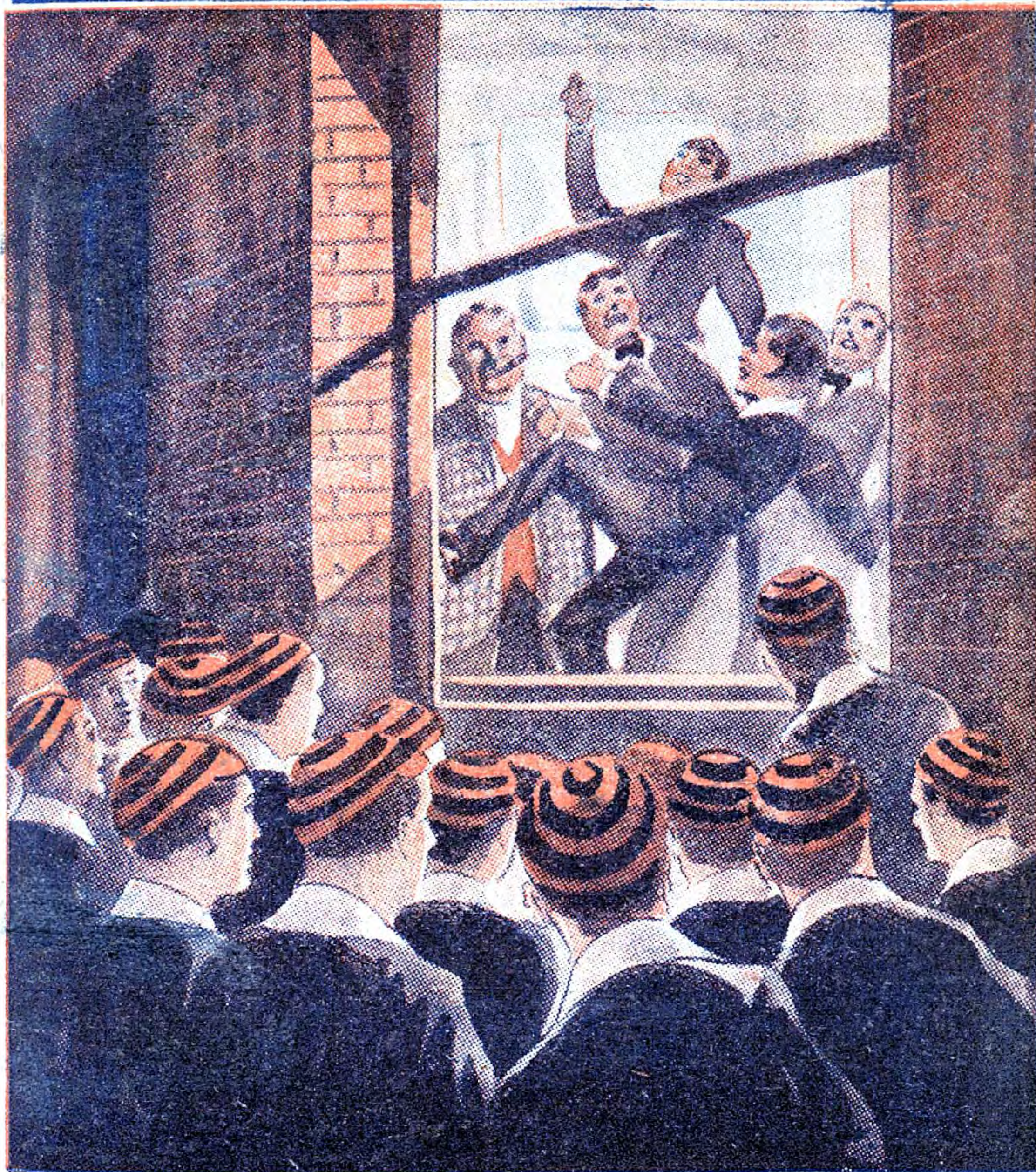


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED
THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

BAD NEWS!

"**B**LESSED if I can understand it!" remarked McClure. "He's been as sweet as honey all day long!"

"Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!" said Church. "But you never can tell with Handy, you know. Sometimes he's gloomy, other times he's in the best of spirits, and then again he suddenly becomes terrifically important. He's a wonderful chap for moods!"

McClure nodded.

"But I can't see why he should be so jolly happy to-day," he said. "There's nothing special happened. I don't believe he got a remittance this morning. But yet he's going about with a smile as broad as a giddy window!"

Church and McClure were rather puzzled about their famous leader, Edward Oswald Handforth. At present the two juniors were in Study D of the Ancient House of St. Frank's, and they were preparing tea. Handforth, for some reason or other, was hanging about in the Triangle, and every now and again he went over the gate and gazed searchingly down the road.

There was certainly something different about Handforth on this particular evening. It was quite bright, for the sky was clear and the air mild. At length, however, Handforth turned and went into the Ancient House.

When he arrived at Study D he found tea all ready, and Church and McClure were about to sit down. Handforth closed the door, and rubbed his hands gently together as he came towards the table.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Not a bad tea, on the whole, but nothing like we're going to have before long!"

"My hat!" said Church. "We don't want anything better than this, Handy! It's a special feed—to celebrate the tip I received this morning from my pater. We've got a pork pie, and a big tin of sardines, and cream puffs and —"

"It's pretty decent, I'll admit," said Handforth, sitting down at the table; "but, at the same time, a feed like this will seem pretty paltry when we get used to better things. I'm not quite satisfied with the furniture in this study, either."

Church and McClure stared.

"What's the idea?" asked McClure.

"What's wrong with the furniture?"

Handforth looked round disparagingly.

"Well, it's not so bad, but it might be a lot better," he said. "That bookcase, for example. It's chipped, and there's no giddy polish on it. I saw a ripping bookcase in Bannington the other day, solid mahogany, and it was only thirty quid!"

"Thirty quid!" yelled Church. "Who's got thirty quid here to squander on a fatheaded bookcase?"

"We're going to have that bookcase,"

said Handforth calmly. "I've already decided to buy it. I shall go and pay cash at the shop on Saturday, and tell them to deliver the thing. We might as well get some more oilcloth, too, and a jolly decent mat or two. Well, I'll tell you what, we'll have a carpet in here—a real Turkey carpet, by George!"

"And a roll-top desk, I suppose?" asked Church sarcastically. "And, while we're about it, we might as well have three roll-top desks—one each!"

"And a player-piano, and a golden overmantel," suggested McClure, grinning.

Handforth glared.

"I don't want any of your rot!" he exclaimed severely. "I'm going to get that bookcase and a carpet, and we might as well have two new easy-chairs. They've got some beauties at that same shop at about twelve quid each."

"My only hat!"

"He's—he's mad!"

"Oh, no, I'm not!" said Handforth. "I'm just telling you chaps what I mean to do, and we shall have sumptuous teas in future. You know, something really grand. There's no reason why we shouldn't spread ourselves a bit."

Church set his teacup down.

"Have you come into a fortune, by any chance?" he asked bluntly.

"Well, not exactly a fortune," said Handforth. "But two hundred quid is a pretty big amount. I'm planning to spend about sixty quid on furniture and stuff, and I'll keep the rest——"

"Two—two hundred quid!" gasped McClure, who had nearly choked himself with a mouthful of bread-and-butter. "How have you got two hundred pounds?"

Handforth smiled.

"Well, I haven't exactly got it yet," he said; "but it's coming along. It's bound to arrive either to-morrow or the next day. I've been expecting a telegram all this afternoon."

"I thought there was something the matter," said Church. "The way you watched the gate was jolly queer. What's the telegram you're expecting?"

"Oh, that's bound to come before the evening's out!" said Handforth. "You see, they'll send me a telegram before they despatch the money."

"Who will?" asked Church. "Who's they?"

"Oh, you know as well as I do!" said

Handforth. "It distinctly said in the conditions that the winner would be informed by telegram on the twelfth. Well, that's to-day. So the telegram simply must come."

"The—the winner!" gasped Church.

"Oh, my only topper!" said McClure.

"Do—do you think you'll get that two hundred pound prize in the 'Home Gossip' puzzle competition?"

"Get it?" said Handforth. "Of course I shall get it! You know as well as I do that I solved the puzzle correctly. I solved it! It stands to reason that I shall get the prize, and first prize, too!"

Church and McClure stared for an instant, and then they howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling hyenas!" roared Handforth. "You babbling lunatics! Is there anything to laugh at?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Church. "I should say there is!"

"Oh, Handy!" moaned McClure. "Why do you do it? You'll be the death of us one of these days! Fancy you thinking that you'll get the first prize in that giddy puzzle competition. Why, you stand one chance in a million!"

"He doesn't stand any chance at all!" grinned Church. "He didn't even solve the puzzle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth rose to his feet, slowly and deliberately. Then he proceeded to turn back the cuffs of his coat. He eyed Church and McClure in a grim, measured kind of way. It was quite evident that trouble was brewing.

"I—I say, Handy, don't start any of your rot!" said Church hurriedly. "We—we couldn't help grinning, you know!"

"I'm going to kick you out—both of you!" said Handforth deliberately. "I'm going to pitch you out of this study! Why, what—Great pip!"

Handforth broke off abruptly, and stared out through the window across the Triangle. His gaze was fixed and fascinated. Somebody had just entered the big gateway into the Triangle, and this somebody was a boy—a youngster on a red bicycle, and the boy was wearing a blue uniform and a peak cap.

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "The telegraph-boy! That wire's come!"

And Handforth, without waiting to deal with Church and McClure, rushed to the window, flung it up, jumped out, and raced away across the Triangle. Church and McClure stared after him, and then stared at one another.

