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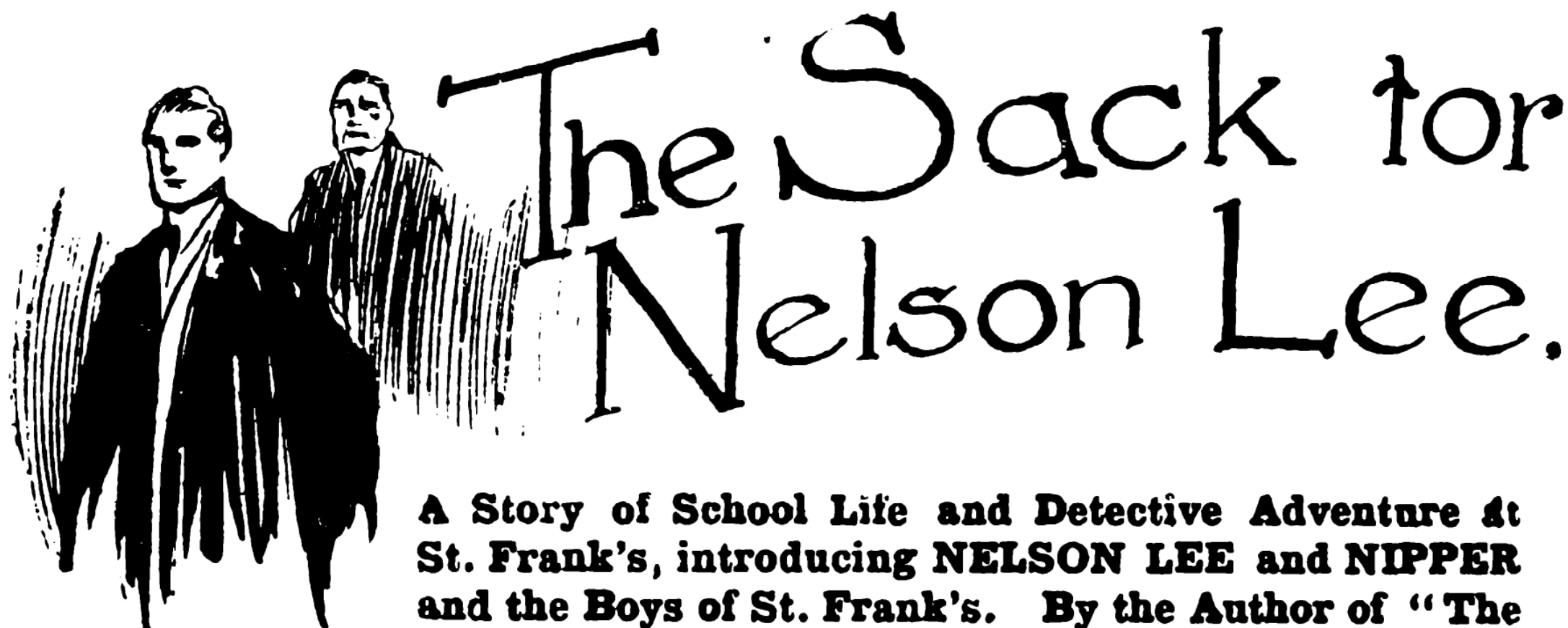
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER 1.

TRouble IN THE AIR.

FENTON, of the Sixth, looked thoughtful.

"Of course, the fellow is impossible. We all know that," he remarked. "But he's our Headmaster, and we've got to remember the fact. If he possesses an ounce of sense he'll drop the whole thing!"

"He won't drop it," said Morrow bitterly.

"Well, he's taken no action yet," went on Fenton. "The affair happened last night, old man, and you were supposed to report this morning, weren't you?"

"Exactly!" said the other Sixth-Former. "Report for a flogging! Great Scott! The man must be mad! Does he think that a prefect can be flogged as easily as a kid in the Remove?"

"It seems like it," said Fenton.

The captain of St. Frank's smiled slightly, and Morrow grunted. The two Sixth-Formers were in their study, and the October sunshine was pouring in at the window quite brilliantly.

St. Frank's looked spick and span, inside and out. The decorators had been busy of late, and the whole school was wearing a clean, brand-new appearance. All the boys, after several weeks in London, had returned to the old school, to find that many alterations had been made.

The most important of all was concerning Dr. Malcolm Stafford, the Headmaster of St. Frank's. He was enormously popular with the boys, seniors and juniors, and he had gone!

The school Governors had decided that Dr. Stafford was not capable of continuing his duties as Headmaster. General Ord-Clayton was responsible for this. He was the new Chairman of the Governors, and he was a fiery, hot-tempered old man, who had no right to be in such a responsible position.

And he had appointed a new Head—Mr. Howard Martin.

It was this man who had caused such a stir in the school. He was hated and despised by everybody, for Mr. Howard Martin was a bully and a rotter. He had imposed certain restrictions on the boys, which caused them to be on the verge of revolt.

"It's all nonsense!" went on Morrow impatiently. "The Head may think that he can flog a Sixth-Former, but he won't be able to. Do you think I'm going to report myself?"

"No; I don't think you will," said Fenton. "And, what's more, you'll have the support of the whole Sixth if you make a stand. We'll back you up, old man."

"I expect you to—and I'm not presumptuous in saying that," exclaimed Morrow, sitting on the edge of the table. "This chap Martin is just about the limit. He knows no more about

conducting a public school than a rabid dog! All he can do is to snarl and snap and go for everybody bald-headed. He doesn't stop to reason, and he doesn't think. If he lasts a fortnight, it'll surprise me."

"Once a man of that kind gets his foot well in, he needs a bit of shifting," said Fenton grimly. "That's just the trouble, Morrow. He's all powerful, and I'm doubtful if the fellows will stand up for their rights."

Morrow looked determined.

"Well, I'm going to stand up for mine!" he declared. "You know as well as I do that Martin's restrictions are not only needless but ridiculous. He makes an order that none of the juniors shall take food into their studies. They can't even have tea in their studies. Now, as you know, study teas are an institution at St. Frank's; they've been allowed for fifty years. Then this outsider comes along and puts the ban on them, for absolutely no reason."

"I suppose he has got a reason," said Fenton. "He's a new man, and he wants to throw his weight about. He doesn't care for the idea of following in the footsteps of dear old Stafford. He wants to make new tracks for himself."

"He's not going to make them at my expense—that's all!" growled Morrow. "What offence did I commit, anyhow? A crowd of juniors were feeding themselves in the lobby last night. They weren't breaking any rule, and when I found them there, it wasn't my duty to interfere. Yet Martin comes along, gives every fellow two hundred lines, and places the village tuck-shop out of bounds! Not only that, but he deprives me of my prefectship, and orders me to report for a flogging! Me, you know—a Sixth-Former! Hang it all, there's a limit!"

"And you've reached it," said Fenton. "You haven't reported yourself. That's all to the good, old man. If you knuckled under, Martin would crow like the deuce, and he'd be encouraged to continue his rotten games."

A moment or two later the breakfast-bell rang, and the two Sixth-Formers left the study and went along to the dining-hall. Mr. Howard Martin did not appear at breakfast-time. The juniors were in an unusually animated condition. Whispering went on continuously at the Remove table, and the subject of the conversation was the same in every case.

I noticed that Mr. Crowell, the Remove-Form master, was more lenient than was customary with him. Perhaps he realised that we had excellent cause for being indignant. The fellows on every side of me partook of breakfast hungrily, for there had been no supper the previous evening.

Mr. Martin had given orders that the food should be plainer, and there was plenty of evidence at the breakfast-table that his orders had been carried out, and the juniors were naturally incensed.

This, on the top of the village tuck-shop ban, made everybody hot with indignation. But what could be done? Mr. Martin was the Headmaster, and there was no appeal beyond him.

Just before breakfast was finished, it was announced that the whole school was to assemble in Big Hall. Nobody knew why, and there was a good deal of speculation on the subject.

"Some more of the Head's rotten restrictions, I suppose," remarked Watson, with a grunt of disgust.

"Begad! Surely not, old boy!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I don't think we are capable of standin' any further restrictions. If things go on at this rate, St. Frank's will be like a bally prison. It will, really!"

"If things go on at this rate," I said grimly, "Martin will find himself in a bit of a mess. He can go to a certain point, but not beyond. If he is foolish enough to overstep the mark—well, there'll be trouble."

"There's trouble in the air now," put in Handforth, who was standing near by. "I can give you my word I'm not going to put up with Martin's humbug for long. My idea is to make a stand —"

"Yes, we know all about your ideas, Handy," I put in. "You're too ram-headed—that's your trouble. But we'd better buck up and get into Big Hall, or we shall have a prefect on our track, and that'll mean a thousand lines each!" I added ironically.

In less than five minutes Big Hall was crowded with curious, wondering fellows, and Mr. Howard Martin was not long in making his appearance. He stood eyeing the school as though he were a despot king of ancient times eyeing his serfs.

"It is not my intention to detain you long, boys," he said at length. "I've called you together because it is my will

that you should witness the punishment of a disobedient young rascal who has been foolish enough to ignore my orders. I am referring to Morrow, of the Sixth Form."

There was a general murmur of astonishment, and all eyes were fixed upon Morrow.

The ex-prefect was slightly pale, but quite calm.

"As some of you are fully aware," went on the Head, "I ordered Morrow to report to me for a flogging. He has failed to do so, and I am now about to administer the punishment he deserves. The wretched youth was insolent beyond description, and were I a severe man I would expel him forthwith! But, in consideration of the fact that he is a member of the Sixth Form, I am inclined to be lenient. His punishment will be severe, but I shall allow him to remain in the school."

The school remained silent.

"Morrow," said Mr. Martin coldly, "stand forward!"

Morrow remained perfectly still.

"Oh, good!" murmured Handforth.

"Defy him! Ignore the beast!"

"Stick to your guns, Morrow!"

"Don't take any notice!"

Many juniors gave unnecessary advice.

"Silence!" roared the Head. "If there is any further speaking over there I will detain the whole school for a week! Morrow, did you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," said Morrow.

"Then why have you not stepped forward?" demanded Mr. Martin.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Morrow steadily.

"Eh? What—what—— Good gracious!" ejaculated the Head. "You have the audacity to question me! Stand forward at once, you insolent young dog!"

The ex-prefect remained in his place.

"Do you mean to flog me?" he asked.

"Yes, I do!" roared the Head. "I intend to flog you with the utmost severity! I intend to flog you until you scream for mercy! Stand forward this instant, Morrow! I shall not order you to do so again!"

Morrow nodded.

"That's just as well," he said, "because I sha'n't take any notice!"

The Head nearly staggered, and the juniors danced with excitement.

"Oh, good man!"

"That's the stuff, Morrow!"

"Keep it up!"

"Don't be afraid of the rotter!"

Mr. Martin strode forward to the edge of the platform.

"Very well!" he raved. "I will soon deal with this obstinacy, you impertinent young puppy! You seem to forget that I am your Headmaster!"

"And you seem to forget that I am a Sixth Former!" shouted Morrow hotly.

"I'm not a kid! I'm not going to be flogged before the whole school just because you order it! If I'd done something to deserve punishment, I wouldn't make a fuss; but I've done nothing at all!"

"Silence!" thundered the Head. "How—how dare you! Are you coming upon this platform, Morrow, or not?"

"I'm not!" snapped Morrow.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Morrow!"

"Fenton!" screamed Mr. Martin. "Fenton—Conroy—major—Wilson—Jenson! Seize Morrow and bring him upon this platform! Do you hear me, boys? Seize that young hound and bring him here!"

The four prefects were rather taken aback, but only for a moment.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Fenton quietly.

"What?" shouted the Head. "What did you say, Fenton?"

"It can't be done, sir—that's all," said Fenton. "I am captain of the school, and I am expected to give the other fellows a good example. But I should be untrue to myself, and untrue to the Sixth, if I helped you to humiliate Morrow before the whole school."

The Head clenched his fists.

"Do—do you mean that you refuse to obey my order?" he asked dangerously.

"If you like to put it that way—yes!" said Fenton.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Fenton!"

"Stick to your guns, Morrow!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the Head!"

"Down with tyranny!"

"Are we going to be bullied and trodden underfoot?"

"NO!"

The junior school simply roared, and for a moment all order was abandoned. The Head shouted and raved in vain. The scene was an amazing one.

Mr. Crowell, Mr. Pagett, and other Form-masters succeeded in regaining

order after a few exciting minutes. The Head was still talking, and he was in a towering rage.

"I am amazed, shocked, and astounded!" he shouted. "That the senior boys of this school could be so outrageously insubordinate is appalling. I shall see that the Sixth Form is adequately punished!"

The Sixth looked rebellious.

"Meanwhile, I intend to carry out my original plan," went on the Head grimly. "Morrow, I will give you one more chance to come upon this platform willingly. I warn you that if you refuse force will be applied!"

Morrow took no notice whatever.

"Do you hear me, boy?" thundered Mr. Martin.

"Yes, sir," said Morrow. "But I still stick to my decision."

"Oh!" snarled the Head. "Very well, Morrow—very well! We will see how much success this attitude will bring you. Since you will not move yourself, and since the Sixth Form refuses to shift you, I will attend to the matter personally! I will have you understand that you cannot defy your Headmaster with impunity."

And Mr. Martin, amid a sudden hush, stepped down from the platform, and strode towards the spot where Morrow was standing. His brow was black, and he looked positively murderous.

Morrow was not afraid of him, but Morrow certainly was afraid of being yanked on to the platform like a kid in the Second. The proceeding would be terribly undignified, and the very thought of it appalled the Sixth-Former.

He turned on his heel and walked away before Mr. Martin could reach him. He made straight for the exit.

"Morrow," screamed the Head, "come back!"

Morrow walked on.

"Do you hear me?" roared Mr. Martin. "Come back at once, Morrow!"

The ex-prefect vanished through the doorway.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A tremendous yell of derisive laughter went up, and the sympathies of the whole school were with Morrow. The Head spun round, his face purple with rage. He had made himself look ridiculous before the whole school, and he knew it.

"Silence!" he shouted hoarsely. "Every boy in this hall has witnessed

the utter insubordination of Morrow. The wretched boy will leave the school this very day. He is expelled from this instant!"

"Oh!"

"Shame!"

