You simply laughed all the more, and D'Albert can't be blamed for showing you up like this!"

De Valerie nodded.

"Yes, it's my own fault," he admitted. "I've been several kinds of an ass. But who would have thought— Oh, my hat! It seems almost too mad to be true now! Just look at the chap!"

Nearly everybody was looking at me. I seemed to be a hopeless specimen; but my performance was of far more importance than my looks. The feelings of the Removites were chaotic when they remembered that they had actually presented my services to Helmford. And I could have played for St. Frank's if only I had had my chance!

The Remove had expected a fairly decent match with Helmford; but to have all their best men bowled out in succession like this was rather too much of a good thing. However, I was not a magician; I could not wipe out the whole eleven within the space of eleven minutes.

Jack Grey, who was one of the best bats in the team, came to the conclusion that he would have to look alive.

And when Farman joined him as partner things began to liven up.

Grey was alert; and he seized every opportunity. My bowling was useless against him. Again and again he scored a 4, and 2's were relentlessly frequent. Farman, too, was going strong.

The score mounted up steadily to 56, and Grey was responsible for 42 of these runs. After that Farman had a quick succession of lucky hits, and the score mounted to 73. Farman was finally dismissed by a neat throw-in by one of the Helmford men.

"Good man!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, you bounders!"

Watson was next man in, and he gave me a steady look as he passed to the wicket. He didn't want to be dismissed for a duck's egg—so he wisely decided to protect his own wicket while Grey mounted up the runs.

Watson was a stone-waller of the best type. He was never brilliant, but he could make excellent swipes when he felt in the mood. At present he preferred to be careful.

He knew whom he was facing, and he didn't take any risks.

Grey was a stickler, and he scored again and again, while Watson kept his end up. But at last Grey was caught out, and he

carried his bat off amidst a round of hearty cheers.

He had contributed 86 runs to the total of 123—a really fine performance.

Tregellis-West took Grey's place, and my noble chum distinguished himself by scoring 15 runs before he was bowled by me. Sir Montie was very disappointed, for he had hoped to double the score.

Christine made the Helmford fieldmen wake up with a vengeance. Christine was a splendid bat—and he proved it on this occasion. I did my utmost to dismiss him, and so did Barlowe. But Christine only swiped when he saw a safe ball; he never took chances.

Thus, in this way, the total mounted up until it stood at 194. The second century had just been passed, when Christine was bowled by Barlowe. Then the game fizzled out, for the other bats were quickly disposed of. Tommy Watson survived until the last man but one—and he had scored 12 during that time. Not a magnificent total, but he had done well; for he had kept his wicket up while the more brilliant men made the runs.

The innings finally ended with the score at exactly 230.

"Jolly good, too," said Pitt. "Those Helmford chaps will have their work cut out to equal our total. Grey's a wonderful bowler, and he'll soon dispose of the Helmford wickets. We'll win, if you ask me."

"Yes, but how's D'Albert going to shape?" asked De Valerie anxiously. "I hope he won't be hot stuff with the bat—"

"But he's one of our men, really," interrupted Pitt. "I'd like to see him make a century! Good luck to him, I say! This is his game, old man. You've got to admit that."

De Valerie grunted.

"I've got to admit all sorts of things, it seems," he said. "If we win this match with D'Albert against us, what should we have done with him on our side? These Helmford fellows would have been nowhere!"

"Yes, but they've got D'Albert—and we shall have to work like navvies to beat the beggars!" said Pitt grimly. "It's going to be a struggle, my son!"

And De Valerie was quite ready to believe him.

CHAPTER VII.

A SURPRISE FOR ST. FRANK'S.

"**F**EELING fit?" asked Barlowe genially. "I'm splendid, thank you," I said, smiling.

"Think you can make a century?" went on the Helmford skipper.

"I'll try," I replied modestly.

"If you do as well at the batting as you've done with bowling—you'll be worth your weight in gold," said Barlowe. "I don't mind admitting that my team is a bit weak; I was expecting a licking this afternoon."

"And if you win, I shall be the cause?" I asked.

"You'll be the main cause, anyhow."

"And he's playing against his own school," grinned another Helmford fellow. "I say, it's a queer position, you know."

"I am determined to do my best for you," I said quietly. "For the time being I forget that I am a St. Frank's boy. It is my duty to play up for my side—and Helmford is my side this afternoon. I was willing to play for St. Frank's, but I could obtain no chance."