"Well, my only hat!" said Church. "Of all the silly asses!"

"Well, there's a telegram come, anyhow," said McClure. "It may not be for Handy, but it's certainly done us a good turn!"

"Rather!" agreed Church.

They passed out of the study by means of the window, too, and they hurried across to the gateway. Handforth had already arrived, to say nothing of a number of other juniors, including Reginald Pitt, De Valerie, Tommy Watson, and two or three College House juniors.

"Telegram!" exclaimed Bob Christine. "Let's see who it's for."

But Handforth did not worry over a detail like that.

He rushed to the telegraph-boy and grabbed him by the arm.

"Gimme that telegram!" he said breathlessly.

The boy grinned.

"Sorry, Master Handforth!" he exclaimed. "I can't let you have it——"

"What rot!" roared Handforth. "It's mine! There's no need to take it in to one of the masters. Give it to me straight away. Buck up!"

"But, you see, Master Handforth——"

"I don't want any nonsense!" snapped Handforth. "Gimme that telegram now!"

"But it's not——"

"You'll either give me that wire, or get a thick ear!" snorted Handforth.

"I'm not going to be messed about by a beastly Government official!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Government official grinned.

"I'd let you have the telegram at once, but it ain't for you."

"What!"

"The telegram ain't addressed to you, Master Handforth!" said the boy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't be a young ass!" said Handforth. "Of course it's for me; it couldn't be for anybody else."

"I'm awful sorry, Master Handforth, but the telegram is for Dr. Stafford."

"Oh, my hat! The Head!"

"And we've been keeping the kid here!" said Pitt. "You'd better buzz

off and deliver that telegram at once, kid!"

The boy was allowed to depart, and Handforth looked fairly bewildered. Just then he happened to catch sight of Church and McClure, who were standing in the offing, so to speak, grinning broadly. This edifying spectacle had the effect of rousing Handforth's ire, and he gave chase at once. Church and McClure fleeing helter-skelter for safety.

Meanwhile, the telegraph messenger went to the Head's private door and rapped upon it. He handed the telegram in to the butler, who lost no time in carrying it upon a silver tray into Dr. Stafford's study.

The Head was seated in an easy-chair, reading a learned weekly periodical. He glanced up, and the butler advanced into the room.

"A telegram, sir."

"Bring it over here, Jenkins," said the Head.

The telegram was brought over, and Dr. Stafford picked it up off the tray. Then the butler retired, closing the door after him.

Dr. Stafford assumed that the wire was from one of the school governors; perhaps one of those gentlemen had sent a message to say that he was coming down to the school. If this proved to be the case, the Head would not be very pleased, for he was extremely busy just now, and visits from governors always wasted a lot of valuable time.

A minute later, however, the Head was upon his feet. His face had paled, and he was visibly agitated.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "This—this is terrible!"

The message was a cablegram, and it had been despatched from a small Swiss town earlier in the day. It ran as follows:

"Come at once. Avalanche early this morning. Maude gravely injured; fear dying. She has asked for you."

"CRESSWELL."

The Headmaster paced up and down for some moments.

"How shocking!" he muttered. "How truly appalling! Poor Maude—poor Maude!"

For fifteen minutes the Head remained alone with his great trouble, and by the end of that time he had come to a

decision. He rang his bell, and tried to look composed.

Tubbs, the pageboy, appeared.

"Tubbs, I want you to go to Mr. Lee, and tell him that I require his presence in my study," said the Head unsteadily. "You will then go to Mr. Foxe and give the same message."

"Yessir!" said Tubbs.

The pageboy gave the Head a curious glance, for he could see that something was wrong. Then he passed out of the study, and made all haste to give his messages. Five minutes later Nelson Lee tapped at the door of Dr. Stafford's study, and entered. But he had hardly done so before Mr. Smale Fox arrived.

"Ah, gentlemen, I am glad that you have come together!" said the Head gravely. "I have received some terrible news, and it has necessitated a complete alteration of my plans."

"I trust that nothing is seriously wrong?" asked Nelson Lee concernedly.

"I wish to Heaven I could give you a happy answer, Mr. Lee!" said the Head gravely. "But I am unable to do so. My sister has met with a terrible accident in Switzerland, and, I fear, is dying."

"I am distressed to hear this news, Dr. Stafford," said Nelson Lee. "It is indeed terrible."

"If we can do anything, sir, you may rely upon Mr. Lee and myself to use our utmost efforts," put in Mr. Foxe.

"Thank you, Mr. Foxe—thank you!" said the Head. "I have received a cablegram from my brother-in-law—Sir Horace Cresswell. He and his wife—my sister—went to Switzerland for a holiday, and it seems that my sister is a victim of a terrible avalanche accident. I must go to Switzerland at once. I must leave to-night—within the hour!"

"If we can be of any help——" began Nelson Lee.

"I really fail to see what you can do, Mr. Lee," interrupted the Head. "There is only one course I can pursue. I must go to London without delay, and cross to France as early as possible to-morrow. Perhaps there will be some delay over passports, but we must expect that in these times. In any case, I must go to London by the evening train, and hope for the best."

"Perhaps, if I came with you, I might be able to hurry matters through," suggested Nelson Lee. "I can, at all

events, use my influence with certain Government officials."

"It is very good of you, Mr. Lee, but I think you will be needed here," said the Head. "And I fancy that I shall be able to deal with my own difficulties in a satisfactory manner. During my absence, I want you to have full control of the Ancient House, Mr. Lee, and the same applies to you, Mr. Foxe—you will have full control of the College House. You will each be your own headmaster for the time being. I do not suppose I shall be absent for much longer than a week, but it will possibly be ten days before I finally return to the school. During that time, gentlemen, I wish you to do your best. You will be in full charge of the Ancient House, Mr. Lee, and you will be in complete charge of the College House, Mr. Foxe. I have no hesitation in saying that I have complete confidence that everything will run smoothly until I return."

Neither Mr. Foxe nor Nelson Lee could say much. Lee, for his part, felt that the Head would be relieved if very little was said, for Dr. Stafford was in a terrible state of worry and agitation.

Mr. Foxe took his departure almost at once, leaving Nelson Lee and the Head alone. The master of the College House crossed the Triangle, and when he got into his own study he closed the door, and he rubbed his hands gently together.

His eyes were gleaming, and there was a smile of intense pleasure on his face. Apparently he was not worrying himself over Dr. Stafford's trouble. Mr. Foxe was thinking of something very different.

"My chance at last!" he muttered exultantly. "It has come, and I will seize it!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHEMER'S OPPORTUNITY.

MR. SMALE FOXE lay back in his easy-chair, puffing at a cigarette. He was thinking; he was scheming. Yes, his opportunity had come! He had waited for it, and now it was within his grasp. He would hold it with both hands, and take advantage of the circumstances.

Dr. Stafford was going away—within an hour he would be gone!

And then would come a period of perhaps ten days or a fortnight, during which time Mr. Foxe would have complete and absolute control of the College House. Whatever happened on this side of the Triangle, Nelson Lee would be unable to interfere. In just the same way, Mr. Foxe would be unable to interfere with the Ancient House. He had no desire to do any such thing, but he was quite determined that Nelson Lee should not intervene in the affairs of the College House.

"Lee will have no right—no right whatever!" Mr. Foxe murmured. "Whatever happens here, I am the master—I am in charge! Nothing can be done until Dr. Stafford returns. And he will be in Switzerland, unable to lift his finger! By heaven, what a chance—what a golden opportunity!"

Mr. Smale Foxe was not popular in the College House. He was, strictly speaking, only a temporary Housemaster, for Mr. Stockdale was away, and would be away for the whole term, and probably the next. And, although Mr. Foxe had been at St. Frank's only a comparatively short time, he had managed to give the Headmaster a very good impression; and certainly he was a clever man, and a good scholar! The Head knew nothing of certain facts concerning Mr. Foxe's behaviour.

And yet the Housemaster had performed many questionable acts since his arrival at St. Frank's.

He had attempted to blackmail Lawrence, of the Remove. But the junior had defied Mr. Foxe to do his worst, and Mr. Foxe had done nothing.

Only the previous week, however, Mr. Foxe had engineered a plot which had been calculated to get Lawrence expelled from the school in dire disgrace. But that plot had come to nought, mainly owing to the efforts of Nelson Lee. But Lee had been acting in secret, and Mr. Foxe knew nothing whatever of the inner facts. And now he did not care! He cast Lawrence out of his thoughts. He had another scheme in view, a scheme which had been in his mind ever since he had set foot in the College House.

After a while, the Housemaster rose to his feet and paced up and down the study. But he felt that he wanted somebody to talk to—he wanted somebody to listen to him, and there was certainly

nobody at St. Frank's whom he could confide in. Therefore, after a while, he came to a decision, and, getting on his overcoat and hat, he emerged into the Triangle, and strode rapidly down the lane towards Bellton.

By this time the Head had taken his departure; he had left by the fast evening train for London.

But Mr. Foxe's journey was only a short one. He caught a slow local train at the station which carried him into Bannington, merely a distance of three miles.

Mr. Foxe walked briskly through the streets of Bannington until he came to a quiet side road, where there were small, old-fashioned houses. Mr. Foxe knocked at the door of one of these, and, when it was answered, he inquired if a Mr. Robinson was at home.

"Why, yes, sir," said the woman, who stood at the door. "Mr Robinson is up in his rooms now."

"Thank you!" said Mr. Foxe. "May I go up?"

"Why, yes, sir, with pleasure!" said the landlady. "You're a friend of Mr. Robinson's, ain't you, sir?"

"Yes, my good woman—yes!" said Mr. Foxe, brushing past her.