"Boo-oo-oo!"

A perfect storm of booing and hissing burst out. That decision of the Head's was unpopular. If Morrow had actually committed a sin, and if the Head had been justified in attempting to flog him, his present conduct would have been justly punishable by expulsion. But Morrow had done nothing. He had only had the courage to stand up for his rights and to defy a bully.

And the whole school was with him. If the Head stuck to his decision there would probably be a revolt before the day was out.

But the Sixth Form was taking a hand in the matter. The seniors held a brief, hurried consultation, and then Fenton stepped forward.

"I wish to say something, sir," he exclaimed grimly.

The Head glared at him.

"Well?" he barked. "What do you want?"

"Do I understand, sir, that Morrow is expelled?"

"Yes—he is expelled!"

"He will leave St. Frank's to-day?" asked Fenton.

"I intend to pack him off by the first available train," snarled the Head.

"Very well, sir, I should just like to point out what that decision will involve," said the captain of St. Frank's. "If Morrow goes, every member of the Sixth Form will leave for home by the same train!"

"What?" gasped the Head. "What did you say, Fenton?"

"The Sixth does not intend to see an innocent fellow suffer at your unjust hands," went on Fenton boldly. "If Morrow goes—we go. And you will be left to make your explanations, Mr. Martin, to the school Governors. I fancy it will be a somewhat difficult task!"

Fenton walked out of the Big Hall, and every member of the Sixth followed him. The Head stood still, as though dazed.

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the Sixth!"

"Good old Fenton!"

"If the Sixth goes, we'll go!" yelled Chambers of the Fifth.

"Hurrah!"

"And we'll go, too!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors crowded out of the Big Hall, excited and noisy; and Mr. Howard Martin had ample evidence that he had made a big blunder. If he persisted in his present attitude, the whole school would go home!

So the situation was somewhat interesting

CHAPTER II.

ROUGH ON FATTY.

"IT'S the only thing he could do," said Pitt contemptuously.

"Of course!"

"I'll bet it cost him a bit to climb down," I remarked. "And you can take it from me, my sons, that somebody will catch it hot. The Head isn't likely to let the matter drop completely."

We were gathered round the notice board in the lobby—quite a crowd of us. A half sheet of notepaper was pinned there, and upon it, in the Head's handwriting, were the words: "In consideration of the fact that Arthur Morrow, of the Sixth Form, has hitherto borne an exemplary character, his insubordination of this morning will be overlooked, and he will be permitted to remain in the school. Howard Martin, Headmaster."

"Naturally, he had to make some excuse," remarked Watson scornfully. "The rotter didn't like to say that he was afraid of the consequences. By jingo! There wouldn't have been a chap left at St. Frank's by to-night—if Morrow had been sacked!"

"The Head has just saved his bacon!"

"Yes—at a pretty heavy cost," I put in. "If he had commanded any respect before, he doesn't command any now. Even the kids in the Second despise him. He's proved himself to be as weak as a rat, and a weak man isn't capable of maintaining order in a big school like St. Frank's."

"I don't give him another week," said Handforth.

Jimmy Little, the fat boy of the Remove, looked dismayed.

"Great rissoles!" he ejaculated. "You don't think he'll last a week? How the mutton chop can I last out until next Thursday? I'm starving already—and I shall be skin and bone by that time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, you can laugh!" said Fatty sadly. "You don't know what it is to be hungry!"

He looked quite comical as he stood there—a huge, lumbering bulk of humanity. For a fellow of fifteen, Fatty Little was an appalling size. He wasn't merely fat—he was enormous.

Yet, surprisingly enough, he was quite active when he wanted to be. And nothing could hurt him. Three ordinary juniors could hurl themselves at him with impunity—to Fatty. But the three juniors would probably hurt themselves on the rebound.

"I'm always hungry," went on the fat boy plaintively. "While we were in London it wasn't so bad—I could get all sorts of tuck from the shops, and the school grub was decent, too. But this beast here has cut down our rations, and I'm not allowed a second helping of anything!"

"Hard lines!" I grinned.

"You don't understand," went on Little sadly. "I've got a void inside me which needs filling—but there's nothing to fill it with! And the Head's forbidden us to buy tuck outside. So what can a chap do?"

"It's just fate, old chap," smiled Somerton. "The more you worry, the hungrier you will feel. But if you are really in danger of dying, there's a plum cake in my study, which came this morning—"

"A plum cake!" gasped Fatty, overjoyed.

"Exactly," said the schoolboy duke. "You see, a hamper arrived, and my people generally do things well. De Valerie and Hart and I can easily spare that cake, if you'd like to demolish it."

"Humping pancakes!" said the fat boy. "Lead me to it!"

"Yes, I think that'll be just as well," put in Hart. "If we let you go to the study alone, you'll scoff the whole lot, and we can't spare more than one cake. This way, you land whale!"

Fatty Little followed Hart eagerly,

amid the chuckles of the crowd. The cake proved to be quite a large one, and Fatty's eyes glittered as he grasped it. But just as he was leaving the study, the bell rang for morning lessons.

"That's done it," said Hart. "You'll have to leave it till later on, Fatty. There's no time to eat that cake now."

"Oh, goodness!" groaned Little. "I'm starving, you know. I can't wait until after lessons!"

He took a huge bite, and concealed the cake within his jacket. It was still there when he entered the Remove Form-room, and a moment or two later it reposed in his desk.

Fatty was looking quite happy. He intended to demolish the whole of that cake before the first lesson was over—Mr. Crowell or no Mr. Crowell. And the master of the Remove was not a hard man, usually. He would probably wink at the fact if he happened to spot Fatty's jaws working overtime.

"Really, my good Little, I must advise you not to partake of eatables at such a time as this," murmured Nicodemus Trotwood, who sat next to the fat boy—and who shared the same study with him.

Fatty Little closed his desk, after taking a big bite of the cake.

"I'm starving!" he mumbled. "I must have something to keep body and soul together. I sha'n't be spotted, Trotty."

"I sincerely trust not, at all events," said Nicodemus.

A moment later Mr. Crowell entered the room. He gazed round with his usual comprehensive glance, and everybody looked bright and alert. It was just as well to be attentive when Mr. Crowell first appeared.

"I hope, boys, that everything will go smoothly this morning," said the Form-master pleasantly. "You were somewhat troublesome in Big Hall not long ago—but you must be attentive now. No noise, remember."

"We were only backing up Morrow, sir," said Handforth.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Crowell. "Quite so, Handforth. Morrow, I am pleased to know, is to remain with us. It would have been hard for him to leave the school upon such a slight offence. The least said the better. We will confine ourselves to the work in hand."

Mr. Crowell adjusted his glasses, and looked round. His gaze roved over the boys until it finally rested on the bulky figure of Fatty Little. And there it stopped for a moment or two.

"Are you eating, Little?" asked Mr. Crowell abruptly.

The fat boy swallowed convulsively.

"Eat—eating, sir?" he gulped. "No—not at all, sir."

"I am afraid that is only half truthful, Little," said Mr. Crowell. "You may not be eating now, but you were a moment ago. No doubt you have a large appetite—an appetite which befits such a frame as yours—but you must remember that this apartment is a Form room, and not a restaurant."

The Form chuckled, as in duty bound. When Mr. Crowell was pleased to become humorous the Remove was called upon to acknowledge it.

"Furthermore, I suspect that your desk contains something more eatable than lesson-books," continued Mr. Crowell drily. "If so, Little, I must beg of you to be so good as to leave it uneaten until the morning's work is concluded. It is quite impossible for you to answer any questions I may put if your mouth is full of—er—a late breakfast!"

Fatty Little was very red, but he was enormously relieved to find that Mr. Crowell did not press him to produce the precious cake. Lessons commenced with the Form and with the master in good humour.

It was jolly decent of Crowell. I considered, to treat Fatty so leniently. On the quiet, the Form-master probably sympathised with the fat boy, and Jimmy was able to take several bites, at favourable opportunities, as the lesson proceeded.

Everything went smoothly for half-an-hour. And then the door opened, and Mr. Howard Martin appeared. He stepped into the Form-room with a rustle of his gown, and Mr. Crowell frowned.

He detested being interrupted in the middle of lessons, and it was an open secret that he greatly disliked the new Head. He laid his book down, and waited for the visitor to speak.

"I am glad to find, Mr. Crowell, that you are able to control these unruly young rascals," said the Head, approvingly.

Mr. Crowell coughed.

"You will pardon me, sir, but you are mistaken if you think that these boys are unruly," he said. "Taking everything into consideration, this form is very well behaved, and I never have any difficulty in maintaining order."

"H'm! That is very good," said the Head. "From what I have seen of the Remove, I was under the impression that the boys were unruly in the extreme. They were certainly disgracefully insubordinate this morning. I have come here now to give them a word of warning."

Mr. Martin faced us with his jaws set firmly.

"I wish you to thoroughly understand, boys, that I will not put up with any further insolence from you," he said grimly. "This morning you took advantage of the fact that the Sixth Form was rebellious. That matter is now settled, and the first junior boy who dares to disobey my commands will be flogged before the whole school. I am determined to have obedience and order. Now that I am Headmaster of St. Frank's there is to be no more slipshod rule."

I stood up in my place.

"May I speak, sir?" I asked.

"What do you want to say?"

"Merely that you have made a mistake, sir," I replied calmly.

"I have made a mistake?" said the Head, glaring. "What do you mean, boy?"

"You've apparently got the idea, sir, that Dr. Stafford was slipshod in his rule," I replied. "That's quite wrong, sir. Dr. Stafford was strict and stern when necessary, and he was always scrupulously fair."

"Hear, hear!"

"That's one for his nob!" murmured Pitt approvingly.

Mr. Martin frowned.

"I don't know whether you intend to be insolent, Nipper, or whether you are merely foolish," he said sharply. "You will, however, write me a hundred lines for having the audacity to address me. Sit down."

"Shame!"

"Tyrant!"

Mr. Martin glared along the forms.

"Who muttered those words?" he shouted angrily. "I am amazed, Mr. Crowell, that you should call this Form well behaved! By what I can see, the

boys are utterly lacking in manners. Your administration is altogether too gentle; you must be more firm with the young dogs!"

"The boys are well mannered with me, sir," said Mr. Crowell tartly; "and I see no reason why you should refer to them in that strange manner. I would remind you that we are in the middle of a lesson——"

"That is sufficient, Mr. Crowell," snapped the Head. "I will stay just as long as I choose—— Boy—boy!"

He broke off, and pointed to Fatty Little.

"Ye-es, sir!" gasped Fatty.

"What was that you put in your mouth a moment ago?" shouted the Head.

"In—in my mouth, sir?"

"Yes! You were eating!"

"Eat—eating, sir?"

"You were!" thundered the Head.

"I—I were, sir!" panted Little. "I—I mean, I was——"

"What were you eating?" demanded Mr. Martin harshly. "Good gracious! This is positively disgusting! A boy eating sweets or some such rubbish in the middle of a lesson! I am amazed, Mr. Crowell!"

The Head strode forward, and grasped the lid of Fatty's desk.

"Really, sir, I—I——" began Little desperately. "I—— Great pancakes!"

The desk was wrenched open, and the Head glared into the interior. He saw the remains of a fairly large plum cake, and a number of crumbs. His brow grew black and ominous.

"A cake!" he ejaculated. "Good heavens! It is far more serious than I supposed. You have the astounding effrontery to eat cake during the morning's lessons, Little! Do you see, Mr. Crowell?"

The Form-master nodded.

"You are fully aware, Little, that you are not allowed to eat food during lessons," he said severely. "Bring that cake here, and do fifty lines for breaking the school regulations!"

"Yes, sir," gasped Little. "Thank you, sir!"

The Head held the fat boy back.

"Oh, so this is an example of your methods, Mr. Crowell," he said sourly. "I am afraid you will not please me. This boy is guilty of a grave breach of

the rules, and you punish him by inflicting fifty lines!"

"An adequate punishment, sir," said Mr. Crowell.

"Nonsense!" shouted the Head. "Little, you will go to my study and wait there for me to return. I intend to cane you severely for this inexcusable offence. Go, boy—go at once!"

"Yes, sir," said Fatty. "But Mr. Crowell has——"

"Do not dare to argue with me, Little!" Mr. Martin. "If you presume to say another word I will make your punishment doubly heavy. Go!"

Fatty Little gave a sigh of resignation, and walked out of the Form-room. As he did so there were several murmurs of sympathy, in spite of the Head's presence, and Handforth—as usual—was reckless.

"Hard lines, Fatty!" he breathed. "The Head's a rotter!"

Handforth's whisper was always like anybody else's shout, and I knew at once that trouble would follow. The leader of Study D never seemed to realise when it was safe to indulge in his stage whispers.

"Mr. Crowell," shouted the Head. "What is the name of that boy?"

He pointed a quivering finger at Edward Oswald.

"Handforth, sir," said Mr. Crowell.

"A moment ago, Handforth, you made a remark which was probably intended to be for ears other than mine," said the Head. "You will write me five hundred lines for unwarrantable impertinence."

Handforth went red with wrath.

"Five hundred lines, sir!" he shouted. "Why, I only whispered——"

"You will write six hundred lines, Handforth," barked the Head.

"But, sir——"

"Seven hundred lines!"

"Great pip!" said Handforth weakly.

"And for that absurd exclamation you will write me an added three hundred lines," said Mr. Martin harshly.

"One more word, Handforth, and I will send you after Little—and you will receive a flogging in addition to your imposition. You will bring those thousand lines to my study before noon to-morrow. I intend to have obedience and discipline in this school!"

For once Handforth was utterly in-

capable of speech. He sat in his place, looking absolutely blank and dazed. He didn't seem to realise that the imposition was really for him.

And he was about to whisper something to McClure, when McClure nudged him, and made a grimace, signifying that he should be silent. For that little tip McClure was awarded two hundred lines.

I had already made up my mind that Mr. Howard Martin was a tyrant and a martinet (quite an unconscious pun, by the way) of the very worst type. There was utterly no sense in arguing with him, for such tactics could only bring disaster. We should have to adopt other measures.

And while the Head was amusing himself by insulting Mr. Crowell, Fatty Little wended his way sadly to Mr. Martin's study. He was thinking far more of the cake than any possible punishment.