"That's quite right," said Grey, who was standing near. "D'Albert tried his utmost, but De Valerie only grinned at him—we all grinned, in fact. We didn't know he was such hot stuff."

"Well, you've got to pass two hundred and thirty to win," observed Pitt. "I don't think you'll do it—not even with D'Albert. Only one innings each in this game—no time for more. Grey's a keen bowler, and he'll —"

"Just a word with you, my son!"

Handforth came charging through the group. He was looking grim, and he regarded me severely.

"A word with me, Handforth?" I asked mildly.

"Yes—with you!" said Edward Oswald. "What the dickens do you mean to playing against the Remove?"

"Oh, dry up, Handy!" said Pitt. "You know well enough that De Valerie wouldn't give the chap a chance—"

"That's nothing," said Handforth. "Hasn't he got a tongue?"

"Eh?"

"Couldn't he tell us that he could play like this?" roared Handforth.

"Well, he did tell us—"

"What's that?"

"He did tell us, you ass!" grinned Pitt. "Not once, but several times. He explained that he could play cricket—and, instead of listening to him, we yelled with idiotic laughter. D'Albert did everything possible, but we were pig-headed and obstinate."

"Speak for yourself!" snapped Handforth.

"That's what I am doing—and for you, too," said Pitt blandly. "You were worse than anybody, Handforth. You tried to tell D'Albert how to play cricket, and he dotted you on the nose for your trouble!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth retired, beaten.

And shortly afterwards Helmford went in to bat.

The innings was opened by Barlowe and a fellow named Gregory. They were both decent, and they soon settled down. De Valerie, who was in the field, looked rather relieved.

He probably thought that, as I had not opened the innings, I was only moderately good as a batsman.

Gregory received his dismissal at the end of the second over—and the score then stood at 16. I went in to take Gregory's place, and I was watched carefully and anxiously.

This was a vast change, indeed. Instead of grins, I received glances of inquiry and doubt. How should I shape? That was the main question. How long would I last?

I received Grey's bowling at first—and I felt in topping form. The first ball I received I sent away to the boundary—just for luck. And the St. Frank's fellows looked at one another with rather sickly expressions.

"He's going to bring us down," said De Valerie. "He'll make a century off his own giddy bat! What a glorious afternoon we're having!"

"Don't mention it!" said Owen major bitterly.

Clack!

"There he goes again!" groaned Pitt.

It was a three that time, and Barlowe faced the bowler. But in the next over I had another chance, and scored three 4's in succession. I was feeling perfectly "set" and as confident as possible.

Barlowe had the misfortune to be caught out after he had scored 34, and at that time my own total was 43. Two other Helmford players did little else but walk on and walk off again.

Grey's bowling was deadly.

He couldn't touch me, however. He used every trick he knew; he tried every dodge. Then there was some trouble with a Helmford man who persisted in stone-walling.

He didn't even try to score—except an occasional one, in order to give me the bowling. He lasted a full half-hour, and only had 15 runs to his credit. But during that half-hour I had been extremely busy.

The total stood at 142, and of these I had scored 80 off my own bat.

"Oh, he'll make his century!" said De Valerie. "The fellow's a wonder! He's even better than Nipper used to be—and that's saying a tremendous lot! D'Albert's a mountain of strength to any side!"

"And we gave him to Helmford!" groaned Somerton.

"Oh, dry up!"

My score mounted up steadily, and I was as firmly set as ever. 93—95—96. And then a boundary gave me my century.

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, D'Albert!"

"Oh, good man!"

The St. Frank's fellows cheered me lustily. I was playing against them—but they remembered that I should, in future, be playing for them. And this fact greatly tempered their feelings.

"Give us a chance, old man!"

"Ain't you satisfied?"

"Ease up, D'Albert!"

But these remarks were only chaff. Even though I was playing against St. Frank's, everybody was anxious to see me do my best. The last vestige of doubt had gone long since.

I was hot—that fact had been accepted by all.

I noticed that Walter Starke had strolled towards the pavilion, and he was watching the play with affected indifference. But

Starke was watching me, and he turned to Kenmore, who was by his side.

"Queer, how that chap can play," he remarked.

"I don't know about queer," said Kenmore. "It seems that these Remove kids have made a bloomer, though. They've practically given this game to Helmford, the young asses. They ought to have had D'Albert on their side."