It was, of course, a lodging-house. At least, there were two rooms there which were occupied by this Mr. Robinson. Mr. Foxe passed up the stairs, arrived on the landing, and then he entered one of the rooms. As he entered, a man who had been sitting down near the fire, rose to his feet and came forward.

"Oh, it's you, James!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad you have come, because I want to have a straight talk with you. To tell you the truth, I'm getting quite tired of this state of affairs."

"My dear Ralph, there is no need for you to adopt that tone," said Mr. Smale Foxe smoothly. "The time will shortly arrive when I shall need you more than ever."

The two men did not shake hands. They stood looking at one another, and Mr. Robinson appeared to be somewhat impatient and angry. He was a man exactly the same size as Mr. Foxe—the same build in every detail. But he had long, shaggy hair, he wore tinted spectacles, and a moustache adorned his upper lip.

But shorn of these additions, Mr. Robinson would have been a second edition of Mr. Foxe.

To be quite frank, "Mr. Robinson" was Mr. Smale Foxe in reality—Mr. Ralph Smale Foxe, and he was facing his brother, Mr. James Smale Foxe. By all appearances, there was not much love lost between them.

And this was scarcely to be wondered at, for it had been Ralph who had received the appointment as Housemaster at St. Frank's. For the first day or two, Mr. Ralph Smale Foxe had held that position. But then his brother had appeared upon the scene—his twin-brother, and James had stepped into Ralph's shoes. In other words, it was the wrong Mr. Smale Foxe who was the Housemaster at St. Frank's.

There had been a great deal of trouble at first. Ralph had positively refused to have anything to do with his rascally brother. He had refused to allow him to enter the school. But then there had been a quarrel, and Ralph had been brutally struck down by his brother. During the time that he was unable to take action, Mr. James Smale Foxe went into the school and took charge of the College House. After that, it had been impossible for Ralph to assert himself. And he was not the kind of man to assert himself, being rather weak willed. He was clever and steady-going and moderate in every way. Had he not been interfered with, all would have been right. But the cunning of James had upset everything.

And it seemed, moreover, that Mr. Smale Foxe had some hold over his brother Ralph. The latter was unable to take any action; he could do nothing. Thus it was that Ralph was here, in Bannington, wearing a simple disguise.

"The Headmaster has gone," said Mr. Smale Foxe, with delight in his tones. "Dr. Stafford has left St. Frank's, and he will not be back until the end of next week, and probably not until a fortnight has elapsed. During that time, Ralph, an enormous amount can be done."

"What do you mean?" asked Ralph.

"I mean that my chance has come—the chance I have been waiting for ever since the beginning of this term at St. Frank's!" said Mr. Foxe tensely. "Don't you understand, man—don't you realise what I mean? I have been placed in complete charge of the College House, and there is no higher appeal, since the Headmaster is absent. Whatever I do in the College House—what-

ever happens—I alone shall be responsible. I have been waiting for this for weeks and weeks!"

Ralph stared at his twin-brother.

"You must be mad, James!" he exclaimed. "What insane idea have you got in your mind now? What mischief are you contemplating?"

"That is precisely the word—mischief!" said Mr. Foxe grimly. "By heavens, have I not waited for fifteen years? Think of it, Ralph! Fifteen years! And now, at last, my time has come. The name of St. Frank's College is to be dragged in the mud!"

Ralph started.

"Good, gracious! You—you don't mean——"

"I mean that I am going to have my revenge!" interrupted Mr. Foxe. "I am going to pay off an old score!"

Ralph looked at his brother in rather a scared kind of way.

"But you can't mean it, James!" he exclaimed huskily. "Fifteen years ago! Surely you do not intend to rake up that old trouble now? It is dead and buried! Why should you want to harbour any animosity?"

"I made a vow at the time that I would get even," said Mr. Foxe. "I said that no matter how long I found it necessary to wait, I should get my own back one day. That day has arrived, Ralph; it is here!"

"But—but——"

"Listen!" interrupted the other. "Since I came to St. Frank's—since I stepped into your shoes—I have been watching. Until now, I have been unable to achieve my desire. My little affair with Lawrence is a trifle; it matters nothing now. This new development eclipses everything."

Ralph was looking worried and anxious.

"But, man alive, you can't do it!" he ejaculated. "You can't carry out your threat, James!"

"I can, and I will!"

"It is mad—absolutely mad!" said Ralph. "And of your name afterwards—what of my name?"

"Ah, that is what you are thinking about, is it?" sneered Mr. Foxe, turning on his brother. "You're wondering about your name. Have no fear, Ralph; you will not be mixed up in this matter."

"But you are supposed to be——"

"At present—yes," said Mr. Foxe; "but later on the truth will be told. It won't matter then—the harm will be done. The name of St. Frank's will have been dragged into the gutter, and it will be a matter of years before the school recovers from the terrible blow. Don't you understand, Ralph? Public opinion is a queer thing, and once St. Frank's gets a bad name, that name will stick to it. It may take years and years for an establishment to get a reputation, but that reputation can be wrecked within one week. And no matter what explanations are made afterwards, it will make little difference. When this is all over, your position will be quite plain, for it will be well known that it was I who acted in your stead. You will not suffer, Ralph, so you need not shiver in your shoes."

Ralph shrugged his shoulders rather helplessly.

"Is it worth it?" he asked. "Ask yourself that question, James. Is it worth all this trouble? Why not let bygones be bygones? Why should you drag up that episode, which is now fifteen years old? I didn't think you were a man like that, James. I didn't think that you would harbour animosity in your mind for such a terrible time. And, after all, you were to blame——"

"Bah!" snapped Mr. Smale Foxe. "It is no good arguing with you, Ralph—no good at all! You always were a fool, and you always will be one!"

"You had better be careful——"

"Oh, don't let your temper run away with you!" interrupted Mr. Foxe curtly. "I will just remind you of what happened fifteen years ago, since you have forgotten. I was an undermaster at St. Frank's at that time; I held the position for exactly three months. And then, just because I happened to have a harmless visitor in my study, I was dismissed. I was sacked without a moment's warning—I was packed off that very evening!"

"But the visitor——"

"The visitor was a bookmaker. Well, what of it?" demanded Mr. Foxe. "A man has a right to choose his own friends, I suppose? This man was a bookmaker, and I was simply indulging in a little flutter. Was there any harm in it? I was a youngster then, and all would have been well but that the Headmaster happened to come into my study at that very time. It wasn't Dr. Stafford; the

fellow is dead now. But that makes no difference. My grudge is against St. Frank's, not against any particular individual."

"But——"

"Wait until I have finished!" went on Mr. Foxe impatiently. "That disaster was my undoing, Ralph. I was sent away from St. Frank's, and I had a bad name. Everywhere I attempted to find a position I was turned down. No matter which way I looked, it was the same. I could get no appointment. For two years I nearly starved. I went about seeking work of any description. I was in rags. I finally took any odd job in order to save myself from starvation. Then gradually the past was forgotten, and I secured a position as undermaster in a small private school in the North of England. After that time I gradually got on, and things were better. But I have never forgotten those two years, Ralph, and I have never forgotten that St. Frank's was responsible."

Ralph looked impatient.

"It's all very well for you to talk like this, James," he said; "but are you speaking the absolute truth? Why should you have this grudge against St. Frank's? What reason had you got for such animosity? You were dismissed by a headmaster who is now dead."

"The school governors are the same," interjected Mr. Foxe curtly. "It was they who dismissed me; it was they who put me on the 'black list.' Now, in revenge, I intend to 'black list' the school! It will be a fitting revenge. Next term St. Frank's will be half empty—parents will withdraw their boys, and a period of disaster will overtake the school."

Ralph stepped up to his brother and looked him straight in the eye.

"This is a terrible thing you are contemplating, James!" he said quietly. "Think well before you start upon it. And remember that it was your own fault you were dismissed from St. Frank's fifteen years ago."

"My own fault!"

"Yes!" rapped out Ralph. "You had this bookmaker in your study, and you had two or three senior boys. You were inciting them to put bets on horses. Could any headmaster under the sun keep you in the school after a discovery such as that? Why not be reasonable and face the facts? Your own commonsense ought to tell you that you are to blame,

and nobody else. 'Therefore, why should you harbour this hatred against St. Frank's and the school governors?'

Mr. Foxe snapped his fingers.

"This kind of talk makes me tired!" he said impatiently. "I have mapped out my course, Ralph, and I intend to keep to that course."

"This plan of yours is hastily conceived, and it will end in disaster," said Ralph. "Be quite sure of that, James."

"Conceived in haste!" interrupted Mr. Foxe. "What do you mean? I have been planning this for years! I've been waiting for an opportunity to come to St. Frank's, so that I could put my scheme into operation. When I learned that you had obtained a position as housemaster, I seized upon that chance at once. I came here, and I stepped into your shoes. And now—now, my dear brother, I am in sole charge of the College House. There is not one soul in the whole school to question my actions, or to hinder my progress. It will not take me long to drag down the name of St. Frank's into the mire."

Ralph sighed wearily.

"Why have you come here?" he asked. "Why have you come to me?"

"Because it is quite likely that I shall require your assistance," said Mr. Foxe. "It will be no use your objecting. Ralph—if I need you, I shall come. And I thought it as well to prepare you in advance."

"What about the Headmaster?" asked Ralph. "What will your position be when Dr. Stafford returns and finds the school in chaos?"

Mr. Foxe laughed.

"My position will be quite secure, for I shall not be here," he replied. "After I have done the damage, I shall quietly and unobtrusively leave the district."

"Leaving me to face the music?" asked Ralph bitterly.