The cake had not been finished, and Fatty was quite certain that the remnant would have vanished for ever by the time he got back. His appetite was enormous, and food was his god. He thought in food, his conversation was nearly always connected with food, and he was never happy unless his jaws were at work.

He arrived at the Head's study in a forlorn state of mind. The apartment was quite empty as he closed the door. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, and Fatty turned round abruptly, with a startled expression on his face.

He didn't look at anything in particular; he sniffed the air.

"Holy chickens!" he muttered. "What a glorious niff!"

He couldn't make out what it was, or where it came from. But the study was certainly pervaded by a delicious smell of hot coffee and toast. They were the most distinctive odours in Fatty's nostrils.

He looked round eagerly, with his heart beating fast. And there, upon the Head's desk, stood a tray! What the tray contained was a mystery, for it was covered over by a snowy-white serviette.

"Oh, great bloaters!" murmured Little. "Grub!"

He gazed at the door, and listened. All was silent; there was no indication that the Head was coming. Fatty transferred his attention to the tray, and he licked his lips longingly.

Of course, it was utterly out of the question for him to dream of——! But,

still, he might be able to peep under the serviette. Even the sight of food was better than nothing at all.

The fat boy knew well enough that it would be madness to interfere with that tray—the Head's own tray! But something which he could not control urged him across the room. He tried to hold himself back—he made up his mind to sit down near the door, and he even thought about holding his nose and closing his eyes—so that the smell and spectacle should not affect him.

But he moved onwards in spite of his good resolutions. And, at last, he stood near the tray. His fingers gingerly lifted the serviette—and he gazed upon the array of food.

A neat pile of hot toast stood upon a hot plate, a covered dish concealed something which was probably luscious; a little pot was filled with coffee. It was the Head's breakfast. Fatty Little remembered that Mr. Martin never attended breakfast in the Hall—it was his habit to partake of it in the privacy of his own study, an hour after everybody else had breakfasted.

Probably the Head wanted to be exclusive. And this morning, owing to his visit to the Remove Form-room, he was late. Perhaps he had forgotten his breakfast in the joy of administering impositions.

At any rate, there it was.

Little could not resist the impulse to lift the dish cover. His mouth positively watered when he saw two slices of delicately crisped bacon and several kidneys. The brown gravy looked too good for words.

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Fatty. "This is cruel—heartless! Leaving me alone with—with this! It's more than any ordinary human being can stand! Why doesn't he come? Great haddocks! Why doesn't he come before I give way to temptation?"

The fat boy was actually perspiring with the effort to hold himself in check. He knew well enough that it would be an act of idiocy to interfere with the Head's breakfast.

But what did punishments matter? What if he received a double flogging? The food was what he wanted! And there it was—right in front of his eyes, dazzling him. There it was, blinding him to all thoughts of consequences. He was alone, and there was no sign or sound of anybody coming.

Fatty gave up the unequal fight.

He told himself that the Head would never miss one small square of toast and a mere portion of kidney. He demolished the toast in record time, and that, of course, was his undoing.

Once having started on the job there was no holding him back. With eyes shining with happiness, he sat down and tucked into the Head's breakfast with huge gusto, and with a fine disregard of the punishment to come.

But as he was nearing the end of the feed, troubled thoughts came into his mind. The full enormity of his offences began to dawn upon him. He, a mere junior, sent for punishment, had actually demolished Mr. Howard Martin's specially prepared breakfast. Would the world come to an end when the Head found it out?

But was it necessary for the head to find out at all? Little gave a gasp of hope as an idea occurred to him. He would conceal the tray beneath one of the big armchairs, and when the Head found it out there would be nothing to indicate who had actually "boned" the feed. The Head might suspect, but he would know nothing for certain.

Unhappily for Fatty, he was unable to accomplish this scheme. For as he was working the plate round with the last portion of toast, the door opened. Mr. Howard Martin appeared. He had come up the passage silently, without allowing Fatty a second to conceal the tray.

"Boy!" thundered the Head at last.

"Yeh—yes, sir!" gasped Little, backing away. "I—I was just having a snack, sir, I—I thought it was simply ripping of you to leave this on the table for me—to—to while away the time with——"

"How dare you!" snarled the Head. "You know well enough that that tray contained my breakfast."

"Your—your breakfast, sir," said Fatty weakly.

"You unmitigated young thief!" shouted Mr. Martin violently. "Never in the whole course of my career have I known a boy to be so outrageously wicked! By Heaven! You shall suffer for this, Little."

"I—I'm sorry, sir!"

"Silence!" roared the Head. "You were sent here for punishment and, by thunder, you shall receive it! I will

teach you a lesson that you will not forget until your dying day!"

"I—I——"

"You pilfering glutton!" went on the Head harshly. "Come here!"

Little advanced gingerly. He was not brisk enough for the enraged Head.

Mr. Martin snatched up a cane and dashed at the startled Jimmy like a madman. The next second the cane was rising and falling rapidly and forcibly.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

But if Mr. Martin thought that he would squeeze any yells from Fatty, he was mistaken. It was like beating a balloon. Fatty was hurt undoubtedly—but his great bulk enabled him to withstand the flogging without flinching.

He received a truly terrible "welting"—a punishment such as Dr. Stafford had never dreamed of inflicting upon a boy. And Fatty Little stood it all without a murmur. He was not the kind of fellow to snivel.

"There!" panted the Head, at last. "That will make you realise that I am in earnest, Little!"

"Yes, sir," gasped Fatty. "I—I'm awfully sorry, sir. I didn't really mean to touch your brekker—but it was so jolly tempting, you know. I've had a few swishings in my time, but this beats all of 'em!"

The Head glared at his victim furiously. It aggravated him to find that Little was still capable of ordinary conversation; he had intended flogging the boy until he howled for mercy.

"It seems that your punishment is not sufficient," snarled the Head. "Your body is grossly fat, and you do not feel the cane——"

"I felt it every time, sir!" said Little, rubbing himself ruefully. "And even if I am a bit big, you needn't rub it in! May I go now, sir?"

The Head laughed fiercely.

"No, you may not!" he exclaimed. "You will not return to your Form room—but you will come with me. It is my intention to drive this lesson home fully. You will not dare to pilfer food again. Follow me!"

Fatty wondered what was coming. He was racked with pain, for his body was sore all over. He seemed quite calm and amiable—but, inwardly, he was boiling with rage and disgust. Mr. Martin had proved himself to be a brute and a cur.

They passed out of the study, went along the passage, and then up the stairs. Arriving at the first landing, the Head led the way to the narrow staircase which led up into the old tower of the Ancient House.

At the top of the staircase stood a massive oaken door, provided with a heavy lock and a bolt—the bolts being provided with padlocks. The place had been used, countless years since, as a kind of prison—long before the Ancient House had been part of a big public school.

The room beyond the heavy door was only a small stone place quite bare and chill. The windows were mere slits, and there was no escape from that grim tower. Into this cold apartment Fatty was thrust.

"And you will stay here, you young thief, for twenty-four hours," said Mr. Martin, with great relish. "Do you understand, Little? I intend to keep you here until this time to-morrow—and you will receive neither food nor drink during the period of your confinement. Perhaps it will be a lesson to you!"

Fatty Little went pale with dismay.

"But sir," he panted. "You—you don't mean——"

But the Head turned his back, and strode out.

Slam! Click!

The door closed heavily, and the key turned in the lock.

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CHAPTER III.

NOT QUITE STARVING.

"SHAME!"

"It's disgraceful!"

"Inhuman!"

"The man's a brute!"

"A beast!"

"A caddish tyrant!"

A crowd in the Remove common room did not stint themselves in their choice of words condemning Mr. Howard Martin. The news had leaked out that Jimmy Little had been sentenced to twenty-four hours confinement in the old tower, without food or water.

I flatly refused to believe the statement when it was first told to me, after morning lessons. Other fellows were equally vehement in scouting the very

idea. But a visit to the tower stairway was sufficient.

For, at the top, Jesson of the Sixth was on guard.

Jesson was a prefect—and a cad. The Head probably knew that he could rely upon the rotter of the Sixth to carry out his harsh instructions. Jesson would not allow any of the juniors to interfere with the prisoner.

"A Hun—that's what he is!" declared Handforth. "I don't see why we should stand it. There's no reason why this school should be turned into a prison! We're not going to put up with any rot from a beast like Martin!"

"Oh, chuck it!" snapped Fullwood sourly. "I suppose you heard why the fat ass was locked up? He was fool enough to scoff the Head's brekker——"

"He was dotty to do that, of course," said Handforth. "But that's no reason why he should be locked in a cold tower for a whole day and a night! It's—it's inhuman. No decent man would do such a thing."

"Well, it doesn't interest me," said Fullwood. "Little can look after himself for all I care. Rats to him—Yaroooh!"

Smack!

"That's for being a rotter!" said Handforth warmly. "That's for being a cad!"—smack!—"that's for being a supporter of the Head!"—smack!

"You--you fool!" panted Fullwood, backing away. "Ow! You dotty mad-man! Ow-yow!"

Fullwood retired from the common-room, rather sore. And the fellows continued to call the Head everything that was uncomplimentary. But I knew that all this talk was useless.

"You won't make Fatty's position any better by calling the Head names," I said. "What we've got to do is to give Fatty some assistance. I don't exactly know how it's going to be done, but we shall probably think of something if we put our heads together."

"That is exactly what I was thinking, my good Nipper," said Nicodemus Trotwood, in his quiet way. "As you know, Fatty shares Study L with my dear brother Cornelius and myself—and we are naturally deeply concerned regarding him. Is that not so, Cornelius? Are we not greatly worried?"

Cornelius Trotwood, the deaf junior, beamed and nodded.

"That is not surprising, my dear Nicodemus," he said. "Handforth was very violent, and one would expect Fullwood's movements to be hurried."

"We weren't speaking about Fullwood, you deaf ass!" grinned Pitt. "We were talking about Fatty Little up in the tower."

"Sour!" ejaculated Cornelius. "But I don't understand——"

"I said the tower!" roared Pitt.

"Oh! Now I realise what you mean——"

"We're trying to think of some way to help poor old Fatty," I said. "But you'd better not join in the discussion, Corny, or it'll last until Fatty is due to be released!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is no reason why you should insult me!" said Cornelius coldly.

"Insult you!" I roared, gasping.

"You called me a beast——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, let's give him up," I said, with a sigh. "If you want to discuss this subject, Nicky, you'd better come along with me to Study C. I've got an idea that might turn out decent. The main thing is to get some grub to old Fatty—and I think we shall do it."

Nicodemus Trotwood followed me out of the common-room, and a few minutes later we were in Study C—Tommy Watson, and Sir Montie Tregellis-West with us. I closed the door, and grinned.

"The problem," I said, "is easy—as easy as falling off a form!"

"I really fail to understand," said Trotwood. "You know well enough that Jesson is on guard. You also know that the door is bolted and locked. Even if we trick Jesson away, we cannot open the door——"

"We sha'n't trick Jesson away," I said. "And we sha'n't even trouble to open the door."

"And yet we shall take food to Fatty?"

"Yes."

"Ah! You mean by a window——"

"No, I don't mean by a window," I said. "The trick can be performed with the greatest of ease, my son. I don't happen to be a magician, but I'll guarantee that we can get food up to Fatty without troubling about the window, and without interfering with the door."

Nicodemus shook his head.

"It is beyond me," he confessed—"and I am quite sure that you are attempting to joke with me, Nipper."

"Begad! I'm frightfully puzzled myself, dear old boy," said Sir Montie.

"Puzzled—you?" I said severely. "Montie, I'm surprised!"

"Really, dear fellow——"

"Where is your memory?" I asked sternly.

"I'm sorry, Nipper boy, but I'm afraid I must have mislaid it," apologised Montie. "At all events, I've lost that portion of my memory which I am at present in need of. I can't think how this trick is to be done—I can't really."

"What about the secret passage?" I asked, in a whisper.

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson. "Oh, my hat!"

"Begad! The secret passage!" ejaculated Sir Montie. "You are quite right, old boy. I am shockingly forgetful—considerin' that I have been down that passage myself. What a really rippin' idea!"

Trotwood shook his head helplessly.

"I am still quite fogged," he said. "You may think me dense, but I don't know what you mean by a secret passage, Nipper. It sounds to me like so much nonsense—but you are not the kind of fellow to talk out of your hat."

"Thanks," I said calmly. "The fact is, Trotty, we three in this study know a secret which has been kept practically to ourselves. Not another soul in the school knows anything about it—and we only found out by accident, one rainy afternoon."

"Found out what?"

"This!" I replied. "Up in that old tower is a secret doorway—it's absolutely hidden, and looks like a piece of the solid wall. There's a staircase that leads right down to the very basement, with several other secret doors on the way. Now do you catch on?"

Nicodemus looked at us with gleaming eyes.

"Is this really true?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course it is."

"A secret staircase actually exists?"

"Yes."

"Then what a wonderful joke!" said Trotwood, his lean face breaking into a grin. "What a peculiarly strange piece of humour! The Head has locked Fatty in the tower, he has placed a prefect

on guard, and he believes that our stout friend is beyond all aid. And yet, happily enough, we are in a position to assist Fatty absolutely on the quiet."

I nodded.

"That's just it," I said. "Of course, we can't rescue him, and I doubt if he could squeeze himself down the secret stairway, in any case. But we can take him a supply of grub, and prevent him starving."

"Splendid!" said Nicodemus. "It seems to me that all we have to do is to be careful that nobody hears us. Nipper, my good friend, it is a splendid idea of yours, and I have nothing but praise for it."

"You are quite right, old fellow," said Sir Montie. "And when do you propose to go on this thrilling expedition of mercy? Do you think Fatty will be able to last out until this evenin'?"

"He'll have to!" I replied grimly. "There's no time for us to get the grub now—to say nothing of taking it to him. I propose we slip down to the village directly after lessons, get a supply of grub, and take a parcel to Fatty as soon as it's dark."

"The tuck-shop is out of bounds," put in Watson.

"Rats to that!" I declared. "Do you think we're going to take any notice of Martin's rotten impositions? He's placed the tuck-shop out of bounds, but nobody takes any notice of it."

And this plan was agreed upon.

Mr. Martin could not have placed Little in a better prison—from our point of view. The Head fondly imagined that Fatty was quite inaccessible—that it would be utterly impossible for anybody to interfere with him.