"He plays as well as Nipper used to," said Starke slowly.

Kenmore did not notice anything significant in the remark. And even Starke had no definite thought in his mind.

And, meanwhile, the game progressed.

If possible, I wanted to keep my bat throughout the innings. It would be a bigger lesson than ever for the sceptical Remove. It seemed that my wish would be granted. For nobody could get me out.

I dare say I met with great luck that afternoon. At all events, I played a better game than usual. But perhaps this was because I was feeling in the mood for it. I wanted to surprise the natives.

If the Helmford men would last, there was no doubt that we should win. And, although it may seem queer, I wanted to win; I was anxious for the Remove to be beaten.

I should not have been true to my side if I had wished otherwise. Having elected to play for Helmford, it was my duty to play for all I was worth, and to do the best I could.

"Two hundred!" exclaimed Barlowe, as the score appeared on the board. "Oh, we're home! And it's my belief that D'Albert will stick in until we've brought home the victory."

"Pity we can't have him always," said another Helmford man. "The next time we meet St. Frank's we shall have him against us!"

"And lose!" said Barlowe.

For that reason they were all the more anxious to win on this occasion, and the St. Frank's fellows watched the game concernedly. But there was little hope for them.

I was still swiping away with as much vigour as ever, and three 4's in succession brought the score up to 222 with a rush.

"Eight to equalise—nine to win!" said De Valerie. "And they've got two men to play yet—and D'Albert not out!"

"They won't need to play those two men," said Pitt. "We're whacked!"

And they were.

A quick burst towards the finish mounted the score to 228, and after that I sent the leather soaring to the boundary.

232! Helmford had won!

"Hurrah!"

"Oh! Good!"

"Three cheers for D'Albert!"

"One hundred and thirty-four—not out!"

"Hurrah!"

Needless to say, it was the Helmford fellows who shouted so lustily. But the Removites were by no means stinting their praise.

They cheered me to the echo, and I was surrounded by a shouting, excited mob.

"You spoofer!"

"You blessed swindler!"

"Why didn't you tell us what you could do?"

De Valerie pushed his way forward.

"We've lost the match, D'Albert—but I'm hanged if I'm not glad!" he declared heartily.

"I've had my eyes opened. Old man, I want to offer you a humble apology."

I beamed.

"Really, De Valerie, you need not trouble," I said. "I will admit that I was annoyed because of your jeers."

"That's right—pile it on!" grinned Pitt.

"We deserve it!" said De Valerie.

"And it was not a deliberate affair, either," put in Jack Grey. "D'Albert was asked to play, and we can't blame him for seizing his chance, can we? And we were all willing for him to play against us."

"So now we've got it in the neck, we've only got ourselves to blame," went on De Valerie. "D'Albert, I don't know whether you'll care for a place in the Eleven, but it's open to you whenever you like."

"Rather!"

"It is very good of you," I said, chuckling inwardly at the farce of the whole proceeding. "I accept your offer with alacrity, De Valerie."

"Good!"

"Three cheers for D'Albert!"

"Hurrah!"

"And I hope that we shall play Helmford again very shortly," said De Valerie. "Then we shall have you on our side, old son—and we shall win, with your aid."

"Yes, I expect you will," said Barlowe. "But you never know. Cricket's an uncertain game, after all. We shall be jolly glad to meet you on our own ground, De Valerie."

"We'll be there," said the Remove skipper.

"And, by gum, we'll beat you!"

The Remove fellows—and the eleven in particular—were feeling very much inclined to kick themselves. But they knew very well that they had only themselves to blame for what had occurred.

And the ovation I received was really great.

As a new fellow—and a simpleton—I was getting on very decently. But the Removites were beginning to realise that there was not much of the simpleton about me.

I looked the part, but I didn't act up to it.

Being a duffer was rather too dull for me, and I was inclined to risk exposure rather than live a drab existence.

The Helmford fellows were entertained royally before they commenced their journey back.

Barlowe and Gregory and one or two others were visitors in Study M. I had also been invited, with Watson and Tregellis-West. The study, in fact, was packed to suffocation.

The visitors were in great good humour. They were returning to their own school

victorious. But they were compelled to acknowledge that their victory had been made possible by my efforts.

"But how the dickens did you know that D'Albert was so good?" asked De Valerie, as we sat at tea. "That's the point I keep coming up against. How did you know, you bounders?"