"By no means. You will have my full permission to tell the truth, and it will be an easy matter for you to produce evidence that will support your story. And, in any case, your troubles do not concern me."

"Ah, now you are speaking the truth!" said Ralph. "I do not think I shall put up with this, James. I shall take action——"

"By heavens!" snarled Mr. Foxe. "If you dare to interfere, Ralph, I will take such action that you will regret it to your dying day! Do not forget

what happened seven years ago. You were imprisoned for three months——"

"Why should you remind me of that?" interrupted Ralph wretchedly. "Yes, I was in prison, but for a crime which you committed, James. You cunningly arranged matters so that I should be blamed, and I could do nothing."

"Well, it makes little difference who committed the crime," said Mr. Foxe curtly. "You were imprisoned, and that fact has been kept secret until now; but if you dare to interfere in this matter, Ralph, I will bring that fact into prominence. You will never obtain another position; you will be sent from pillar to post, until you starve!"

Ralph sat down, and he breathed hard.

"It is difficult for me to believe that I have such a brother as you!" he exclaimed huskily. "You have caused nothing but trouble, James—always trouble! Have you no heart? Have you no finer feelings——"

"This is no time to discuss such matters!" interrupted Mr. Foxe grimly. "I have a heart, and I have finer feelings—but, at the moment, I have cast them aside. I made a vow that I would get even with St. Frank's and the school governors—and now my time has come!"

"I can see that it is quite useless to argue with you," said Ralph, with a sigh. "You have made your plans, and nothing will cause you to alter them."

"But have you thought of the difficulties you will have to contend against?" he continued. "In the first place, how do you intend to set to work? How will you achieve your object?"

"In the simplest manner possible."

"It is not a simple matter at all," said Ralph. "St. Frank's has one of the best reputations in the Kingdom, and it will not be an easy matter to upset it——"

"You think not?" asked Mr. Foxe smoothly. "My own opinion is very different from yours, Ralph. I will tell you this much. I do not intend to take any particular action on my own account. I shall do no plotting, and no scheming. And, as I sit in my study at St. Frank's, the damage will be done—swiftly and grimly. Within the space of two weeks I will cause so much damage that it will take twenty years to repair. I shall not tell you more now—you will very soon know. Because the whole of Bannington will be talking about St. Frank's."

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT.

"**R**OUGH on the Head!" remarked Tommy Watson. "I feel awfully sorry for him, you know."

"Begad! Rather, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, nodding. "It is frightfully bad. I do hope that the poor lady will recover. I suppose the Head is well on his way to Switzerland by now."

"Well, I should think so, Montie," I said. "But then, of course, he'll have to deal with passport officials, and you know what they're like! If Dr. Stafford gets over to Switzerland by this time to-morrow, he'll probably be lucky."

It was the day following, and Sir Montie and Tommy and I were standing with our backs to the gymnasium wall, and we were having a little quiet chat. Morning lessons were over, and it would soon be dinner time.

"I wonder how long it will be before the Head comes back?" asked Watson.

"Oh, pretty nearly a fortnight, I should think," I replied. "He's bound to stay over there until his sister recovers—or dies. If she dies it'll be awfully rough, and the Head will be delayed much longer. But, in any case, it won't make any difference to us here. Everything will go on just the same."

"Oh, I don't know," put in Bob Christine, who had joined. "Old Foxey has got complete charge of the College House now, and the Head ain't about to look on. There's no telling what tricks he'll get up to. He's a queer bird, is Foxey, and he may take advantage of the Head going away."

"Well, perhaps so," I said. "I think Mr. Foxe is that kind, as a matter of fact. But he can't do much. You seem to forget, Christine, old son, that Mr. Lee is on the spot!"

"No he isn't!" said Christine.

"He's in control of the Ancient House

"That's a different thing," said Christine. "Mr. Lee will have quite enough to do to look after you chaps, without bothering about us. He's got his hands pretty full!"

"You cheeky monk——" began Watson wrathfully.

"Keep your hair on!" grinned Bob. "No offence, old son! But, seriously speaking, Mr. Lee won't be able to take

any hand in our affairs on the College House side. For one thing, he won't have the authority. Mr. Foxe is master of his own house—and, if Mr. Lee interferes, he'll be butting in, and Foxey will probably send him about his own business!"

"The guv'nor won't butt in!" I said. "As long as Mr. Foxe conducts the College House to the best of his ability, he won't be interfered with. Of course, I fully realise that it's a hopeless task to conduct the College House at all. Considering what a set of monkeys there are inside——"

"Nothing doing!" grinned Bob Christine. "I don't feel like starting a House row now, Nipper. The only thing about Foxey, is that he's an unknown quantity. He's done one or two queer things, and perhaps now that the Head's gone, he'll do a few more. That's the worst of these new men—we never know how they're going to turn out. Now, if we had old Stockdale, it would be a different thing. The Head's absence wouldn't make any difference."

"And I don't suppose it will make any difference now," said Watson.

But Bob Christine shook his head doubtfully.

And, as it turned out, the leader of Study Q was quite a prophet in his own way. For Mr. Smale Foxe not only startled the College House, but he staggered the whole school.

It was a half holiday that day, and the fellows were unusually light-hearted at dinner time. Over in the College House, everything was going smoothly. Word went round, just before dinner was over, that the whole House was to collect in the Lecture Hall immediately the meal was over—every senior, every prefect, and every junior, including the fags. In fact, every single boy was to be present in the Lecture Hall immediately after dinner.

Nobody knew why, except that Mr. Foxe intended addressing the whole House. He wanted to say a few words—so it was understood. But, what these few words were about, nobody could imagine.

"Oh, it'll be nothing!" said Oldfield, at the dinner table. "He's going to preach, I suppose!"

"Or else he's going to ask us to alter some of the rules," said Clapson. "That's the worst of these Housemasters.

They're always making alterations—and it's a dead certainty that the alterations will be unpopular. And it's rather queer that he should do this after the Head's gone away!"

"Well, it's no good making guesses," said Yorke. "The only thing we can do is to wait. We shall soon know the truth, anyway."

After grace had been said, it was the usual custom for the boys to file out of the dining hall, and their time was their own. But, on this occasion, they filed straight out, each form to itself, and marched into the Lecture Hall. A prefect had charge of every form, in order to see that no juniors slipped off.

And, at length, everybody was present in the Lecture Hall—there was not one absentee. And all the fellows, seniors and juniors alike, were curious to know why they had been called together.

They did not wonder for long.

Mr. Smale Foxe appeared on the platform at the end of the hall. He was wearing his gown and mortar board, and he looked rather impressive. His long nose appeared to be longer than usual, and his bony face was set in an expression of pleasant anticipation. If anything, Mr. Foxe was looking genial.

"Now, boys, just a few words with you!" he began cheerfully. "Please do not imagine that I have come here to lecture you, or to preach. Nothing is further from my thoughts. I merely wish to have a little confidential chat—a quiet talk with you. I intend to say a few things which will probably cause surprise—but, I am quite sure, you will not be disappointed. To be quite blunt, I have made up my mind to try an experiment—a great experiment."

The fellows listened, wondering. And Mr. Foxe proceeded.

"This experiment of mine will be something of an entirely new and novel character," went on Mr. Foxe. "Now, to begin with, I do not altogether agree with the rules and regulations which have been set down for this House. The same rules and regulations apply to the Ancient House, of course—but, unfortunately that House is not under my control, and I can do nothing. But I am convinced that Mr. Lee will follow my example when he finds out how well this experiment works—as I am certain it will work. The alteration I intend making will be drastic."

Bob Christine snorted under his breath.

"There you are!" he muttered. "I knew it! Messing about with the rules! I suppose he's going to put Bannington out of bounds, and forbid the juniors to have tea in their own studies, and all that sort of rot!"

"If he tries any of those games, there'll be trouble!" muttered Talmadge.

"By Jove, there'll be big trouble! We won't stand any rot!"

"The rules are all right—why should they be altered?"

There was quite a buzz of talk in the ranks of the Remove and the Third.

"Silence!" called out a prefect.

Mr. Foxe looked round, still smiling.

"It has been a pet theory of mine that boys are compelled to suffer restrictions of too severe a nature," he went on.

"In a big school like this, the boys have no freedom. They are, practically speaking, held in a state of bondage. And, to my mind, that does not seem to be an ideal state of affairs. If boys were trusted more they would be more open, more honest and more straightforward. Under the existing conditions, boys are liable to be more deceitful and cunning—not to say untruthful. Hemmed in by so many rules, they actually break these rules as regularly as clockwork. It is only to be supposed that they should do so. Boys are boys, and their spirits will not be kept down. What is the result when they are restricted by absurd rules and regulations?"

Mr. Foxe looked round again, and he observed that the fellows were paying much more attention—and were looking quite interested.

"It is hardly necessary for me to tell you the result," he continued. "Practically every boy in the school becomes a liar—and I do not intend to offend you by that remark. It is the simple truth. All boys, when they are compelled to face the music for some little misdemeanour—all boys in those circumstances, invent excuses. It is only natural that they should do so. They do not wish to suffer the consequences of their harmless little actions, and therefore resort to falsehood. The whole system encourages such a thing. It is the system which is wrong—wrong from start to finish. And if a certain thing is forbidden it is only natural for healthy boys to do that very thing. Somehow, or other, human nature is made that way. Things which are forbidden are much more sought after than those things

which are readily obtained. I think you will all agree with me on that point."

Mr. Foxe again paused, and he saw that his audience was more interested than ever. The fellows were listening intently, wondering what on earth the Housemaster was getting at. And, the majority of the fellows heartily agreed with Mr. Foxe. They did not believe in all the rules and regulations—they would certainly welcome more freedom with open arms. And they began to regard Mr. Foxe with more kindly eyes. They had an idea that he was about to make alterations which would meet with their entire approval.