And the Head was almost right in his supposition. For neither he nor anybody else in the school knew of that secret passage—with the exception of my chums and myself.

In attempting to put Fatty in a safe place, the Head had really played into our hands. We had found that quaint old stairway one wet afternoon, when we were exploring the tower. It led straight down, through the Ancient House, to the very basement, far behind in the servants' quarters.

We did not confide our scheme to anybody else. For it was to our advantage to keep the secret to a small circle. And, after lessons, Tommy Watson and

I ran the gauntlet to the village tuck-shop.

Mr. Binks was quite pleased to see us, for his trade had fallen off sadly since the Head had placed the ban upon his establishment. And he was eager enough to supply us with all the grub we could carry.

We were not spotted by any master or prefect—at least, I don't think so. Morrow was in the High Street as we emerged from the tuck-shop, but he seemed to be greatly interested in a shop window. I'm practically sure that he deliberately avoided seeing us—for Morrow was as much against the Head's harsh methods as we were.

"Good!" I exclaimed, as we arrived in the Triangle. "Everything is going smoothly, my sons. Now, before we have our own tea, we'll take a nice supply of good things up to the living skeleton in the tower."

Watson grinned.

"He wouldn't be a skeleton if he starved for a month!" he declared. "It really wouldn't do him any harm to go without anything until to-morrow. But, dash it all, we must have pity on the chap. He only lives for his tummy, but he's a decent sort in the main."

We took the supplies into Study C, via the window—for it was unsafe to pass through the lobby and the passages loaded up with suspicious parcels. In Study C we found Sir Montie and Nicodemus.

"You have been successful?" asked Trotwood. "Splendid, dear friends! This is indeed good of you. Little is my own study mate, and it is really my place to assist him. It is extremely good of you to go to all this trouble in the interests of an outsider."

"Rats!" I exclaimed. "Fatty is a member of the Remove—and I'm the captain of the Remove. It's up to me to get busy. Stand by the door, Tommy, while we sort out the tuck."

A big parcel was made up for the prisoner. And when this was ready, Nicodemus and I set off. There was no reason why the four of us should go—or even two, come to that. But Trotwood was anxious to see Fatty, and to console him.

Most of the fellows were at tea in Hall—for Study teas were banned now. And the passages were quiet and deserted. Our route lay through the

servants' quarters—which were strictly out of bounds for juniors—and down to the basement.

Here, in a perfectly blank wall, the secret door was concealed. I stood against it, and Nicodemus regarded me with wonder.

"But there is nothing here, Nipper, surely?" he said mildly.

"Look!" I whispered.

I bent down and pressed against a portion of the stonework near the floor. And immediately a portion of the wall slid back, revealing a dark cavity. I had mastered the secret of the door weeks earlier.

"There you are!" I whispered.

"How's that? Nip in, my sons."

"Wonderful!" murmured Trotwood.

He slipped in, and I followed him. Then the door was closed, and we stood squeezed in a narrow space, with a flight of steep stairs in front of us. I was now able to use my electric torch as I pleased—for there was no possibility of the light being visible from outside.

I led the way up the stairs. Two or three flights were mounted, and Nicodemus was greatly interested as we progressed. At last we arrived at the top, and stood outside the door which led into the tower.

"Now, only the faintest whispers," I said. "And be ready to dodge back in case the ordinary door is unlocked."

I switched off my torch after placing my finger upon the little lever which held the stonework in position. I pressed, and the door opened. Everything was pitchy dark within the tower-room. But the sounds of pacing feet came distinctly to our ears.

"The brute—oh, the beastly rotter!" came a mumbling voice.

Fatty Little was apparently pacing up and down his prison—in order to keep warm. And his hunger, by this time, was probably enormous. For he had had no dinner, and it was already past tea-time.

"Fatty!" I breathed. "Can you hear?"

The pacing footsteps stopped abruptly.

"Great rissoles!" muttered Little. "Who—who's that?"

"It's all right—don't make a noise," whispered Nicodemus. "It's only Nipper and I, Fatty. We've brought some grub for you."

"Saved!" gasped the fat boy. "Where—where are you?"

I switched on my torch, and Little gave a low ejaculation of amazement as he saw us step into his prison from the solid wall itself. He thought he was dreaming for a few minutes—and even when we explained matters he was hardly ready to believe us. And it certainly did seem a tall story.

But Fatty forgot all else when he set eyes upon the food we had brought—pork pies, beef patties, and cakes and pastries of all descriptions. He looked supremely happy as he started his meal.

"I'll remember this as long as I live, you chaps," he mumbled, with his mouth full. "It's ripping of you—sporting. By chutney! These patties are top-hole! What a pair of bricks you are!"

"Not so much jaw!" I said. "Eat while you've got the chance!"

In a surprisingly short amount of time Fatty had got rid of the grub—and we had brought quite a huge quantity with us. But, for once in a way, he was satisfied. He had eaten until he had had his fill.

"Good!" he said, with a fat sigh. "I haven't felt so comfortable round the waist for weeks! I don't want to seem greedy, but—but do you think you'll be able to bring me any brekker in the morning?"

"Don't you worry about to-morrow—let to-morrow take care of itself," I whispered. "You won't starve, anyhow. The Head's absolutely a cad for leaving you here like this, and the fellows feel strongly about it, I can tell you."

"Well, it's decent to know you're all taking an interest in me," said Fatty. "Thanks awfully. Jesson told me that he'll bring me a mattress and some blankets later on—and I hope it's true, because it's frightfully cold in here."

"Oh, I expect it's true enough," I said. "Even a harsh rotter like the Head wouldn't leave you in this tower all night without—Hullo! What's that?"

Voices had sounded outside the heavy door, and we had no difficulty in recognising the tones of Jesson and Mr. Martin.

"The Head!" breathed Nicodemus. "We must be going, my good Nipper. Good-night, Fatty! I hope everything will turn out well."

I bade Little good-night, and a moment later Trotwood and I had slipped through the secret doorway, and Fatty was alone once more. There was no sign that he had been receiving visitors. Not even a crumb remained on the floor to tell its story to the Head's eagle eye.

Nick and I crouched on the other side of the door, listening.

A key grated in the lock, the bolts were shot back, and the Head entered Fatty's prison, carrying a lighted candle.

"I hope you are feeling more chastened in spirit, Little," he said harshly. "I have decided to favour you by permitting you to sleep on a mattress with some blankets—they will be brought in a few minutes."

"It's too good of you, sir," said Fatty calmly.

The Head eyed him curiously. He had expected to find the fat boy cold, disconsolate, and craving for food, but Little seemed to be quite comfortable and at his ease. He did not give the Head the pleasure of seeing him discomfited.

"You must remember, Little, that I am very severe upon all boys who descend to the crime of pilfering," went on the Head. "It will teach you a much-needed lesson. By the morning your hunger will be such that you will realise how wrong it is to interfere with food which is not your own."

"I am quite comfortable in that way, sir, thanks," said Fatty easily. "Grub doesn't worry me much. A fellow can manage to be all serene without food for a few hours."

The Head was still puzzled. Fatty did not look hungry, and he did not speak as though he were hungry. Yet there was no doubt about the fact that the fat boy had received no food. Mr. Martin was quite certain that not a morsel had passed between Little's lips.

And the Head was disappointed. He didn't like the calm way in which his victim took his punishment. He would have been better pleased if Fatty had begged for food, and for his release.

Mr. Martin took his departure in a grumpy mood. The mystery would have been explained to him if he could have seen beyond that secret door! But it was a puzzle which was not likely to be solved.

Fatty Little was not quite starved, after all.

CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH'S GREAT IDEA.

"CERTAINLY," said Handforth, helping himself to a cake.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" protested Church. "It couldn't be done, Handy."

"Of course not!" agreed McClure.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "It can be done, and, what's more, it's going to be done. You don't seem to realise that the time's come for us to act! We've got to rise up in all our strength, and strike."

Handforth looked grim as he poured himself out another cup of tea, and his chums looked at one another anxiously. When Handy got into this frame of mind he was generally hard to manage.

The chums of Study D had managed to get some supplies, and they were taking tea in their own quarters, as of old—in spite of the new order. Handforth was always ready to break a rule if he considered it unjust. He wasn't prepared to sit down and take things meekly.

"That's the idea," he went on. "We'll strike—strike a blow for liberty and justice. The Head has brought it on himself by acting like a beastly cad. If a barring-out results—well, he'll only have himself to blame."

"A—a barring-out?" asked Church, staring.

"Exactly!"

"You're dotty!" said Church.

"Of course you'd sneer—I expected it!" went on Handforth. "But the fact remains that the school is in a state of ferment. You don't deny that, I suppose? We all jib against Martin's rotten restrictions."

"Very likely!" said McClure. "But what can we do?"

"Rebel!" said Handforth promptly.

"Try it on—just try it, and see what the result is," exclaimed Church. "Why, it would mean the sack for the ring-leaders! I'm all in favour of a demonstration, or something, but we can't go in for open rebellion."

"That's only if Martin proves obstinate," explained Handforth. "Rebellion is the last resort. My idea is to give the Head a chance—put it plainly to him that he's got to stop acting the goat, or we'll make things hot for him. See? We'll demand to have all the

restrictions done away with. If Martin refuses, we all revolt. How's that?"

"Idiotic!" said McClure frankly.

"Eh?"

"So it is!" persisted McClure. "Don't get excited, Handy! I say it's idiotic. In the first place, who's going to tell the Head all this? Who's going to put the thing to him?"

"I am," said Handforth.

"You?"

"Yes, me! Why not?"

"You'll soon find out why not, if you try it on," grinned Church. "We're not anxious to lose you, Handy; but if you're looking for the sack, you've only got to go to the Head with that jaw, and you'll be fired out in three minutes."

Handforth shook his head.

"Not if I make it clear to him that my expulsion would lead to a general revolution in the school," he said. "Of course, if I went, you'd all back me up—I can count on that. But the Head's a blusterer. All he requires is firmness."

"From you?"

"From anybody," said Handforth. "I'm perfectly willing to put the thing straight to him; in fact, that's what I intend doing. Nobody else seems to realise the gravity of the situation, so I must get busy."

McClure nodded.

"Oh, you'll be busy enough," he agreed—"packing your things to go away! That's how you'll be busy, Handy!"

"Piffle!" snapped Handforth. "Do you think I'm going to be influenced by your cowardly fears? This is a great idea of mine, and I'm not going to rest until it has been tested. All you chaps think about is your own skins; you never dream of doing anything for the good of the school!"

His chums sighed.

"It wouldn't do any good, Handy," said Church. "It would only do harm—to us. It won't help the school if we're sacked, I suppose? And that's what'll happen if we beard old Martin in his den—and put it to him straight, as you call it. No, Handy, it's too risky."

"All right—have your own way!" exclaimed Handforth. "I've got my own ideas, and I stick to 'em. All we want to do is to give the Head a fright. Threaten to bar ourselves out, and he'll crumple up. He's as weak as water, and he'll never stand against a strong

will. I mean to give him one chance, and if he likes to take it, all well and good."

"You—you'll give the Head a chance?" asked Church blankly.

"Yes!"

"And what if he refuses to take it?"

"It'll be the worse for him," said Handforth. "Boldness is everything, and Martin will be like putty in my hands when I face him squarely. When I get really on the go, I need a bit of stopping, you know."

"By jingo!" said McClure, with feeling—"you do!"

"So I'm going to tell the Head that he's got one chance—and only one chance," said Handforth. "If he likes to remove the restrictions, all well and good. If he refuses to listen to me—woe betide him!"

Church and McClure went on with their tea without saying much. They were quite sure, in their own minds, that Handy would regain his senses before the tea was actually over.

But they were wrong.

"Well, I'd better be going, I suppose," said Handforth at last.

"Going?" asked Church. "Where to?"

"The Head's study, of course!"

"But—but you're not really going?" said McClure anxiously.

"Haven't I told you a dozen times that I mean it?" snapped Handforth.

"I've never seen such—such fat-headed chumps in all my life! You'd better come along with me to support the——"

"Not likely!" interrupted Church.

"We're not coming!"

"We don't want to be sacked!" said McClure.

Handforth glared.

"Do you call yourselves my chums?" he roared.

"That's nothing to do with it!" said Church gruffly. "We're ready to back you up in anything sensible—you know that. But when it comes to an idea that'll mean disaster for all of us—well, we're not having any!"

"Rather not!" said McClure, nodding.

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly.

"But, my dear asses, you don't seem to understand!" he exclaimed, with withering scorn. "You don't grasp the significance of the whole situation. Martin has proved himself to be weak—

he caved in pitifully over that Morrow business, as you know. Well, we've only got to show a bold front, and he'll cave in to us. The Head needs a good jawing, and I'm the chap to do it. He'll crumple up like a house of cards if I make it clear to him that it'll end in revolt if he doesn't."

McClure sighed.

"Oh, you're hopeless!" he said. "Do you think the Head will take any notice of you—a junior? Why, you lunatic, he'll pitch you out of his study, and he'll pitch you out of the school. It's not worth it, thanks!"

"Then you're not coming?" demanded Handforth.

"No!" said his chums in one voice.

"All right!" said Handforth. "I shall remember this—and I shall also make it clear to the whole school that the credit for defeating Martin belongs to me."

"You'd better defeat him first!" said Church tartly.

"Oh, rats!" snapped his leader.

Handforth charged out of Study D, and strode up the passage. He was fully determined to carry out his project—and no power would stop him, unless physical force was applied.

Church and McClure knew that physical force with Handforth was hopeless. Even if he was hammered until he was blue, he would still be as determined at the finish. The only way was to let him run on.

By the time Handforth reached the Head's study he was not feeling quite so determined. The nearer he was to Mr. Martin's presence, the smaller his courage. But not for worlds would he have admitted that he was feeling nervous. He was determined to beard the tyrant in his den.