"Well, you see, D'Albert happened to be over at Bannington earlier in the week," explained Barlowe, with a grin. "I was there that evening, fixing up a match with Elliott. D'Albert fielded a ball for the Grammarians, and Elliott asked him if he could play."

"He said he could, of course?"

"Naturally!"

"Did you believe him?"

"Hardly," smiled Barlowe. "We thought it was a bit of bluff. But Elliott's a good-humoured chap, and he offered D'Albert a bat, and told him to go to the wickets. Elliott meant to bowl the boulder first ball."

"And I'll bet he swiped it away to the boundary," grinned Watson.

"He did!" said Barlowe. "And after that he gave us an exhibition of what he could really do. We were all staggered when we heard he wasn't in the eleven—and I was jolly glad, I can tell you."

"You deep beggar!" exclaimed De Valerie. "You knew the chap could play like that, and you asked me to lend him to you!"

The Helmford skipper chuckled.

"Well, it was up to you to refuse," he said.

"D'Albert's a member of the eleven now, don't forget," said De Valerie, "and he's not available to be lent out again!"

"I shall be only too pleased to play for St. Frank's in future," I said gently, beaming round. "Now that I have succeeded in getting myself recognised, I am quite satisfied."

"And so are we," grinned Barlowe.

De Valerie was the only fellow who was not satisfied. He could not help repeating his apologies; he was sincerely sorry and genuinely cut up because his own obstinacy had resulted in a lost match.

But the day ended quite merrily for all, and when the Helmford men finally took their departure they did so with warm feelings towards me. They looked forward with some doubt to the return match.

"I don't want to be unkind," said Barlowe, grinning, as he stepped into the charabanc, "but when you bring your team to Helmford, De Valerie, I hope that D'Albert is suffering from a sprained wrist!"

The juniors chuckled, and I smiled at that tribute to my form. At last I found myself alone with Tregellis-West and Watson in Study C, and they regarded me with beaming faces.

"Well, are you satisfied?" demanded Tommy.

"Quite," I said.

"You've lost us a first-class match——"

"Rats!" I interrupted. "De Valerie lost it. I offered to play, and he wouldn't have

me And De Valerie lent me to Helmford. So how do you make out that I lost the match? You didn't expect me to come out with a duck's egg on purpose, did you?"

"Dear boy, you did the only thing possible," declared Sir Montie. "You are gettin' on famously. But how long will it last? It seems to me that as soon as you have made a name for yourself as D'Albert—well, begad, D'Albert will pass into oblivion. You'll be yourself again."

I looked serious.

"Well, I don't think the end is far off now," I said thoughtfully. "Within a couple of weeks I hope to get Starke in a knot, and I want to let the whole school know that I'm Nipper—and that I'm innocent. I'll do the trick before the end of term, anyhow!"

"That's not so very long," remarked Watson. "You'll have to buck up, my son. And what's the next move in the little game?"

I sat down and considered matters.

"Well, I'm not quite sure," I replied. "Perhaps I shall try to get hold of Beckett—I don't know yet. Things need thinking over. You can bet your boots, though, that I sha'n't allow things to rest."

And I was quite serious when I said that. I did not know that before very long I should find my plans rudely and violently upset—that I should, in fact, be in grave danger of utter exposure. But that episode is quite separate in itself, and must be related separately.

So that's where I'll leave matters just at present.

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

ALAN CARNE, a young Britisher captured by the Germans in East Africa, is cast out at the end of the War, to wander in the jungle. He is joined by a Hottentot servant named

JAN SWART. After a few days of hardship they fall in with

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums determine to find this mysterious house. On the way Dick slips and falls into a river. He floats down stream and manages to make a landing. After walking for some hours he hears voices. He has unwittingly walked into an Arab camp, and the Arab leader is Tib Mohammed, the noted slave dealer. A girl called Lorna has also been captured, and in view of the sentry the two have a talk together. She tells him of a man named Taverner, whom her father wished her to marry, against her wish. Later on she is rescued, but Dick is recaptured. Dick saves Tib Mohammed's life, and thus his own is spared. He makes a daring escape and rejoins Alan Carne and his party. Eventually they decide to trek north in search of the hidden valley.

(Now read on.)

THEIR PURSUERS DECEIVED.