"Now, take a school like St. Frank's," went on Mr. Foxe, in an easy, conversational style. "This school, when you come to think of it, closely resembles a prison; This is not an exaggeration—it is the simple truth. In other words, my boys, you are similar to convicts!"

"My only hat!"

"What the dickens is he getting at?"

"Convicts!"

"Great Scott!"

"I am only making a comparison," went on Mr. Foxe. "You boys are like convicts in this respect—you are hemmed in by restrictions—you are held in bondage. You cannot go out when you choose, you cannot stay out as long as you like—you cannot go to this place, and you cannot go to the other place. Your life is made up of one constant struggle to evade the rules and regulations which bind you. You are always suspected of wrongdoing—you are never trusted. Under no circumstances has it been possible for you to follow your own impulses. You have been compelled to remember those rules. It is all the time—rules, rules, rules! You have no freedom—no joy in living. Now, it is my intention to alter all this. I am going to make a great experiment—and, I am convinced, this experiment will be successful."

"What can he mean?"

"Blessed if I know!"

"There's a trick in it somewhere!" muttered Bob Christine. "But I will say that Mr. Foxe is speaking in the most extraordinary way! I've never heard of a Housemaster addressing his boys in such a manner as this! It's absolutely unheard of!"

"Rather!"

Mr. Foxe beamed round the Lecture Hall.

"I wish to tell you that I do not believe in this present system," said the Housemaster. "I do not think that boys should be restricted so much. It only harbours discontent and deceitfulness. It is my idea that if boys are given more freedom—if they are put on trust—they will not take advantage of the fact. They will, on the contrary, be on their best behaviour. And, instead of being constantly at war with the masters and prefects, they will be on amiable terms. And the whole school will carry on smoothly and sedately, and with perfect harmony for all concerned."

The majority of the fellows were now open-mouthed with astonishment. They could hardly believe what Mr. Foxe was saying. Such utterances had never before passed the lips of a Housemaster, and yet, at the same time, the fellows realised that there was perfect logic in what Mr. Foxe said.

But it frequently happens that when logic is put into practice, it is not successful. It is quite possible that Mr. Foxe's ideas were sound—to a certain extent. But to give boys absolute freedom—or even partial freedom—is merely another way of asking for trouble. But, of course, Mr. Smale Foxe wanted trouble. That was his whole object.

"Freedom!" muttered Christine. "My hat!"

"No rules!" said Yorke.

"No regulations!" murmured Talmadge breathlessly.

"Great Scott!"

"He—he must be dotty!"

"Clean off his rocker!"

"No sane master would jaw to us like this!" said Christine.

Mr. Foxe commenced speaking again, and everybody became absolutely silent—listening intently.

"I am fully aware that discipline must be maintained," said Mr. Foxe. "Discipline in a big school like St. Frank's is necessary. But cannot discipline be obtained without all these unnatural rules? Surely the boys themselves will be able to keep things in order? In any case, I intend to make this experiment, and see how it works out. That is my idea in speaking to you now. I wish to tell you all that restrictions, from this moment, will be cancelled. I have a mind to see how you will act if you are given your freedom. That freedom is yours now—you are your own masters, and you will be able to do

exactly as you wish. But you must remember, constantly, that you are on parole, and that you must be answerable to yourselves for your actions. You must be honest and upright always—you must remember that you belong to a great and honourable school, and that you must not commence any actions which will be detrimental to St. Frank's. Do you follow me, boys?"

"Yes, sir," roared several voices.

"Rather, sir!"

"Splendid!" smiled Mr. Foxe. "I want you to thoroughly understand that all existing rules are at an end. You will be placed upon your honour to carry on in just the same way as of old. But you can do as you wish. For example, no place will be out of bounds for College House boys. Those places which have been out of bounds hitherto will now be open to you. You may go where you wish, and no questions will be asked. We will take an example."

"That's the idea, sir!"

"We will suppose that a boy has been doing a hard ride on a bicycle," continued Mr. Foxe. "He is hot and thirsty. And it happens to be in a little village, perhaps five or six miles away from St. Frank's, where there is no shop, there is, however, a public-house. The boy enters this public-house in order to obtain a bottle of ginger beer or lemonade. He drinks this, is refreshed, and emerges. Well, just at that moment a St. Frank's master passes by in a motor-car. He sees the boy emerging from the public-house, and later on he is reported. He is flogged."

"Rather!" murmured Christine. "Entering a pub. is a frightful crime!"

"Well, you see how unjustly the boy is treated!" said Mr. Foxe. "He went into that public-house in order to obtain a harmless drink; and yet, because of those antiquated regulations, he is compelled to suffer severe flogging. In my opinion, most unjust and unfair. Every boy has a right to enter a public-house if he wishes to—possibly, it is only a means of obtaining a harmless, refreshing drink. All boys understand well enough that intoxicating liquor is harmful, and boys will not touch it. In future, you will be able to use your own discretion in such matters."

"Oh!"

"My only topper!"

"We—we can go into pubs!"

"Great pip!"

"And then, again, there is the question of visitors," went on Mr. Foxe. "At present no boy is allowed to bring a visitor to the school—to partake of tea in his study, say—unless that visitor is well known, and has a recognised right."

"Yes, sir."

"That, in my opinion, is wrong," said Mr. Foxe. "A boy ought to be able to choose his own friends, without being questioned by master and prefects. In the future, you will all be able to bring to the school any visitors you choose, and you will be able to entertain them, and have an enjoyable time during your free hours. Furthermore, your visitors will be able to remain just as long as they like."

"What about when bedtime comes, sir?"

"Bedtime?" repeated Mr. Foxe. "That, of course, will be left entirely to your own discretion. In future, you will be able to go to bed when you like —"

"Oh!"

"Go—go to bed when we like!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"Great Scott!"

"You appear to be surprised, boys," smiled Mr. Foxe. "But I am sure that everything will work out smoothly. Perhaps there will be a little exuberance during the first day or two, but that will soon wear down. And you must remember that I trust you. As I have just said, you may do as you like, and you may go to bed when you like. But you must remember that if you lose any sleep it will be your own loss. For you must be up in the morning, in order to get down in time for breakfast. Lessons will be exactly the same as hitherto. You must attend lessons punctually, and you will be answerable to your Form-masters if you are late. This experiment of mine solely concerns your free hours. It is my desire to give you full liberty in your free hours."

"If any of you wish to go to a place of amusement, you can go. And if you arrive back late, it will be your concern whether you lose a certain amount of sleep or not. That has nothing whatever to do with me. The door of the College House will always be open, ready to admit you—no matter how late!"

"Phew!"

"We—we must be dreaming!" said Christine. "It can't be true!"

"It's the most amazing thing we ever heard in all our lives!"

"Rather!"

"From now onwards there will be no prefects in the College House," proceeded Mr. Foxe. "Prefects will be unnecessary under the new conditions. And you will all be able to do precisely as you choose—individually. There will be no interference, and no inquisitive prying. I intend to let you do just as you like; and, boys, I am convinced that you will not disappoint me. I want you to help me in making this experiment a success. For, if it is successful, I can assure you that the Headmaster will approve of it when he returns. So it is up to you to be careful, and to refrain from abusing your new liberty."

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Foxe!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers were given with a will—with a terrific roar, which nearly lifted the roof of the lecture hall from the walls. And Mr. Foxe stood looking on, beaming and smiling.

It was impossible for him to say anything more after that, the uproar was too great. At all events, Mr. Smale Foxe had succeeded in staggering the College House, and his speech was the most popular one which had been uttered in the whole history of St. Frank's. Mr. Foxe was regarded as a wonder. Everybody adored him at that moment.

And, still smiling, Mr. Foxe retired, and made his way to his own study. He closed the door, and advanced into the centre of the room, rubbing his hands softly together.

"Excellent," he murmured. "I rather fancy I have sown the seed. The harvest will be quite a big one, I imagine! Unless I am greatly mistaken about boys, they will not disappoint me. This experiment will end exactly as I want it to—in disaster; for when boys are given their liberty they are almost certain to abuse it. That is what I require!"

There was a great deal of truth in what Mr. Foxe said. The College, suddenly finding itself in possession of liberty, would go off its head—and a large number of fellows would immediately set to work to "make hay."

Certainly, Mr. Foxe warned the boys

that they were on their honour, and that they would have to remember, constantly, that they were trusted, and that they must not do anything which would be detrimental to their characters, or to the honour of St. Frank's.

But Mr. Foxe knew well enough that fellows would not take heed of those words. Mr. Foxe was cunning, and he had used his cunning to the full advantage. With this sudden liberty in their hands would the boys remember to be moderate? Most decidedly they would not!

They would forget everything—they would take complete control, and, as a result, trouble with a capital T would fall upon the school.

Mr. Foxe knew quite a great deal about boys, and he was certain in his own mind that this experiment of his would be eminently successful.

But it would be the kind of success which Mr. Smale Foxe desired!

CHAPTER IV.

RELEASED FROM BONDAGE.

"FREEDOM!"

"No rules—no regulations!"
"We can go where we like, and stay as long as we like!"

"My only aunt!"

"It's—it's absolutely staggering!"

The fellows were out in the Triangle now, collected together in little groups.

They were excitedly discussing the position. Seniors as well as juniors were filled with wonder and excitement. They could not understand what it all meant—they could not fully grasp the meaning of Mr. Foxe's revolutionary order.

A great many fellows were overjoyed, and filled with exuberant spirits. They did not trouble to think—they only knew that they had their liberty, that there was nobody to question them or to stop them.