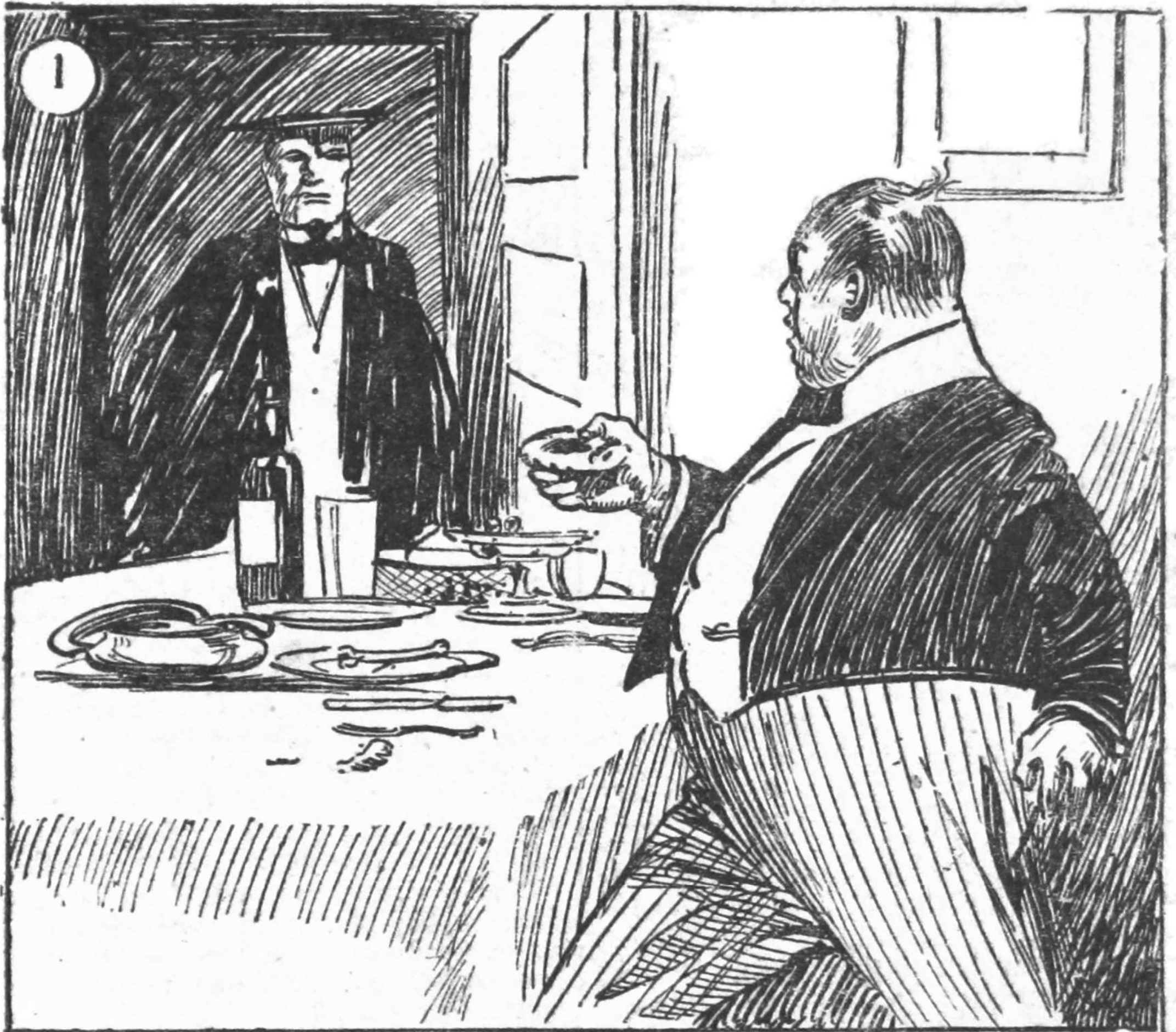
Of course, it was a mad idea, and no fellow in the school would have embarked upon it. But Handforth was always looking for trouble; and, somewhat naturally he was always finding it.

He tapped upon the door firmly.

"Come in!" exclaimed the Head's voice.

Handforth opened the door and marched in. Mr. Martin was sitting at his desk, and he looked up and stared at Handforth in some amazement. It was a most unusual thing for a junior boy to visit the Head alone.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Mr. Martin harshly.



1. "How dare you?" snarled the Head. "You know that tray contained my breakfast!"

2. Lee delivered an uppercut which sent Mr. Martin sprawling backwards.

It was not a very good opening for Handy, and the famous leader of Study D began to feel that his chums' advice had not been so bad. However, it was too late to draw back now.

"I—I—that is to say—I mean, sir——"

"Out with it, boy—out with it!" snapped the Head. "Your name is Handforth, I think? I had occasion to inflict an imposition upon you this morning. What do you require? I give you one minute to speak."

Handforth cleared his throat rather huskily.

"The—the fact is, sir, I have come to—to warn you," he said.

"Warn me?"

"Exactly, sir," went on Handforth. "You—you see, I feel it necessary that something must be done, and I have taken it upon myself to tell you a few home truths—I—I mean, to state the case clearly."

The Head laid his pen down.

"Are you insane, Handforth?" he demanded. "I had trouble with you this morning, and it seems to me that you are a very foolish boy. What nonsense have you been talking? What do you mean by coming here and saying that you wish to warn me? Explain yourself, boy!"

Handforth felt rather limp, but he steeled himself.

"The Remove feels that your new regulations are—are unjust, sir," he said, making a bold dash at the truth. "It's not fair that the tuckshop should be out of bounds, and that Study teas should be banned. The fellows are feeling pretty sore about it, and unless something is done there'll be trouble—in fact, I might say ructions. The Remove particularly is absolutely fed up."

Mr. Martin lay back in his chair. For a second he had been on the point of jumping to his feet, but he refrained. And Handforth failed to see the dangerous glint in the Head's eye.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Martin. "So the Remove is—er—fed up? That is most interesting, Handforth. I shall be quite delighted to hear anything further you have to say. Your conversation is charming!" he added grimly.

Handforth smiled.

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," he said, expanding considerably, and totally un-

aware of the danger signals. "You see, sir, it's this way. The junior school is hit harder by these rules than the senior school. And, as a junior, I feel that it is my duty to say something on the subject. The fellows, as I intimated, are getting rather out of hand."

"That is most enlightening," said the Head. "Go on!"

"They're feeling particularly wild about Fatty, sir—I—I mean Little," said Handforth. "It was a rotten trick to lock him up in that tower——"

"A rotten trick?" interrupted the Head. "You have a delightful way of expressing yourself, Handforth. Pray continue."

"Certainly, sir," blundered Handforth. "I don't want to preach, but it's an absolute fact that you've been treating us in rather a rotten way. And most of the chaps are getting furious. I want to warn you that unless you carry on the school just as Dr. Stafford carried it on, there'll be something like a rebellion. I don't want to scare you, sir, but it's a fact that tempers are getting short."

The Head nodded.

"They are, Handforth," the Head exclaimed harshly. "My own temper is no exception to the rule. When you have quite finished, I shall be glad if you will inform me."

"I don't suppose I shall be longer than ten minutes, sir," said Handforth. "I only want to make a few suggestions as to how the juniors should be treated. You've listened to me splendidly, and it's glorious to know that you're going to give in. I thought you were a bit of a beast—I—I mean—beg pardon, sir, but these things will slip out now and again——"

"I think you have said sufficient, Handforth," said Mr. Martin, in a dangerous voice. "At all events, you must say no more. It is now my turn to talk. Come here—stand in front of me."

Handforth felt, at last, that everything was not as it should be. He began to suspect that trouble, in some vague way, was brewing. And he walked to Mr. Martin's side rather gingerly.

"Now, Handforth, I will speak," said the Head grimly. "I've allowed you to run on in order to find out how far you could go. I regret to discover

that you are not only capable of astounding insolence, but that you are even prepared to insult your Headmaster to his face."

Handforth gasped.

"By George!" he said huskily. "I—I—"

"Silence," thundered the Head. "Do not dare to speak again, boy! I have had patience to listen to your nonsense for long enough—and my patience is exhausted. You are the most impertinent boy I have ever dealt with, and if I thought for a moment that you were really serious I would expel you within the hour."

"Great pip!" breathed Handforth.

"As it is, I believe that you are merely lacking in wits," continued the Head. "You are utterly foolish, and it would be unfair to your parents to inflict your presence upon them. I intend to thrash you soundly for your unwarrantable insolence in coming to my study—"

"You—you're going to thrash me, sir?" panted Handforth, with a gulp.

"As you have never been thrashed before!" exclaimed the Head, reaching for his cane. "And if you attempt to struggle, or to resist, I shall double your punishment. Not another word!"

But Handforth was not the kind of fellow to take things lying down.

"Dash it all, sir, I don't see why I should be flogged!" he exclaimed indignantly. "I was only telling you the truth! Unless your restrictions are removed, the whole junior school will revolt in a body!"

"Upon my soul!" shouted the Head. "You are quite impossible!"

He snatched at a walking stick—his cane being unavailable—and he brought the stick down across Handforth's shoulders with tremendous force. It was a cruel, violent blow, and Handforth staggered.

"Yaroooh!" he howled. "Ow! You—you cad!"

Mr. Martin let himself go. With a face set in a snarl of fury, he grasped Handforth and wielded the stick with all his strength. The junior was quite helpless in the grasp of the powerful bully. It was not Handy's habit to yell, but he yelled this time. He yelled with rage and indignation.

Slash! Slash!

Again and again the stick descended, and Mr. Martin was not particular as

to where the blow struck. Some of them hit Handy across the legs, and the pain he suffered was enormous.

"Good gracious!"

The exclamation came from the doorway. The Head turned, his stick poised for another blow. And he stared into the face of Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER V.

BITTER BLOOD!

MR. HOWARD MARTIN frowned. "Go away!" he shouted violently. "Can't you see that I'm attending to this boy? Kindly refrain from interfering now, Mr. Lee. If you wish to speak to me, I will attend to you later."

Slash! Slash!

"Ow-yaroooh!" yelled Handforth. "Rescue, Mr. Lee! I'm being half murdered by this—this bully—yow-ow!"

Mr. Martin continued his savage attack with more force than ever. He was treating the junior with rank brutality—and Nelson Lee was not the type of man to stand idly by and watch.

"Stop that, Mr. Martin!" he said sharply.

"What!" panted the Head, amazed. "What—what did you say?"

"I told you to stop that brutal attack upon Handforth," snapped Lee. "You are apparently unconscious of the fact, Mr. Martin, that you are acting like a hooligan—and not as a Headmaster. Drop that stick at once."

"How—how dare you?" screamed the Head.

Slash! Slash! Slash!

But he was able to get no more blows home. For Nelson Lee dashed forward, and dragged the stick out of Mr. Martin's hands. He flung it across the room and pushed Handforth behind him.

"Handforth, you may go," said Nelson Lee grimly.

"Thank—thank you, sir!" gasped Handforth. "You're a brick, sir!"

He lost no time in escaping from the study. And Mr. Martin and Nelson Lee were left facing one another in a highly dangerous attitude. The Head, indeed, was on the point of flinging himself at the schoolmaster-detective. But he checked himself in time.

"I am astounded, Mr. Lee, that you

should have the effrontery to interfere with me while I am inflicting punishment on an impertinent boy!" exclaimed the Head, fighting down his fury with an effort. "You will please understand that under no circumstances will I permit you to —"

"Pardon me, Mr. Martin, but I did not interfere as you intimate," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You were not inflicting punishment—you were engaged in a harsh and cowardly attack upon a junior boy——"

"You had better be careful what you say, sir," shouted Mr. Martin. "I will have you understand that I have been invested with full power and authority by the school Governors. And if I have any nonsense from you I shall not hesitate to dismiss you at an hour's notice. Please do not imagine that you are indispensable!"

Nelson Lee was quite unmoved.

"Your attitude fills me with nothing but contempt, Mr. Martin," he said quietly. "I shall not attempt to argue with you, or to prolong this conversation in any way. Perhaps when you have calmed down, you will realise the true position you have placed yourself in!"

Nelson Lee did not wait for the Head to speak again; he turned on his heel and walked out of the study. There had already been bitter blood between the two, but now it was open hostility. And such a state of affairs, of course, was not likely to last for long.

Meanwhile, Handforth had returned to Study D. He crawled, rather than walked, in. Church and McClure were waiting, and they were not at all surprised to note Handforth's method of entry.

Indeed, Church had thoughtfully provided a box of soothing ointment, and there were several bandages handy.

"Hurt much, old man?" asked McClure sympathetically.

"Oh no!" said Handforth. "I'm not hurt at all! Look at this!"

He pulled up the leg of his left trouser and pulled down his sock. And there, upon the calf, wore two livid weals.

"Great Scott!" shouted Church.

"Good Heavens!" said McClure hoarsely. "D—did the Head do that?"

Handforth sat down.

"It's nothing," he said rather wearily. "My back is simply covered with weals—six times as bad as those. The cur—

the beastly brute! He swiped into me with a walking stick! He was just like a wild animal, and used every ounce of his strength."

"How did you get away in the end?" asked Church.

"I expect I should have been finished off altogether if I'd been left with Martin," said Handforth. "He didn't know what he was doing—and I should have been beaten about until I fell unconscious. But Mr. Lee came in."

"Oh, good!"

"What did he do?"

Handforth's eyes glittered for a moment.

"He snatched the stick out of Martin's hand and chucked it across the room," he said. "My only topper! You ought to have seen it! I don't know what's happening now, but I wouldn't mind betting a quid that the pair of 'em are engaged in a free fight!"

"Did the Head listen to you?" asked Church.

"Listen to me!" said Handforth indignantly. "He listened to every word, and kidded me that he was sympathetic. And then, at the finish, he turned on me like a wild tiger!"

"Well, of course, you were an ass to go there in the first place," said McClure.

"I don't like to say that we warned you, or anything of that sort, but you must admit that it was a dotty idea—— Come in, you ass!"

A tap had sounded at the door, and it opened to admit Nelson Lee. McClure turned very red.

"I—I'm awfully sorry, sir!" he stammered. "I didn't know it was you——"

"I can quite believe that, McClure," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "Never mind—we will let it pass. I came here to see you, Handforth. Apparently you are not particularly hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of, sir," said Handforth.

Church snorted.

"Nothing to speak of,!" he shouted.

"Why, he's covered with weals, sir!"

"Oh, dry up!" growled the victim.

"Let me examine you, Handforth," said Nelson Lee quietly.