SELBY informed Rembo of the plan as to the proposed march, but there was no argument with him or with the other natives. They were so frightened by the disaster that had fallen upon them, so much in fear of the slavers, that they did not raise any objection.

There was no delay. The Arabs could not be far distant, though to the north the silence was unbroken. What luggage had not been destroyed was shouldered, and when the little party had pressed to the south for a couple of hundred yards, seek-

ing for an outlet from the gorge, they came to a narrow cleft in one side of the gorge.

They ascended it in single file, toiling up a steep slope of loose stones, on which they left no footprints, to the borders of the forest above. At his own suggestion the Hottentot remained here in hiding, to see if the slavers should pass by. The others climbed still higher, following a wooded ravine; and when they had pushed on for a mile across the level, at a leisurely pace, Jan overtook them.

"It is well, baas," he said. "I waited till I saw them."

"The Arabs have gone by?" asked Alan.

"Yes; they went past very quickly, with their guns in their hands, talking to themselves."

"They were not looking for our tracks, Jan?"

"No, baas; they did not turn their eyes to right or left. They think we are ahead of them, fleeing to the south."

It was good news. The slavers had been deceived, and, knowing the fugitives to be still in considerable force, it was not likely that they would pursue them, even if they should discover their trail as they were returning along the gorge.

"That's fine!" said Dick. "I guess we won't have any more trouble with Tib Mohammed and his band. At least, not in this part of the country."

"I should think not," Alan agreed. "We needn't worry about them."

The headman spoke to several of the natives, and turned to the young American.

"When we get to the big river, Bhagwan," he inquired, "will we march back?"

Dick hesitated for a moment.

"No, Rembo, we are going farther than that," he imprudently replied.

He gave the word to advance, and as he led the way on through the dense forest, with Alan by his side, he told him the whole story of his thrilling adventures, and repeated all that he had learned from his conversation with Lorna Ferguson.

DESERTED.

ALL of that day, with one short stop for food, the safari travelled steadily through a vast, primeval jungle, in which they saw no signs of human inhabitants. With the exception of Dick, they had had no sleep at all on the previous night, and they were dead tired, exhausted by the long march when, in the dusk of the evening, they halted in a nest of boulders, close to a pool of brackish water.

They decided to camp here, as it was not a drinking-place for wild beasts, there being no pugs or hoof-prints visible in the mire at the edge of the pool.

It was the Hottentot who gathered a quantity of wood and started a fire. His companions were indifferent to that precaution.

"We won't post a sentry," said Dick. "If we did, the fellow wouldn't stay awake. And what would be the use, anyway? We have crossed a lot of hard and stony ground, and the Arabs couldn't have held to our trail."

"No, they're not skilled in tracking, as are some of the African tribes down in Rhodesia," Alan assented. "I don't believe we have anything to fear from them."

"Nor do I, Carne. Tib Mohammed's head is too full of the mysterious valley and the diamonds to bother about us. I wish he hadn't seen the necklace of uncut stones Lorna Ferguson was wearing."

"You told me he was keen on finding the valley before, Selby."

"Yes, that's right. And the three men he sent up the Bana River know where the entrance to it is, for they saw the girl slip out in her canoe. But don't worry, Carne. You can bet that Mr. Ferguson will be on his guard against an attack, after what has happened."

The subject was dropped for the present, while the evening meal was prepared and eaten. And when the weary natives had replenished the fire and were lying around it the two lads crept into a grassy nook amongst the big boulders and sat there wrapped in their blankets, with Jan squatted at their feet.

The night fell dark and chill, and a lion roared in the distance. The tale that had been told to Alan during the day had made a deep impression on him. He was silent for a time, a sombre look on his face. And Dick, gazing at him curiously, divined his thoughts.

"I don't want to be inquisitive," he said awkwardly, "but are those people who live in the hidden valley the ones you imagined they might be?"

"I don't know," Alan replied, shaking his head. "I'm still in some doubt."

"The name of Ferguson isn't familiar to you, then?"

"No, I never knew anybody of that name, or of the name of Taverner either."

"And what of the girl's name, Carne?"

"That may be only a coincidence. I can't tell."

"Lorna Ferguson said she had never heard of you."

"That's what makes me think I am wrong, Selby. And yet, even if my suspicions are right, and——"

Alan checked himself, leaving the sentence unfinished, and stared into vacancy again with knit brows.

"Right or wrong, I mean to reach the hidden valley at any cost," he resumed.