The Ancient House fellows, of course, quickly saw that something was afoot, and that excitement was running riot in the College House. For the Monks were bubbling over, they simply could not contain themselves.

"There seems to be something pretty

big going on over there!" I remarked, as I strolled out of the Ancient House, with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. "What's the trouble, I wonder?"

"Supposing we go over and inquire?" asked Watson.

"A good idea, dear old boy—it is, really," said Sir Montie.

We strolled over, and presently we found Oldfield and Clapson and Ernest Lawrence. They were already talking to Pitt and Handforth and one or two other Ancient House fellows.

"Rot!" Handforth was saying. "You can't stuff me up with a yarn like that, you silly asses!"

"But it's true!" said Clapson.

"Rubbish!"

"I tell you——"

"You can tell me fifty times, I won't believe it!" said Handforth. "The idea! Did you hear him, you chaps?"

"No," I said. "What's the argument about?"

"You'll yell when you hear it," said Handforth with a grin. "These silly asses have had the nerve to tell me that Mr. Foxe has done away with the rules and regulations in the College House! Not only that, but the Monks can have as much freedom as they like—they can go out and keep out till mid-night, if they want to! There's no particular bedtime, and they can go into pubs., and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth couldn't get any further. Pitt and Grey and De Valerio and Watson—they all yelled at the top of their voices. I grinned, too. And Sir Montie Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez, and turned a severe gaze upon the Monks.

"Really, dear old boys, I think this is frightfully ridiculous!" he protested. "There is absolutely no sense in spinning such a yarn——"

"We won't get wild," said Clapson.

"Of course, you look upon it as a yarn—that's only natural. But it simply happens to be the truth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The truth!" said Clapson. "Joking aside, you chaps, this is straight from the shoulder—honour bright!"

"Eh?"

"Honour bright!" repeated Clapson firmly.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, looking

shocked. "I am frightfully astounded, Clapson—I am, really! When a fellow says 'honour bright,' it means that he is speaking the absolute truth, and that——"

"Exactly," said Clapson. "I am speaking the truth. Everything you've just been told is absolute fact—honour bright!"

"But—but it can't be true!" yelled Handforth. "Do you mean to tell me that if you fellows want to go to the Bannington Theatre to-night, you can go?"

"And get back to St. Frank's at about eleven o'clock, or half past?"

"Precisely!"

"Without getting into a terrific row?"

"Without getting into any row at all," said Clapson. "That's the idea. And at the same time, any of us can have visitors if we want to—and no questions will be asked about those visitors. We can bring half a dozen village urchins into our studies if we take a fancy to it. Mr. Foxe won't say anything, and nobody else has any authority!"

"Great pip!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"But—but it must be a yarn!" protested Pitt. "Dash it all, we can't believe this, you chaps! It's rather too tall!"

"That's what we thought at first," put in Oldfield. "Old Foxey gave a speech, you know, and he amazed everybody. I think he must be a bit dotty, or something, or he couldn't possibly have spouted in that way. At the same time, all rules and regulations in the College House are suspended. That's an absolute fact. Mr. Foxe is complete master of the College House, and the Head isn't here to put his foot down. So we'll be without any restrictions for over a week, anyhow. By jingo, we're going to make things hum!"

The amazement was general. And, before long, all the Ancient House fellows were compelled to believe the story, for everybody in the College House stated that it was the truth. Seniors were equally positive, and the excitement in the Triangle was tremendous.

The new order had different effects upon different boys. Many seniors, for example, were fairly delighted by their new liberty. Other seniors—honourable, straightforward fellows—were doubtful.

They feared that Mr. Foxe's great experiment would go wrong; and they had the honour of St. Frank's at heart. They were fearful lest some of the more thoughtless boys should bring disgrace upon the school.

It was just the same with Bob Christine.

"It may be all very well to have our liberty, and to go just where we like," said Christine. "But, at the same time, I don't agree with it."

"Eh?" said Yorke. "You don't agree with it?"

"No, I don't!"

"You ass!" said Talmadge. "We're going to have the time of our lives!"

"Perhaps so—but what about a lot of other fellows?" said Christine doubtfully. "What about chaps like Munro and Dallas? They're reckless bounders, and there's no telling what they'll get up to. Then there's Fullerton, of the Third—one of the worst little scamps anybody could wish to see; and there's Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth. Don't you think they'll take advantage of this new order of things? They'll go out, and they'll bring terrific disgrace on the school. That's what I'm afraid of."

"If they do they'll have to answer for it—"

"That's just it—they won't!" said Bob Christine. "They won't have to answer to anybody. That's just where it comes in, my sons. In an ideal school, with an ideal set of fellows, Mr. Foxe's scheme would work beautifully. But the fellows aren't ideal, and you wouldn't find a crowd of perfect boys in any part of the world. There are bound to be rotters amongst any crowd. And those rotters, with freedom of this sort, can do a terrific amount of harm in a very short space of time."

"Well, dash it all, that's nothing to do with us," said Talmadge. "We shall behave ourselves, so I don't see why you should worry, Christine."

At that moment Holroyd and Cobb, of Study P, approached. The two juniors were looking rather excited.

"I say, Christine, I've got a wheeze!" exclaimed Cobb.

"What about?" asked Christine.

"About this evening," said Cobb. "I don't see any reason why we should not take advantage of the new state of things. There's a jolly good show on at the Bannington Theatre this week.

It's a ripping comedy called 'Tilly of Bloomsbury,' I think. Why, shouldn't we make up a party and go there this evening?"

Christine looked doubtful.

"The show's all right," he said. "Some of my people went to see it in London, and they say it was all serene. But what about getting back? The shows not over until about a quarter to eleven, and we couldn't be home here until nearly half-past!"

"That doesn't matter!" grinned Holroyd. "We can get in when we like—no questions asked!"

"It's easy!" said Cobb.

"Well, it's all very well," said Christine; "but I don't believe in overstepping the mark, you know. It's a certainty that some of the chaps will do that—they'll overstep the mark tremendously."

"But, dash it all, this is innocent enough!" put in Talmadge. "There's no harm in going to see a jolly good show at the theatre! And everybody knows that 'Tilly of Bloomsbury' is harmless enough. I vote we go."

"Rather!" said Yorke.

"Oh, all right; I don't mind!" said Christine at length. "I suppose we'd better do something to celebrate the occasion. It's quite likely that all these orders will be altered in a day or two, so we might as well make hay while the sun shines."

"Good!" said Cobb. "I'll go along and get one or two other chaps to make up the party. Perhaps Lawrence will come with us—I hope so, anyway. We'll pool our funds, and then one of us can go along and book the seats. Then we sha'n't be in any doubt about getting our places."

It all seemed topsy-turvy, and to think of going to Bannington Theatre in the evening was quite extraordinary, for, of course, the fellows could not get back until nearly midnight, and for any juniors to be out at that hour was absolutely unprecedented! But everything was upside-down now, and the fellows entered into the idea with enthusiasm.

The Ancient House juniors, on the whole, were simply green with jealousy. They thought the idea was a stunning one, and that Nelson Lee ought to follow Mr. Foxe's example. But I knew better. I shook my head when some of these suggestions were voiced.

"It's no good, you chaps," I said, "and Mr. Foxe will find that he's made a terrible mistake. This experiment of his will only result in disaster. That's my idea, anyhow, and I don't think I'm far wrong. It's a great pity the Head went away."

"Dear old boy, I quite agree with you," said Sir Montie. "It would be all very well if everybody was the same as Christine and the other decent chaps in the College House. But they ain't all the same, begad! The rotters will make the fur fly at a terrific pace! And I'm thinking of the school's good name. It will be frightful if they do something to bring dishonour on St. Frank's!"

"The thing I can't understand is how Mr. Foxe came to make such a speech," I said. "It's amazing; it's absolutely staggering! Because Mr. Foxe must know what would happen. He's got sense, and it's practically certain that he knows that a good many chaps will abuse their new liberty."

I was not only puzzled, but rather concerned, and there were quite a number of other juniors like me—De Valerie, Pitt, and a great many decent fellows in the Remove. They feared that the "smart set" in the College House would bring disgrace upon St. Frank's generally.

But, of course, the majority of the juniors were in high glee—that is, the College House juniors. The same applies to a large number of seniors, particularly those members of the Fifth Form. The Sixth was stately, and its members were not likely to overstep the mark. They looked upon the whole affair as preposterous, and prophesied that Mr. Smale Foxe would shake the dust of St. Frank's from his feet before so very long, probably the same day as the Headmaster came back.

In the meantime, the Sixth decided to carry on as usual.

But among the juniors it was a different story. They saw an opportunity to let themselves go; they found countless chances of doing things which had hitherto been absolutely impossible. They had freedom—full and complete freedom! It was something which had never been their lot before.

And, of course, the greater portion of the fellows were thoughtless, and did not trouble to take into consideration the after-effects of many of their actions.

And in the Ancient House there was a good deal of grumbling. Quite a number of juniors wanted to know why Mr. Lee did not follow Mr. Foxe's example. They thought that it was a splendid idea, and that everything would go smoothly if the boys were only trusted—if they were put on their honour.

But it was all very well to put fellows on their honour—fellows who knew what honour was. But what about the others? What about juniors like Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell? What would they do if they suddenly found themselves in full possession of freedom? Obviously, they would abuse it.

As a matter of fact, Fullwood and Co. were tremendously interested in this great new change which had come about across the Triangle, and the three knuts of Study A discussed the possibilities.

"By gad!" said Fullwood. "Those chaps are lucky over there! Just fancy what it means! They can go where they like—they can go what they like, and no questions asked! We ain't so lucky as that over here!"