The housemaster looked at Handforth's "wounds" where they were available, and he shook his head grimly.

"I should advise you to go to bed as soon as possible, Handforth," he said.

"You will be excused preparation for this evening, and you must have those bruises properly treated."

"Oh, I shall be all right, sir," said Handforth uncomfortably. "I never believe in making a fuss over a few knocks and bruises. Did you dot the Head one in the eye, sir? I—I mean did you——"

"It would not be advisable for me to discuss the subject with you, Handforth," said Nelson Lee. "It is needless for me to tell you that I do not approve of Mr. Martin's behaviour, and I shall do the utmost in my power to look after the interests of the boys in the Ancient House. But you must not forget that Mr. Martin is the Headmaster, and, strictly speaking, I am a subordinate."

"Oh, but that's rotten, sir," protested Handforth. "You're worth ten thousand of the Head! I can't make out why the Governors didn't appoint you! St. Frank's would be a lovely place with you as Head!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"That is very nice of you, my boy," he said. "But, really, we must not continue the subject. Take my advice and get to bed as soon as possible. And do not talk too much of this little affair. It would only stir up trouble."

Nelson Lee departed a moment later, and Handforth eyed his chums grimly.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think of it?"

"Think of what?" asked Church.

"Mr. Lee's jaw!"

"What the merry dickens——"

"He told us to keep quiet about me being knocked about by the Head," said Handforth. "Lee is one of the best in the world, but he's not always right, and if he kids himself that I'm going to spare the Head, he's mistaken. The whole Remove will know about that rotten affair within an hour."

"Quite right, too," said McClure. "Mr. Lee is afraid of trouble springing up. That's why he told you to go easy. I expect he's got an idea that there'll be a revolt or something."

"If he's got that idea, he's not far wrong," declared Handforth. "One or two more exhibitions of that sort, and he'll be kicked through the Triangle, and kicked to the village by a crowd of chaps. We're not going to stand tyrants at St. Frank's at any price."

"Well, let's go to the common room," said Church.

"Right," said Handforth, getting up. "Come on—— Yow!"

He made a grimace as the pain caught him. For he was decidedly sore, and his feelings towards Mr. Howard Martin were very far from amiable.

Ten minutes later, in the common room, he was letting everybody know his woes. I was with Watson and Tregellis-West, and at first I thought Handy was exaggerating, as usual.

But this time he had the proof.

"The man's absolutely a bully," I declared. "This makes two outrages in one day. Fatty Little's case is bad enough, but Martin has proved himself to be unfit to fill the post of a reformatory chief. He is nothing but a cur!"

"And we're not going to stand him for long!"

"Rather not!"

"Down with the Head!"

"Three cheers for Dr. Stafford!"

"Hurrah!"

"I say, stop that!" I shouted. "We don't want to get up a demonstration now—we shall only have a crowd of prefects on us. Don't yell so much. If we're going to deal with the situation, we must remain calm. There's no sense in asking for trouble. We're not prepared to tackle Martin yet."

"That's your policy always," said Handforth. "What's the good of waiting? Why not march in a body to the Head's study and hoot him out of the place?"

"If it could be done I'd be with you," I said. "But it can't be done, and it's no good thinking it can. We've got to wait, and I don't think it will be very long before we get our opportunity. Violence is all very well, but I never believe in using it until things are really serious."

"They're serious now," said Handforth; "and what I say is——"

"There's a lot of noise going on in here," said Wilson of the Fifth, putting his head into the common room. "If you kids want to make a row, you'd better make it somewhere else. The Head's down on all noises."

"Rats!"

"Blow the Head!"

"He can go and eat coke!"

"And so can you, Wilson!"

Wilson grinned.

"All right—do as you like," he said.

"But if the Head comes round and gates you for a month, don't blame me."

He departed, and the juniors regarded one another with indignant looks.

"Well, I'm going to make a speech—and blow the consequences," said Handforth. "Anybody who wants to listen had better collect round. I'm the latest victim of the Head's tyranny, and it's up to you to support me."

"Go ahead, Handy!"

"Spout away!"

"If you'll take my advice, you'll spout somewhere else," I put in. "In the gym., for example. There won't be much fear of interruption there, and you'll feel safer. But you can do just as you like, of course."

The crowd decided to go to the gym., and, led by Handforth, the fellows surged out of the common room.

"Dear old boy, shall we go?" asked Tregellis-West.

"We might as well be in the back-ground," I said. "Come on."

The Triangle was quite dark, and a minute or two before the Removites crowded out of the Ancient House, a somewhat dramatic incident took place against the Head's private doorway.

Nelson Lee had been across to the College House to have a few words with Mr. Stockdale. He was on his way back to his own quarters when he was attracted by sounds of commotion near the Head's door. Mr. Martin was apparently engaged in a fierce argument with another man.

"Go away, confound you!" the Head exclaimed savagely. "I don't want you here. And if you dare to come again, I'll give you in charge——"

"You daren't! You'd be afraid to!" said a hoarse voice. "Don't forget that you're implicated——"

"Keep quiet, you fool!" snarled Martin.

"Well, don't you dare to threaten me——"

"Are you going?" asked the Head in a quivering voice. "I give you just two seconds! If you are not gone by that time, I'll take and pitch you out!"

Nelson Lee felt rather uncomfortable, for he had no inclination to overhear what was going on. At the same time, the detective was interested. For, only a few days before, he had had a little argument with the mysterious stranger himself.

The man had mistaken Lee for Mr. Martin, in the darkness. And he had said quite sufficient to give Lee an indication that Mr. Howard Martin was not all he professed to be. It was only too clear, in fact, that the new Head had a somewhat mysterious secret which he wanted to keep to himself.

And now the stranger had appeared again—and Martin did not welcome his presence. Lee felt that the little matter would bear a private investigation. And he was determined to give some attention to the subject.

But then, as he was about to slip away, he changed his mind.

He had scarcely turned his back before he heard a thud, followed by a low cry. Turning swiftly, he saw the stranger lying upon the ground, with Martin standing over him. Nelson Lee looked grim.

"And now you'll clear out!" snarled the Head.

He kicked at the prostrate figure viciously. It was a cowardly attack, for the man seemed dazed by the first blow and incapable of defending himself. As each kick went home the helpless man groaned.

Nelson Lee did not wait.

His blood boiled at the brutal exhibition, and he sprang across the Triangle at a sharp run. Mr. Martin looked up, startled. He saw who the newcomer was, and then delivered a more violent kick than all the others.

"Get out of here, you confounded tramp!" he exclaimed harshly.

Crash!

Nelson Lee did not wait to argue matters. He brought his fist up and delivered an uppercut which sent Mr. Howard Martin sprawling backwards. Nelson Lee's blood was up, and that blow gave him intense satisfaction.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SACK FOR NELSON LEE.

"HALLO!"

"What's the row?" Handforth and his followers had just emerged from the Ancient House. Over in the gloom by the Head's doorway something was occurring. Mr. Martin's voice, at all events, was very much in evidence.

I came out a moment later, and I saw that the Head was talking—or rather shouting—at Nelson Lee. And I ventured somewhat nearer than the other fellows. All the juniors, however, remained still, listening.

The Head had picked himself up after that knock-down blow, boiling with violent rage. He was relieved to see, at the very first glance, that the stranger had picked himself up in the momentary confusion, and had vanished.

"I should advise you to keep your temper, Mr. Martin," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I was compelled to knock you down—as I always knock a man down who is acting like a brute and a cad."

"You—you infernal hound!" raved the Head. "I'll have the law on you for assault! Not another minute shall you remain in this school—do you understand? You'll go—you will go at once!"

"I advise you to remain calm——"

"You will leave this school at once—do you hear me?" bellowed the Headmaster. "If you think I shall alter my decision you are mistaken! You confounded dog, I'd pitch you out with my own hands if I had no scruples with regard to soiling my fingers. Within an hour you leave St. Frank's!"

Nelson Lee remained calm.

"Am I to understand from you, Mr. Martin, that you wish me to tender my resignation?" he asked quietly.

The Head laughed harshly.

"You are to understand nothing of the sort," he exclaimed. "I will not accept a resignation from you. You are dismissed—you are sacked! I am getting rid of you exactly as I would get rid of a drunken stableman!"

Nelson Lee bowed.

"I will not demean myself by entering into an argument while you are in this violent frame of mind," he said. "Under the circumstances, I am compelled to accept my dismissal without question. You need have no fear, Mr. Martin. I will go. And it will leave you a clear field for your peculiar activities."

Nelson Lee was about to walk away when Martin grasped his shoulder.

"I have a few words to say, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed fiercely. "It gives me the greatest pleasure in the world to dismiss you in this ignominious fashion. No doubt you would have been delighted to remain——"

"On the contrary, Mr. Martin, I had already made up my mind to tender my resignation," interrupted Nelson Lee. "So what pleasure you may have derived from this incident is somewhat robbed of its significance."

"Do you expect me to believe that lie?" sneered the Head.

"You can believe it, or disbelieve it, as you wish," said Lee dangerously. "And I would like you to know, Mr. Martin, that a man who calls me a liar does so at his peril. A repetition of that remark from you will lead to consequences which I shall regret. Only a few moments ago I discussed my resignation with Mr. Stoddale. For, to tell you the truth, I find it impossible to continue my duties while there is a bully and a tyrant of your stamp in complete control."

Mr. Martin seemed as though he were about to choke for a few moments. But, by a great effort, he controlled himself and swallowed hard.

"You will leave St. Frank's at once!" he snarled. "You are dismissed!"

He turned and passed into his own doorway. And as he did so the spell which had held the juniors broke. They surged forward and crowded round Nelson Lee, excited, anxious, and overwhelmed with dismay.

"You're not going, sir?"

"We won't let you leave the school, sir!"

"Rather not!"

"I must ask you to let me pass, boys," said Nelson Lee quietly. "No good will come of this demonstration. I am leaving St. Frank's to-night—for, really, I have no choice."

"We won't let you go, sir."

"Oh, gov'nor, it can't be true!" I shouted, grabbing hold of his arm. "You're not really going, are you?"

"Begad! It's too appallin' for words," said Sir Montie. "You really can't desert us, sir. Just think how frightful it will be here if we are left at Mr. Martin's mercy—without you to stand up for us!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am sorry, boys, but there is nothing for me to stay for and nothing for me to do," he declared. "In any case, I should have left the school to-morrow, so it makes practically no difference."

He forced his way through the crowd and passed through the private door.

way of the Ancient House. The Removites stood about in groups, talking excitedly, and filled with consternation.

The word went through the school like lightning.

Nelson Lee had been sacked!

Everybody, from the Second to the Sixth, knew the truth within ten minutes. And the excitement was intense. The College House fellows were greatly interested, but not exactly alarmed.

It was a different story with the Ancient House. Seniors and juniors were filled with rage and indignation against the Head. Nelson Lee was almost loved by the majority of the boys, and it was a positive blow to the Ancient House to lose him.

And the blow was so sudden—so abrupt.

There had been no warning, no indication that the disaster was to occur. And now, within an hour, Nelson Lee would be gone! Gone for good! It was almost too awful to be believed.

In the junior quarters, the fellows were raving with excitement. It was universally decided that something should be done; delay was no longer possible, and I was as much in favour of immediate action as the others.

There was no time for planning or talking. Either something had to be done at once, or not at all.

"There's no sense in getting dotty with excitement," I shouted. "The fact is plain. Mr. Lee goes to-night, and there's only one possible chance to save him."

"What is it?"

"Speak up, Nipper!"

"We'll wait out in the Triangle until he starts for the station," I said. "We'll surround him, and we'll refuse to let him go. He can't do anything against the whole crowd of us."

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping idea!"

"Begad. But supposin' he orders us to release him?"

"He'll have to order in vain," I said grimly. "We'll make such a fuss that there'll be no peace until things are altered. The Fifth will be with us to a man, and we can easily count on the Third."

"Yes, rather!"

"So it's up to us to take matters into our own hands," I went on. "The time

has come for us to act. You'll never find me slow when a crisis arises."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Go it!"

"A crisis has arisen now," I continued. "Our duty is to stand by the guv'nor—Mr. Lee. Just imagine what will happen out in the Triangle. We'll surround him—practically the whole house will surround him—and he won't be able to move a yard. The Head will come out to see what the commotion is, and then we'll make our demands."

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "That's the stuff!"

"We'll demand that Mr. Lee shall be reinstated—whether he likes it or not—and that Mr. Martin shall tender a full and complete apology," I continued grimly. "And remember, we can do it!"

"Good!"

"We can force the Head to his knees—if we only stick together in one big effort," I shouted. "There must be no waverers. If one or two fellows get it in the neck they'll have to suffer in silence!"

"We're ready!"

"Anything to keep Mr. Lee!"

"Good!" I said. "Then the best thing we can do is to get out as soon as possible. Don't forget that if Mr. Lee goes we shall be absolutely lost. There'll be no hope at all after he's gone. The Head will make life for us a mere existence. We've simply got to keep the guv'nor here—at any cost!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Lead on, old son!"

"You're the chap for us!"

Everybody was enthusiastic and full of hope. It was generally believed that something could be done—that it was not yet too late. But then the real blow fell. For we discovered that Mr. Martin was ready to forestall the scheme.

Four prefects appeared in the common room.

"Now, then, you kids, off to bed!" shouted Wilson briskly.

"Bed!" roared Handforth. "There's another hour!"

"Head's orders!" said Wilson.

"Oh, my hat!"

"You have my sympathy, but there's nothing to be done," went on the prefect.

"We've received orders to see that every

junior is in bed at once. The Fifth is included—and the Fifth has already gone up."

"That's done it," said Hubbard. "We're diddled!"

Unfortunately, there were many juniors who shared the same view—who gave up hope then and there. And half the Remove trooped up to bed without acting, but protesting vigorously.

Talking, however, was useless. The remainder of us were powerless to carry out the project. With such a small number, there was no hope of success. It only the fellows had had the courage to stick together, things might have been different.

But, as the majority had submitted, there was no course for us but to follow their example; and we went up to the dormitory shortly afterwards. At least, everybody except me.

I managed to sneak off to have a few words with the guv'nor before he went. Morrow had allowed me to do this, for Morrow was a good sort. I found Nelson Lee in his study, almost ready for departure.

"Guv'nor," I panted, "you're not really going!"