"You are not more set on it than I am," Dick declared. "I'm thinking of the girl. I wish you had seen her. By George, she's a beauty! We've got to prevent her from being forced to marry that scoundrel Taverner, who hounded John Hammond to his death. I told you Lorna's father had no knowledge of that, didn't I?"

"Yes, and I was glad to hear it. But it isn't only for the girl's sake that I am so anxious to get to the valley. Mr. Ferguson may need our help if he should be attacked by the Arabs, as very likely he will be."

"Well, Carne, we'll get there one of these days, and just as quickly as we can, for Tib Mohammed won't let any grass grow under his feet. I guess he has diamonds on the brain since he stole that necklace. He knows there must be more stones where they came from."

Alan nodded gravely, and after a pause he and Dick plunged into a discussion of their plans, and of the risks that had to be considered. They judged that Ralph Taverner was travelling back to the hidden valley, in the belief that the safari had perished in the burning jungle. And Tib Mohammed, it was to be presumed, was on the way to his stronghold, with the intention of collecting his whole force of slavers and making a raid on Robert Ferguson's secluded domain.

The lads were confident that they would be able to get there first, however, as they had a good start of the Arabs. One thing they regarded with some uneasiness, and that was the chance of encountering the ferocious Bajangas, whose villages were in the part of the country through which they must pass. But they felt that, with caution, they might avoid that danger.

"I'm not down-hearted about it," said Dick. "Our luck will last, I guess. I hope our niggers don't mutiny before we reach the Bana River. It won't matter so much if they desert us then."

"I'm rather afraid they won't go that far," Alan replied, "since you told them they would be expected to go farther. It was stupid of you, if you don't mind my saying so."

"They took it calmly enough. They've been as meek as donkeys all day."

"A bit too meek for my liking, Selby. I mistrust them. I have an idea that Rembo has been putting mischief into their heads."

"You think they mean to leave us in the lurch, Carne?"

"I think they will give us trouble in a day or so, old chap. We had better have a straight talk with them to-morrow and offer

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them more pay. That may be an inducement to them."

Alan glanced at the recumbent forms slumbering by the fire, and tapped the ashes from his pipe.

"I'm going to turn in," he added, with a drowsy yawn. "Good-night!"

The headman was supposed to have called the lads at the first flush of dawn, but when Alan awoke the golden rim of the sun was peeping above the horizon. He rose to his feet, and when he had glanced around the camp he roused Dick, who jumped up and stared in consternation.

"Not a nigger here!" he exclaimed. "Where the deuce are they?"

"Gone!" said Alan. "They've bunked off to the south in the night."

"So they have! By George, the black imps have scooted! The whole lot of them! Rembo, too! And your scallywag of a Hottentot!"

"No, he wouldn't have deserted us."

"He has, though. We've got to go after them, Carne, and drive them back."

"No use, old chap. They're miles away by now, and they will travel as fast as they can. It's hard luck, but we'll have to make the best of it."

The fire had burnt to a heap of cold ashes. The camp was deserted, and the pile of luggage had sadly dwindled. With an anxious heart, fearing that murder had been done, Alan scoured the surrounding cover, and a shout presently drew Dick to him.

He had found Jan, who was lying beneath a thicket, with his wrists and ankles tied and a strip of cloth bound across his mouth. No harm had been done to him. When he had been released he got to his feet, and told his story in a few words. Awakened by a noise, he had sat up, to find the Wakambas and Swahilis gathered around him.

"They grabbed me, baas, before I could call for help," he continued, in an indignant tone. "They held me by the throat and tied and gagged me, and carried me into the bushes. And then they helped themselves to what they wanted, and went away very quietly, so that you should not hear them. That was hours ago, baas, when it was pitch-dark. I had a bad time of it, for I was afraid a lion would come and eat me."

"Did Rembo give you any message?" asked Alan.

"He spoke in a whisper, baas," the Hottentot replied, "bidding me tell the two Bhagwans that an evil spirit was in them, and that he hoped the cannibal Bajangas would roast them over a slow fire."

Had the treacherous headman been within reach, he would have fared ill at the hands of Dick Selby, who was in a towering rage.

"The black scoundrels!" he cried—"to serve me like this! I'll settle with them! They'll catch it hot when I get to Nairobi! By Jupiter, I've a good mind to go after them!"