"I'm blessed if I can believe it, you know!" said Gulliver. "It's too tall, and yet it's a fact. That's the amazing part of it. What ripping times we could have if we only belonged to the College House!"

"Rather!" said Bell. "For example, we could go to Bannington this afternoon. We could have a ripping time; then we could bring some of our pals back to the school. What price that—eh? We could go and meet old Bradmore, and go into a pub. with him if we liked, and it wouldn't matter a dash. Here, in the Ancient House, we're prisoners—we're hemmed in! We can't do anything; we're like a set of giddy convicts!"

"I'm just wondering!" said Fullwood thoughtfully.

"Eh?"

"I'm wondering——"

"What about?" asked Bell.

"Would it be possible for us to transfer into the College House?" asked Fullwood. "Such things are done, you know. I remember two or three chaps transferred; it's really a matter of opinion. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't go over to the College House, if we like."

"By gad!" said Gulliver. "That's a splendid wheeze, Fully! If it could only be done——"



"Oh, indeed!" snapped Mr. Foxe, "I should not advise you to take too much responsibility on your shoulders, Mr. Lee."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Bell suddenly. "Look—look at young Fullerton of the Third!"

Fullerton, of the Third, was a young scamp. As a matter of fact, he was of about the same age as Fullwood and Co. But he was a slacker—one of the worst variety—and he ought to have gone up into the Remove long since. He was much bigger than the majority of the other boys in the Third. And he was a young rip! He believed in smoking, and putting bets on horses, and, in fact, he copied Fullwood and Co. in almost everything. And at the present moment this young rascal was walking boldly across the Triangle, puffing at a cigarette! It was the most astounding exhibition that had ever been seen in the historic old St. Frank's Triangle.

"The young ass!" gasped Bell. "He'll get flogged!"

"Who by?" asked Fullwood. "Mr. Foxe has given the chaps a free hand; they can do as they giddy well like, although I should think this'll be a bit beyond the limit! Why—Hullo, old Foxey is coming out!"

The juniors looked on with great interest, and other boys in other parts of the Triangle gazed at Fullerton with a kind of awe. They expected to see dreadful things within the next minute. Fullerton himself, after a second's hesitation, refrained from taking the cigarette from between his lips. He let it remain there, and puffed vigorously in full view of Mr. Smale Foxe.

The Housemaster saw Fullerton, and he nodded genially.

"Quite a pleasant day, my lad!" he remarked, as he passed.

"Yes, sir—glorious!" said the Third-Former boldly.

Mr. Foxe walked on, and said nothing whatever about the fact that Fullerton was smoking.

"By gad!" muttered Fullwood. "What do you think of it? Smoking in the Triangle, and the Housemaster hasn't said a word!"

"Lucky beggar!" muttered Bell. "And if we were caught smoking by Mr. Lee, we should be hauled into the Ancient House and flogged!"

"I say, this is a good opportunity!" exclaimed Fullwood. "I'll run over and have a word with Mr. Foxe now. If he says that we can transfer into his house, I don't see how Mr. Lee can object."

"Good wheeze!" said Gulliver.

They hurried across, and caught Mr. Smale Foxe just before the Housemaster disappeared from the Triangle. He looked at them smilingly.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"Just a word, sir!" said Fullwood breathlessly. "We—we belong to the Ancient House, you know, sir. We've never been satisfied with the conditions there, and we were just wondering if you'd allow us to transfer into the College House. I know for a fact that there are two or three studies empty. It wouldn't take us long to bring our things across, and I'm jolly certain that the food in the College House is just as good as we've been used to."

Mr. Foxe smiled.

"By all means, my lads!" he said. "If you wish to come into my House, I shall be only too delighted to welcome you. You may, just as soon as you like, but, of course, it will be necessary for you to obtain Mr. Lee's permission."

"Yes, sir, we know that," said Fullwood. "Thanks awfully, sir!"

"You're a brick, sir!" said Bell.

"When you see Mr. Lee, tell him that you have already arranged things with me," said Mr. Foxe. "Tell him that I have no objection to your becoming College House boys, and also mention that there are several studies empty in my House. I hope that Mr. Lee will grant your request."

"So do I, sir!" said Fullwood. "We should all love to be under your control, sir!"

Mr. Foxe nodded and passed on. He knew well enough that Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were gay young sparks, and they were just the kind he wanted in the College House. Fullwood and Co. were the very sort to abuse their rights, and bring disgrace upon the school. Therefore, Mr. Foxe would gladly welcome them in the College House.

The knuts of Study A glanced at one another excitedly after Mr. Foxe had gone. They thought that they were College House boys already. Mr. Foxe had given them permission to go over, so how on earth could Nelson Lee object?

"I say, this is ripping!" said Fullwood. "Old Foxey is a brick!"

"But what about Lee?" asked Gulliver doubtfully. "Do you think he'll let us go?"

"He'll probably be only too glad to

get rid of us?" grinned Fullwood. "We ain't his sort, you know; he likes the good little Georges! And, in any case, I don't see that it's necessary for us to ask his permission. We can transfer if we like. All we've got to do is to go and tell him that we're crossing over."

"That's the idea!" said Bell. "We'll take it for granted."

"I vote we go and see Mr. Lee at once," said Fullwood. "There's no sense in delaying whatever. Come on, you chaps; we'll all go together."

The knuts hurried into the Ancient House, and made their way without delay to Nelson Lee's study. The famous Housemaster detective was in, and he looked up with a slight frown as Fullwood and Co. entered his room. The three juniors had not thought it necessary to tap beforehand.

"I did not hear you knock, Fullwood," said Nelson Lee shortly.

"Oh, sorry, sir!" said Fullwood. "We—we were in a hurry, and I forgot all about it, sir!"

"Well, Fullwood, do not let it occur again," said Nelson Lee. "What do you want?"

"Gulliver and Bell and I have decided to transfer into the College House, sir," said Fullwood boldly. "We've just come to tell you about it, that's all, sir."

Nelson Lee laid his papers aside.

"Oh, indeed?" he said smoothly. "You have decided to transfer into the College House, my boys? That is very interesting!"

"Yes, sir," said Fullwood. "We thought we'd like a change."

"I quite understand, my lads," said Nelson Lee.

"Then it's all serene, sir?" asked Bell eagerly.

"Wait a moment, Bell—wait a moment!" said Nelson Lee. "Who gave you permission to transfer?"

"We saw Mr. Foxe, sir, and he said that we can go into College House if we like," said Fullwood. "So we decided that we'd go."

"You will please understand, Fullwood, that Mr. Foxe has no control over you whatever," said Nelson Lee. "Furthermore, I take it as a piece of insolence on your part to assume that you can transfer into the College House without consulting me beforehand. And I may as well tell you at once that you must remain here. I shall not permit

you to transfer into the College House. You may go."

"But—but——"

"That is quite sufficient, Fullwood!" said Nelson Lee curtly.

Fullwood and Co. looked at one another in dismay.

"But we all want to go over into the College House, sir," said Fullwood warmly. "We have a right to transfer, if we want to! We should like the College House much better——"

"I am not going to argue with you, Fullwood!" interrupted Nelson Lee.

"Once and for all, I tell you that you cannot transfer. I do not wish to discuss the matter further. You may go!"

"But I don't see that's fair, sir!" burst out Fullwood. "If we want to go——"

"One more word, Fullwood, and I shall make you write two hundred lines!" snapped Nelson Lee. "Leave this study at once!"

"Dash it all, sir——"

"Two hundred lines, Fullwood!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Are you going, or do you want me to cane you?"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood swallowed hard. He looked as though he would like to bore holes through Nelson Lee. But he managed to keep himself in check, and he left the study without a word. Gulliver and Bell were already out in the passage. Fullwood closed the door with unnecessary force, and he glared ferociously at the panels.

"Beast!" he muttered viciously.

"I should say he is a beast," said Bell.

"We're dished—absolutely dished!"

And Fullwood and Co. made their way to their own study, feeling disgusted with life in general, and with Nelson Lee in particular.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE RAZZLE!

GRAYSON, of the Fifth, lit a cigarette.

"Well, I will say that Mr. Foxe is a brick!" he exclaimed pleasantly. "I always thought he was one of the best, but this fairly cuts everything. And it's just as it should be. What's the good of living if we're kept like prisoners all the time? We shall have a bit of freedom now."

"Rather!" agreed Shaw, who shared the same study with Grayson. "But I must say that it's a bit queer. We sha'n't know what to do with ourselves, you know. With so much liberty, we shall hardly know where we are."

Grayson chuckled.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, old man," he said. "We're going to have a fine time! And it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to go on the razzle this afternoon. What's to prevent us? There's no reason why we should stick here in the school all the time. Why shouldn't we go over to Bannington and meet old Bradmore? I'd like to have a chat with him about to-morrow's races."

"I'm game!" said Shaw. "If we buck up, we shall be able to catch the afternoon train. I don't feel much like cycling to-day."

"Good!" said Grayson. "Come on!"

He moved towards the door, but Shaw pulled him up short.

"What about that cigarette?" he asked. "You'd better put it out."

"Not likely!" said Grayson. "Didn't you see young Fullerton, of the Third, a little while ago?"

"No."

"Well, if you had seen him, you would have grinned," said Grayson. "He was walking about the Triangle, smoking as boldly as you please, and Foxey walked right past him and didn't say a word!"

"Phew!" whistled Shaw. "That kid's got a nerve!"

They passed out into the passage, and when they arrived in the lobby they dropped into the cloakroom and donned their overcoats. When they came out into the lobby once more, Carlile, of the Sixth, was just passing. He paused, and looked at the two Fifth-Formers.