"My dear Nipper, what on earth is the matter with you?" asked Nelson Lee calmly.

"The—the matter!" I said. "You're going away!"

"Exactly! But is that any reason why you should take leave of what little senses you happen to possess?" asked the guv'nor. "Do you think that I regard this affair as serious?"

"But it's appalling, sir——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Nelson Lee. "I have been expecting it—and if it may please you, I had no intention of remaining, in any event. Mr. Martin is a blackguard, and he has been invested with full authority. It is impossible for me to remain in the school under the circumstances."

"But what shall we do without you, sir?" I asked blankly.

Nelson Lee took my shoulder.

"I have no doubt," he said grimly. "that you will get on far better without me!"

"Eh?"

"Think over what I have said," continued Lee. "You will get on better without me, Nipper—far better. You do not seem to realise that it is impossible

for you to take any action against Mr. Martin while I am present. To do so would be to offend me, in my capacity as Housemaster. But, with me out of the way, you will have a clear field to fight this tyrant on equal terms."

My eyes gleamed.

"By jingo!" I said. "I hadn't thought of that!"

"You must not imagine, however, that I am advising you to do anything rash," went on the guv'nor, his twinkling eyes giving the lie to his tone. "I simply leave it to the school. I have great faith in St. Frank's, and I do not suppose for a moment that the school will allow itself to be browbeaten and bullied for long. I hope I am a sportsman, Nipper, and there is nothing I like better than a fight against tyranny. But I had better not say any more."

"When are you going, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"By the nine-thirty train to London."

"And when shall we see you again?"

"That is a question which I cannot answer now," said Lee. "I should advise you to get to your dormitory as soon as possible. Good-night, Nipper! And don't worry. St. Frank's is passing through a strenuous time at the moment, but all will come right shortly."

"By gum! I hope so, sir!" I said fervently.

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD-BYE TO ST. FRANK'S.

HANDFORTH was looking excited when I entered the dormitory.

None of the juniors were undressed, and it was apparent that something was on. The leader of Study D was making a speech, and, for once in a way, the other juniors were listening attentively.

"It's the only thing we can do now," Handforth was saying. "We've got to take matters into our own hands. We've been ordered to bed like so many kids, but that's no reason why we should sacrifice Nipper's ripping wheeze."

"How can we do it?"

"There's an easy way," said Handforth. "There are plenty of bedclothes here, and three windows. How long will it take us to make some ropes and swarm down into the Triangle?"

"By Jove!"

"That's a fine idea!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "What's the good of acting the goat, my sons? If we get into the Triangle, we shall only be rounded up again. The best thing we can do is to leave things as they are——"

"Eh?" said Watson. "You've changed your tone."

"I know I have," I replied. "But I've got a reason for it. Listen to me! I vote that we'd better get to bed——"

"Rats!"

"Dry up!"

"But listen——"

"Not likely," said Handforth. "We're not going to listen to any of your rot, Nipper! We're going down through the windows, and we're going to prevent Mr. Lee from leaving. That's settled."

"But look here——"

The fellows wouldn't let me speak. They were really too excited to attend to anything except the one matter in hand. And within a few seconds the beds were being stripped of their sheets and blankets.

It was a rash step, but the Remove was in a desperate mood, and nobody particularly cared what happened.

In a remarkably short space of time the ropes were made. I said nothing, for I knew that it was useless to argue, and I realised that it would be far better if the guv'nor did go. We should have a free hand.

I knew that it would be touch and go. Nelson Lee had been almost ready for leaving when I left him. So the chances were that he would be gone when the juniors got out of the dormitory.

And then another idea occurred to me.

Since the Remove was determined, there was no reason why Sir Montie and Tommy and I should not break bounds, too. We might be able to have a last word with the guv'nor before he left.

Many of the fellows were already swarming out of the windows. I followed suit, but, as I had anticipated, Nelson Lee had already taken his departure. For it was nearly a quarter past nine, and the train left at half past.

It was some minutes, however, before this was found out. The juniors collected against the gateway, in readiness to collar Lee as he attempted to pass out. I stood aside with my chums, and I briefly

explained matters to them. They readily agreed that it was just as well that the attempt had come to nothing.

"I'll tell you what," I whispered. "There's no reason why we shouldn't slip down to the station, and see the guv'nor off. I'm not particular now about what happens, and we can't be punished any more than if we stayed here. What do you say?"

"We'll go!" said Watson.

"Begad, rather!" agreed Sir Montie.

And so, without wasting any further time, we slipped over the wall and started off for the station at the double. I was not positive that Lee had already gone, but it was practically certain.

The crowd in the Triangle soon found it out.

Jesson, of the Sixth, happened to be passing from the College House to the Ancient House. He could not fail to observe the crowd at the gates, and he investigated matters.

"What the thunder is the meaning of this?" he demanded sourly. "What are you kids doing out of your dormitory? Have you all gone dotty?"

"Oh, dry up, Jesson," said Handforth. "You can go and eat coke. If you want to know the truth, we're waiting here for Mr. Lee, and we're not going——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jesson.

"I can't see anything to cackle at!" said Pitt tartly.

"Can't you?" grinned the prefect. "I can! I suppose you don't happen to know that Mr. Lee left the school ten minutes ago!"

"What!"

"It's not true!"

"All right—you can believe what you like," said Jesson. "Mr. Lee's gone to catch the nine-thirty train, and it's twenty past nine already. Personally, I think it's a good thing he's gone. We can do very well without him—— Hi! Look out, you young idiots! What the ——"

Jesson fled. The crowd had charged at him angrily, and he did not wait to try conclusions with the juniors. It had been rather unwise for him to make that remark about Nelson Lee with the fellows in their present frame of mind.

"Cad!"

"Yah! Rotter!"

Jesson entered the House at a run, and he was followed by numerous yells and shouts. He went straight to the Head's

study, and reported the fact that the whole Ancient House section of the Remove was out of bed and in the Triangle.

Mr. Martin seized a cane, and investigated.

He found the Triangle bare and empty.

The fellows had taken the opportunity to slip back into the dormitory.

"Have you been attempting to play a joke upon me, Jesson?" barked the Head. "There is nobody in the Triangle—not a soul! How dare you have the audacity to try your confounded tricks—"

"But—but they were here, sir," said Jesson wildly.

"I will give you one chance. I will go to the dormitory," said the Head. "If I find all the boys in bed, I shall know that you have lied, and I will punish you accordingly. Come!"

Jesson felt better, for he knew that the juniors could not be undressed in such a short space of time. They weren't. The Remove was attempting to get into bed quickly; but there were still evident signs of the late escapade. Beds were unmade, and the windows were open still.

"What is the meaning of this?" rasped out Mr. Martin. "Every boy here will be punished for this outrageous breach of the rules. You were ordered to bed, and yet you had the insolence to——"

The Head paused, and glared round him.

"Where is Nipper?" he asked sharply. "Where is Watson? Good gracious! Tregellis-West is missing, also. Where are they?"

Nobody breathed a word.

"I think I can tell you where they are, sir," said Jesson. "It's almost certain that they've gone down to the station, to see Mr. Lee off. Nipper, you know, is Mr. Lee's assistant when they're working on professional detective cases."

Mr. Martin smiled grimly.

"Then we will go into the Triangle and wait until the young rascals return," he said. "Come, Jesson. I will attend to these young rascals to-morrow."

Meanwhile, Tommy and Montie and I had arrived at the station. We were only just in time, for the train was on the point of coming in. The guv'nor was standing upon the platform quite alone, and he regarded us smilingly as we appeared.

"You haven't surprised me in the

least, boys," he said. "I was half expecting that you would turn up. Dear me! One might imagine that you were coming to my funeral by the expressions you are adopting."

"We don't want you to go, sir," said Watson earnestly.

"We shall miss you frightfully, sir," added Tregellis-West.

"Well, boys, you will soon see me again, never fear!" exclaimed Lee calmly.

"You must not imagine that I am leaving St. Frank's for good. I have been dismissed——"

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

"My dear Nipper, that is the literal truth. I have been sacked in just the same manner as a drunken stableman would be sacked," said Lee, with a chuckle. "However, I am quite content. I did not expect anything better from Mr. Martin's hands. You see, St. Frank's is not large enough for both Mr. Martin and myself. I am going, but it will not be long before Mr. Martin goes for good."

"We'll see to that, sir," I said grimly.

"Oh, rats! Here's the train!"

Nelson Lee shook hands with us, and a couple of minutes later we were waving good-bye to him, as the train moved out of the little station.

"Well, that's one thing accomplished," I exclaimed. "The guv'nor has been pushed out. On the whole, I'm rather glad. If the school is willing to go in for a barring out, I'll assist with all my energy. One thing is certain—we won't stand the Head much longer."

My chums agreed with me, and we hurried back to the school, deep in thought. We were so thoughtful, in fact, that we did not consider the possibility of being detected upon arrival.

Consequently, we ran right into the arms of Jesson and Mr. Martin. The Head faced us, with gloating triumph in his eyes.

"So I have caught you red-handed—breaking bounds after bed-time!" he exclaimed harshly. "Very well! I shall make an example of you! Come with me!"

There was no sense in resisting; we could do nothing alone. Rather to our surprise, we were taken straight to the dormitory. Everybody else was in bed, and a good many fellows were asleep. But Mr. Martin soon awoke them.

"I am about to flog these three boys

in the presence of you all!" he exclaimed. "They are guilty of breaking bounds, and you will take this as a lesson not to follow their example. Nipper, stand forward."

I took the flogging without flinching, and without attempting to resist. Some of the juniors were ready to jump on the Head at the moment, but it wouldn't have been good policy. If we really decided to defy Martin, we should have to organise our forces thoroughly. For without organisation we should certainly fail.

And so we took our gruel.

Watson and Tregellis-West received the same punishment as myself—a brutal flogging, altogether out of proportion to the offence. Sore and furious, we were sent to bed on the instant.

"And remember," said the Head sternly, "any further offences committed by this Form will be punished with the utmost severity. I intend to have obedience and discipline. Any boy who presumes to defy me will do so at his peril."

The tyrant took his departure, and the dormitory was left in darkness.

But the fellows did not go to sleep. They had been thoroughly aroused by the events of the evening and by the latest example of Mr. Martin's Hunnish methods. Feeling in the Remove was at fever heat.

But talk was useless. It was all very well to threaten all manner of wild things that could never be accomplished. Mr. Howard Martin was the Headmaster of St. Frank's; he had the full authority and support of the Chairman of the Board of Governors.

If we intended to deal with him, our task was likely to be a hard one. But we were grim and determined. And out of all the talk of revolt and rebellion there was certain to emerge a definite plan, sooner or later.

The Ancient House, at all events, was ripe for revolution. It would only be a matter of time—a very short time—before the whole school was ready to set itself in defiance of the militant Head!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

Since the enlargement of our Paper, I have been deluged with letters of congratulation. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to be able to give you a little more for your money. Gradually, as the Nation settles down to rebuilding that prosperity which existed before the war, so will things become cheaper and money go farther. At present, prices generally are more than double what they were in pre-war days. An exception, however, is the cost of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" which is fifty per cent less than the present-day equivalent of pre-war prices.

The reign of terror existing at St. Franks' under the Headmastership of Mr. Howard Martin cannot last much longer. The sacking of NELSON LEE, the most popular of housemasters the old school has known, is one more nail in the new Head's coffin. Of Mr. Martin's private history, it is evident that there is some mystery which he is trying to keep dark. But he has to reckon with NELSON LEE, who is already investigating, more about which we shall learn in next week's story called, "THE TYRANT'S UNDERSTUDY."

THE EDITOR.

MAGNIFICENT STORY OF ADVENTURE AMONG THE PLANETS.



IN TRACKLESS SPACE.

A Thrilling Account of a Wonderful Voyage to the Moon, Venus, and Mars, and of a Flying Machine known as the "Solar Monarch," the Most Marvellous Invention of the Age.

By ROBT. W. COMRADE.

Author of "The Stowaway's Quest," "Scorned by the School," etc.

INTRODUCTION.

ROBERT GRESHAM, inventor of the *Solar Monarch*, an airship designed to travel through space, decides to put his theories to the test by making a journey to the moon and other planets. He is accompanied by

FRANK HILLSWORTH and **MACDONALD GUTHRIE**, both wealthy young adventurers; **PROFESSOR PALGRAVE**, a renowned scientist; and **ABBIE**, a burly negro, who acts as cook and engineer. The airship is secretly constructed in England. At last everything is in readiness to start. The adventurers are aboard, and as Gresham pulls a lever the *Solar Monarch* shoots up into space. The moon is reached in a week, the projectile attaining a speed of 2,000 miles an hour. The surface of the moon appears destitute of life, but the explorers learn, after many exciting adventures, that the dark fissures and caves are inhabited by strange monsters. They return to the *Solar Monarch*, and set off for Venus. In this world of whiteness the adventurers encounter many extraordinary beings and fresh scenes, such as have never before been seen by the inhabitants of our Mother Earth.

(Now read on.)

A Battle.

BRACE yourselves," he cried, at last. "I'm going to switch the light on again, and if it's right what I think, we'll teach these brutes a lesson they won't forget in a hurry."

He suited the action to the word, and touched the lever. Again the powerful light blazed forth, and beneath them the explorers could see that the Venusites

were getting decidedly the worst of a very one-sided battle. Hardly a battle, however, for the smaller creatures, the what might be called "human beings" of Venus, were quietly submitting to death, never offering the least sign of resistance.

"The cowards," cried Mac. "They might fight for their lives, anyhow! They're worse than—"

"Hush, Mac," said Palgrave gently. "Surely they know best what to do? Even you can see that resistance against these foes would be worse than useless? See how they kill their victims—like you or I might kill a fly."

It was an apt simile. Before the Venusites could raise a hand their terrible murderers crushed them between their forelegs, then placed them in their ghastly mouths.

"This is more than I can stand," cried Gresham in a hoarse voice. "Run and fetch a couple of those bombs, Frank. We'll try and frighten the skunks off before we resort to stronger measures!"

Frank needed no second bidding. The awful sight drove him to a frenzy, and he skidded down the companion like an avalanche. In fifty seconds he was on deck again, lighting a fuse.