He expressed his feelings in some forcible

language, and when he had cooled down a little and realised that it would be folly to give chase to the deserters, he took stock of what remained of his luggage and his weapons.

"The thieving skunks!" he spluttered, in fresh wrath. "They have robbed us of the greater part of the outfit!"

"Here are your rifle and mine, and one for Jan," said Alan, who had kept his temper. "That is something to be thankful for. And we have our revolvers and cartridge-belts."

"And precious little else, Carne. They've carried off all the spare guns, and a lot of other things. Look what they've left us! An axe and a pail, a cake of laundry soap, and a bale of cotton cloth. A tin of soup, two of baked beans, one of coffee, and one of salt."

"Three or four dozen cartridges, Selby. And your medicine-case."

"Yes, thank goodness, that's here! My flask of brandy is in it, and a supply of quinine and permanganate and bandages, and some other stuff which we're pretty sure to need. We're not so badly off, after all—eh, Carne?"

"No, we might be in a much worse plight. We can pull through with what we've got."

The lads glanced at each other and at the rising sun, and were silent for a moment. Each was thinking of the fateful decision they had to make. Were they to alter their plans because the porters had deserted them?

"Are you game for the hidden valley?" said Alan.

"Game to the end," declared Dick.

"Lorna Ferguson needs us, Selby."

"I guess we won't fail her, Carne. That pretty girl shall never be the wife of Ralph Taverner."

Dick flushed hotly as he spoke. Alan looked at him in surprise, and stifled an impulse to smile.

"Are you coming with us, Jan?" he asked.

"Or will you try to overtake the porters? They will let you travel south with them."

"Baas, where you go I will go too," the Hottentot replied. "I have told you so before."

"Good talk!" said Dick. "And now for the Bana."

The pail and the bale of cloth were left behind. Jan and the lads shared the other things between them, and in cheerful spirits, the distant valley of mystery drawing them like a magnet, they set their faces to the north-west and filed into the cool and shady jungle.

TIB MOHAMMED AND THE BAJANGAS AGAIN.

EARLY one morning, six or seven weeks after Rembo and his companions had fled to the south, Dick Selby and Alan Carne were sitting on the grassy scarp of a slope that dipped down to a running

(Continued overleaf.)

brook. They had finished their breakfast, such as it was. The Hottentot was busily cleaning the guns, and Dick had just handed his Zeiss binoculars to Alan, who had lifted them to his eyes and was gazing steadily through them.

They were focussed to the north, where was something that held the lad's interest.

In that direction, on a lower level than the scarp, was a flat, wide stretch of jungle, a maze of stunted timber and tangled scrub, that took the semblance of a greenish-brown sea as it faded into the distance. And beyond the jungle, bulking in grand majesty against the sky, was a range of mountains, lofty and precipitous, with a serrated crest-line.

Some of the loftier peaks were capped with snow, and here and there, below the tops of them, the range was gashed and scarred with black patches that were clefts or ravines.

On the higher level to southward, behind the scarp, rolled a great forest of mighty trees and dense vegetation, and swampy pools; a damp, dark wilderness where marvellous orchids bloomed, and at noonday was the purple gloom of twilight, and there reigned always the silence of death.

"You're right," said Alan, as he took the glasses from his eyes. "I can't see any pass through those mountains—at least, not on the lower slopes; and they are so steep that I doubt if we'll be able to climb up to the clefts that look like black streaks. There is

no end to the range, either. East and west it melts into the horizon."

"Well, we've got to get over somehow," Dick replied, "for the Bana River is on the other side."

"Yes; and probably just beyond the range."

"I should think so, Carne, though John Hammond didn't speak of the mountains. I wonder how far from us they are?"

"About fifteen miles, I imagine. And yet it may be more than that, for the clear air makes distances deceptive."

Dick nodded.

"Twenty miles will be nearer the mark," he said. "By the way, we ought to be approaching the country of the Bajangas, unless we have missed it."

"Possibly we have," Alan answered. "Or perhaps they live in the jungle yonder."

"By George, that's a cheerful prospect! I have a haunting dread of those black devils."

"We're not likely to fall in with any of them, Selby. Not if we're careful."

Jan squatted by the side of the lads, and for a little time the three were silent and thoughtful, their gaze fixed on the distant peaks.

Day by day during the past weeks they had held to the march, realising as they had not realised before of what boundless, immeasurable magnitude was the African continent.

(To be continued.)

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