They needed to make haste, too, for the work of destruction below was progressing at an amazing pace. In a moment the bomb was lowered, and those above waited breathlessly for the result.

At last it came. The bomb exploded with a loud report. If Gresham had expected the assailants to rush away in terror, he was doomed to disappointment. After one startled jump the huge

animals took no further notice, but went on unconcernedly with their late supper. To them the bomb appeared of no greater magnitude than a pea—and a very small pea at that.

"Give them a real one," snapped the scientist, thoroughly roused. "That will make them jump, I'll warrant!"

"There's no doubt about that," said the inventor. "But I've a mind to see what effect a rifle shot will produce."

"None."

"That remains to be seen. Remember how the toad-like beast collapsed this afternoon."

In two minutes Gresham was levelling a Winchester at one of the monsters, and as the whip-like crack snapped out, a deafening roar, followed by a dull thud, told its own tale. Looking down, the occupants of the airship perceived that one of the animals had collapsed in a heap, and was lying lifeless in front of one of the house doorways, through which, a minute previous, it had been dragging the unlucky inhabitants.

"By George, Gresham, you were right!" cried the professor. "Quick, lads, get the other guns! We'll soon show these slaughterers what's what!"

Which they proceeded to do with considerable alacrity. Strange as it may seem to us human beings, the massive animals fell like rabbits under the rifle fire. Evidently the bullets struck a vital part no matter what portion of the anatomy they entered. At first the remaining invaders turned their awful eyes upwards, and gazed into the brilliant glare stupidly. Then, as one followed another to the ground, they became possessed of fear. This was evident from the manner in which they dropped their victims and shuffled about uneasily. A few more rounds settled them. With one accord they turned and rushed away. The explorers gasped. The leaps those monsters took were amazing. Almost before Gresham could realise it the thunder of their feet had died away in the distance.

"Upon my word," Palgrave exclaimed, "they didn't take long, once they had started, did they? They must have been travelling at eighty miles an hour, at the lowest computation."

"If anything, I should say you have under-estimated their speed," declared

the inventor. "I could never have believed it possible——"

"Nor I," put in Frank. "They must have terrific power in their hind legs. But, I say, what do you intend to do with regard to these dead——"

"Leave them where they are," answered Gresham. "If the Venusites want to remove them, they can do so. It would be unwise in the extreme to venture below the level of the houses after what happened to-night; besides which, it would be utterly impossible for us to move the carcasses if we did get down."

"But surely these Venusites will be friendly now that we have saved their lives," commented Mac.

"That doesn't follow in the least. You must remember that we are on Venus—not the earth; and the conditions of things here are totally different. Probably, the inhabitants of this planet do not know the meaning of the word gratitude. We cannot tell; we know nothing; we are as ignorant of their ways and customs as a newly born kitten is ignorant of the ways of the world."

"And it would take years and a very much larger body of men to find out any material information," interjected Palgrave, gazing at the silent streets. "We are only just glancing at the outside of things this journey. When we get back to England we shall know nothing of the real conditions of things on this planet or the others. We shall have seen but a hundredth part of them—therefore, but a hundredth part of their inhabitants, perhaps less."

"Therefore, I vote we 'up-anchor' and sail away from this spot, and explore another part of this globe," remarked Frank.

"Quite right, Frank. But before we start again we all need a good rest. That being the case, I suggest we fly a short distance, alight, batten the hatches down, so to speak, and sleep in peace. In the morning we shall be fresh and eager for further excitement."

And this wise proposition was followed out to the letter. Leaving the silent city behind them—for some unknown reason the inhabitants had remained skulking in the buildings—the explorers flew rapidly onwards until they came to a vast plain. Here the aeronef came to rest,

perched securely on top of a large hillock. Having entered the conning-tower, the door was clamped to, and the tired inhabitants of that little world sought their pillows. Ten minutes later everything was wrapped in quietness, with the exception of Abbie's prodigious snores, and they slept in peace.

Abbie was the first to wake in the morning. He got up, dressed, then descended to the engine-room. Everything was in darkness. He switched on the electric light, looked at his watch; then at the windows.

"Sakes alive!" he murmured softly. "We'm in a 'culiar place, fo' suah! Nine o'clock, an' it ain't gettin' light yet. Dis niggah can't make dat dere out. Massa Gresham tole me t'would be light at five. Guess I'll go an' make investigations."

He hurried to the conning-tower, and compared his watch with the clock hanging there. Yes, it was just five past nine. Had Gresham been wrong? Abbie was wondering what to do, when Frank appeared, having just come from the saloon.

"Morning, Abbie!" was his greeting. "By Jove, though! I'm hanged, if you're not worried over something!"

"Dat's true, sah. T'ain't offen I worry; but can yo' 'splain wat's de matter wid my eyes?"

"With your eyes?" asked Frank, puzzled. "What the dickens are you talking about, you lump of darkness?"

"Wall, yo' see, sah, I guess I'm gettin' kinder blind. It's past de hour ob nine, an' aldough de shutters am down, I can't see nothin' frough de glass but blackness!"

"Well, I expect Mr. Gresham made a mistake in his cal——"

Frank's smiling eyes travelled from Abbie's serious face to the glass dome above his head, and a startled look came into his eyes.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed excitedly. "The sun's up, right enough, and yet it's almost dark in here, except for the electric—— Look there."

And he pointed to a spot in the glass ceiling. Abbie's eyes grew round as he saw a ray of sunlight escaping in at one tiny spot.

"What's happened, sah?" he cried.

"Someone's been tarrin' de glass, fo' suah."

"Not that, Abbie, surely! But I'm off to fetch the others. I want this mystery explained."

And Frank darted off, to return very soon with Mac, the professor, and Gresham. For a moment they stood looking at the glass in bewilderment. Then Palgrave gave a cry and darted forward. He examined the glass carefully; then turned an excited countenance towards the others.

"It's incredible!" he cried. "Yet it's the truth! The Solar Monarch is smothered from stem to stern with hundreds and thousands of insects similar to gigantic spiders!"

The others hurried to the professor's side, and examined the glass wall. Yes; he had been right. On the other side of the dome could be seen, on close inspection, millions of legs and bodies, and all were moving about convulsively. It is scarcely to be wondered at that Abbie was puzzled and alarmed, and believed that the sun had failed to make his accustomed appearance!

A Mountain Twenty-Five Miles High.

"WHAT is going to be done?" asked Frank. "How on earth shall we get rid of the beastly things?"

"We sha'n't get rid of them on earth—or Venus, either," smiled Gresham, who seemed in no way perturbed by the presence of the loathsome insects.

"What do you intend to do, then?" queried Palgrave, who was, by the aid of Abbie's lamp and the conning-tower lights, closely examining the insects on the other side of the glass wall.

"There is nothing simpler."

"I fail tae see that," cried Mac. "We canna open the door, that's very certain. If we did the room would be smothered in an instant, and for all we know these jokers may be deadly poisonous."

"My dear Mac, if you would only use a little thought, you would realise in a moment that we have merely to start the engines, rise to a height of several miles, where the air is cold and frosty, and

these insects will drop off in thousands, being unable to stand the rarified atmosphere. I am quite certain that they are harmless where they now are, so I propose having my usual morning wash—which example, I think, professor, you will follow. Then we can all collect in the conning-tower, and watch results. As it is”—he glanced down at his pyjamas and dressing-gown—"I am far from comfortable in my present deshabille. If you will excuse me, I will adjourn below for a short period."

And, smiling easily, Gresham coolly turned on his heel and descended the companion, leaving the others staring after him in some astonishment.

"Well," laughed Frank; "he doesn't appear to be very much upset. At first sight it gave me quite a turn, I can tell you. Still, I can't see how the little brutes can harm us, so I suppose it'll be all right."

Thirty minutes later, Abbie started the engines, and the Solar Monarch soared from the ground. The explorers were collected in the conning-tower, curious to see the effect upon their inquisitive visitors. At first none was apparent; then, as the airship grew higher and higher, they commenced running about uneasily.

"Ah, they're feeling the change of temperature," observed Palgrave, as he watched. "I shouldn't be surprised to see them all lose their hold presently. The temperature must be below freezing-point already."

"They won't relinquish their grip until absolutely necessary," opined Gresham. "And even then I suppose it will be because their legs freeze and grow stiff."

The little insects were evidently hardy, for the vessel continued its rapid ascent, and still they clung there. At last, however, to the watchers' satisfaction, several patches of light appeared, these gradually growing larger and larger, until, five minutes later, the whole expanse of glass dome had cleared.

"We'll get as high as possible," said Gresham, "and make absolutely sure there are none left in any crannies or corners."

Which they did. And when, after descending a few miles—for the air up there was too rarified to breathe—Gresham opened the outer door and

walked out on deck, not one of their puny assailants remained.

"Good!" said Gresham. "Now we can start on our journey across the globe unhampered."

"It would be advisable, however, to descend within a thousand feet of the ground," said the professor, stamping his feet, for even where they now hovered the air was sharp and chilly. "Then we can examine the forests and animals with ease; also, it will be somewhat warmer."

The aeronef dropped swiftly, and then Abbie started the other engine, and they commenced the journey, travelling at about sixty miles an hour. Having had breakfast, listening the while to the gentle thud, thud of the rhythmically throbbing engines, the adventurers once more took possession of the deck. And so, for several hours, the Solar Monarch rushed onwards, glittering in the burning sunlight, and vibrating under the speed at which she travelled. And those on her deck were lost in wonder at the marvellous sights they saw—too numerous to mention in this brief narrative—and Mac soon had a full score of undeveloped photographs.

Birds—or, rather, flying animals, for they could see the creatures possessed no feathers—of every conceivable description darted about beneath them. All sorts and conditions of animals roamed the forests—animals human eyes had never before seen, some big, some small, but every one being peculiar in shape and build. Once a herd of the monstrous creatures who had invaded the Venusites' city the previous night made their appearance, and from the way they travelled—swift, compact, and purposefully—it was evident that they were journeying to an agreed upon spot, probably another city.

"I shouldn't think it very pleasant, being a Venusite," remarked Frank, lighting a cigarette. "They appear to be constantly menaced by these massive brutes. And they don't seem to have any means of defending themselves, either."

It was getting on towards noon when Mac lifted his eyes from the ground beneath and looked ahead. At first he noticed nothing, owing to the glare of the sun; then, as his eyes grew accustomed

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

to it, he gave a gasp of amazement. Far ahead, wrapped in hazy clouds, could be seen a mountain range. But what a mountain range! It was of such a stupendous height that Mac could not discern the top, try as he would. The others had heard his exclamation, and now turned and looked at his amazed face curiously.

"What's the matter, Mac?" queried Palgrave. "What made you give vent to such a gasp?"

Mac pointed excitedly ahead.

"Luke there, mon!" he cried. "Hae ye iver seen such a sight before as yon? Wull ye tell me that?"

In his excitement, his voice rose and his dialect became more pronounced than usual. When he chose Mac could speak as perfect English as anyone. The others shaded their eyes and looked ahead.

"I don't see anything," began Gresham. Then he too opened his eyes wide with astonishment. "By Jove, but you'd good cause for that gasp, after all. Who ever dreamed of such a mountain?"

"Fully twenty-five miles in height," declared Palgrave when they had got over the first excitement. "And look how steep it is—almost perpendicular, rising from the ground like a pyramid. Just imagine for a moment falling from such a terrible height."

"There's one thing," laughed Frank. "You'd know nothing by the time you reached the bottom?"

"Do you intend to cross this mountain?" asked the professor, turning to Gresham, for the inventor invariably decided the various moves of the voyage. "Because, if you don't I can see us turning back. There seems to be no way round."

"Most decidedly I shall fly over it," declared Gresham. "It will be one of the most interesting experiences of our sojourn on this very peculiar planet." He touched the telegraph. "Abbie, keep your eye sharply open, and as soon as we have approached to within a hundred yards of the mountain ahead, stop the machine and keep on ascending till you get the word to stop. You understand?"

"Fo' suah, sah," replied Abbie, using his favourite phrase.

And so, instead of looking at the forests and plains beneath them, the explorers were presently swiftly mounting upwards,

examining the face of the cliff, and wondering when they would reach the mountain top.

"You might almost think we were in a huge lift," said Frank. "The sensation is precisely similar!"

Up, up, they went, and still up. At last the cold grew so intense that they were forced to stamp about and thump themselves in order to keep warm. Presently the Solar Monarch disappeared into a thick haze; she was passing through a cloud. The cold here was biting in the extreme, and very soon the occupants of the deck were forced to desert their watch and retreat into the warmth of the conning-tower. Here the atmosphere was comfortable, and Frank looked eagerly for the vessel to get clear of the cloud. He had not long to wait. Hardly had Gresham fastened the door when the aeronef shot clear of the mist, and the dazzling sunlight, falling directly on the burnished plates outside, for a moment blinded them.

"By gum, we're not to the top yet!" cried Frank, when he could see. "Talk about mountains!"

"It is higher than I anticipated," said Gresham anxiously. "The only fear I have is that the air will become too rarified to support the ship. You will have noticed that the speed is diminishing all the time, although the engines have been working at the same rate since we commenced the ascent. A mile or two higher, and we shall stop in mid-air, unable to rise another foot."

(To be continued.)

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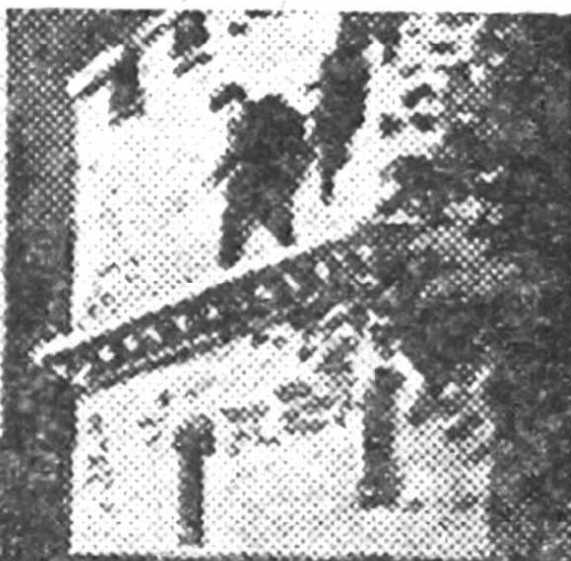
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