And Carlile frowned.

"I say, stop that!" he said gruffly.

"Eh? Stop which?"

"Smoking, of course," said Carlile. "You ought to have more sense, Grayson."

"You can mind your own business," said Grayson. "Who asked you to interfere, anyhow?"

"I'm not interfering," said the Fifth-Former. "At least, I don't intend to. But I think it's a bit too bad of you, Grayson, to smoke in this way."

"Oh, do you?"

"It sets a bad example to the

juniors," went on Carlile. "This new state of affairs will lead to a lot of trouble unless we're careful, and it's up to the senior fellows to show the juniors a good example. And it's a pretty rotten example to go about the lobby smoking. If you want to smoke, Grayson, do it in your own study, or when you're outside. But, for goodness' sake, remember that the kids of the lower school will probably be only too ready to copy you."

Grayson sniffed.

"The juniors don't concern me," he said. "If they like to smoke, let 'em smoke. That's all I say! I'm going to do as I like, Carlile, and you can go and eat coke! At one time you were a prefect, but you're not a prefect now. The best thing you can do is to toddle away and look after your own affairs. You can leave me to attend to mine."

The Fifth-Former glared.

"Well, I'm not going to say any more!" he exclaimed. "But let me tell you this, Grayson. You'd better be careful. The present order of things won't last for ever, you can take my word for that. As soon as the Head comes back, you'll be required to answer for anything that you may happen to do. So bear that in mind."

And Carlile walked on.

"Interfering beast!" said Grayson. "What's it got to do with him? He doesn't smoke himself, and he doesn't want anybody else to smoke? Rats to him!"

The two Fifth-Formers went out into the Triangle, and they were soon hurrying down the lane towards Bellton. They arrived at the little station only just in time to catch their train, and, in due course, they found themselves in Bannington, and they were not the only St. Frank's fellows there, either.

A number of College House juniors were in the High Street, and they were on the look-out to see what they could do which was against the ordinary school rules. They were boys, and it was only natural that they should seek to perform some act which was usually quite forbidden. They wanted to make use of their newly found freedom.

As a matter of fact, some had already caused a bit of a sensation in the old town. The good people of Bannington had been scandalised by the fact that several juniors were walking the High Street boldly smoking cigarettes. Such

a thing had never been seen before in the whole history of St. Frank's, and, naturally, the townspeople were talking about it.

Other juniors had been seen to enter public-houses, another strictly forbidden occupation. And when Grayson and Shaw arrived, they were both smoking, and they both stood chatting for a little time outside the door of the saloon-bar of the Blue Dragon. This was quite a low-class public-house, and it had rather a bad reputation. It was a resort greatly frequented by betting men.

Grayson and Shaw walked in, and they were quite amused by the fact that a good many people saw them.

"We're causing a sensation!" grinned Grayson. "Well, it's about time somebody woke the place up! They've been asleep here for hundreds of years!"

They found themselves inside the saloon-bar, and, almost at once, they were greeted by a flashily dressed individual with a coarse, red face. This gentleman was Mr. Mike Bradmore, a bookmaker with a pretty black record.

"Why, hallo, young gents!" he exclaimed. "This is a surprise, and no mistake! Fancy you a-comin' in here, at this time of day, too—in broad daylight!"

"A bit of a surprise—eh?" grinned Grayson. "How are you, Mr. Bradmore? I'll bet you didn't expect to see us here to-day!"

"I didn't, that's a fact, Master Grayson!" said the bookmaker. "You'd best be careful, young gents! If any of them masters happen to see you—"

"It's all right; you needn't worry!" said Shaw. "We're safe enough. We've been given our freedom."

"You've been given which, young gents?"

"If we're seen here, there won't be any questions asked," said Grayson.

"We're as safe as houses, so there's no need for you to worry. Well, Shaw, what are you going to have to drink?"

"Oh, a ginger-beer, I suppose!" said Shaw.

Mr. Bradmore grinned.

"You'd best be careful with that stuff, young gent!" he exclaimed. "Too much of it might get into your 'ead!"

"Ginger-beer!" said Grayson. "Rot! There's no reason why we should stick to ginger-beer now. What price a little drop of whiskey?"

"Oh, I don't mind!" said Shaw carelessly.

"Good!" said Grayson. "We'll try whiskey, that'll make us feel lively."

And so, very shortly afterwards, Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, were partaking of whiskey. They did not like it particularly, but they made out that they did, and when they had drained their glasses Mr. Bradmore insisted upon their having a drink with him. Naturally, they had to treat Mr. Bradmore afterwards, with the result that they had other drinks themselves.

The whiskey was not particularly strong, but, at the same time, three straight off proved rather too much for both Grayson and Shaw. They were not actually drunk, but they were rather unsteady. Their heads felt in a bit of a whirl, and they swayed slightly as they stood against the bar. But, so far, they were quite in possession of their senses.

"It's a lucky thing we came across you, Mr. Bradmore," said Grayson. "We wanted to have a chat with you about to-morrow's races at Helmford. We're thinking about having a little flutter, you know."

"There ain't any need to talk about them things here, Master Grayson," said Bradmore, in a low voice. "There's a place for everything, and this place ain't suitable for that kind of talk. We want to go somewhere private."

"Better come into my study, then," said Grayson vaguely.

"Eh?"

"My study, you know—in the Fifth Form passage."

"It strikes me, young gent, you've had a drop too much!" said Mr. Bradmore severely.

"Oh, I—I forgot for a moment!" said Grayson, rather confusedly. "I thought we were at St. Frank's. Still, it comes to the same thing, Mike. Why don't you come along to the school this evening, or come back with Shaw and me now? You can bring one or two of your pals, too, and we'll have a good time!"

Mr. Bradmore grinned.

"Well, it's pretty certain that you've had too much, Master Grayson," he said. "I wouldn't mind coming to the school, personally speaking, but I don't reckon it would pay. Somehow or other, I have an idea that there might be trouble. And not only trouble for me, but trouble for you young gents."

"Rot!" said Grayson. "You'll be safe enough; I'll see to that. We can have a little flutter in my study after tea. I enjoy a game of cards now and again. What do you say, Mr. Bradmore?"

"I say that you'd best take a drop of water with it, young gents!" grinned Mr. Bradmore.

"Oh, dash it all, don't try to be funny!" said Grayson. "Things are different at St. Frank's now. We're not restricted as we used to be. The chaps can do as they like; they can have as many visitors as they like, and they can do what they like in their own studies, too. It'll be quite safe for you to come along, Mr. Bradmore, and for you to bring two or three friends, too."

The bookmaker shook his head.

"I don't think I'd risk it, young gent," he said.

"Rot!" put in Shaw. "There's no risk about it. Do you think Grayson and I would have come into this pub—in broad daylight—if things weren't different at St. Frank's? Our House-master has told us that we can do what we like—we needn't keep to rules. We can have visitors in our own studies, and we can do all sorts of things that used to be forbidden."

It was quite a long time before Bradmore fully understood the state of affairs. Grayson and Shaw told him everything, and they went into all the details. And, at length, Mr. Bradmore realised that they were speaking the truth.

If he had only the unsupported word of the two seniors, he might not have been convinced. But, glancing out of the window, he saw quite a number of St. Frank's fellows walking boldly about the High Street, smoking cigarettes. This, at all events, was astounding—unprecedented, and it proved that a new order of things had come into being at St. Frank's!

And, finally, Mr. Bradmore agreed to go back to St. Frank's with the two Fifth-Formers. Two of Mr. Bradmore's friends were introduced. They were beery-looking individuals of a very common type. One of them was known as Mr. Jim Slingsby, and the other rejoiced in the name of Peter Gaff. These two gentlemen would make up the party. They had noticed that Shaw and Grayson were rather flash of money, and there was no reason why they should not go to the school, join in a game of cards, and depart considerably richer. At the

same time, Mr. Bradmore wanted to make a few arrangements with the two seniors regarding the races on the morrow.

At about the same time as these plans were being made, Christine and Co. and Ernest Lawrence were strolling down the High Street in Bannington. They were behaving just the same as usual, and not taking advantage of the fact that they had their freedom. Bob Christine was rather against seeing the performance at the theatre during the evening, and Lawrence, too, did not think that it was quite the thing.

"Still, we may as well do it for this once," said Christine. "It can't do any harm."

Just then two juniors came out of a shop, and both of them were smoking. They were Churchman and Holland, of Study R, in the College House. Both the juniors considered themselves to be rather "doggish," and they looked upon smoking as an accomplishment.

Christine reached out his hand and grasped Holland's arm.

"Hold on!" said Christine grimly.

"Leggo, you ass!" said Holland, turning round. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me," said Christine. "But I should advise you fellows to put those cigarettes out now—at once."

"Rats!" said Churchman. "We can smoke if we want to, and you can go and eat coke, Christine! Mind your own business!"

Christine frowned.

"As it happens this is my business," he said. "I'm the captain of the Remove, and I'm not standing anything of this sort. You're disgracing the Remove by going about the High Street of Bannington, smoking in this way. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! If you don't take those cigarettes out within ten seconds, we'll take them out for you!"

"I'd like to see you do it!" snapped Holland.

"Certainly!" said Christine.

He reached forward, grabbed the cigarette from Holland's mouth, and flung it across the road. At the same moment Lawrence attended to Churchman, and the latter's cigarette was confiscated, too. Then the juniors were lifted by Christine and Co. and bumped into the gutter. It was rather muddy

there, and their clothing was not at all improved.

"You—you rotters!" howled Holland. "Look at my overcoat!"

"I can't help your troubles," said Lawrence. "Perhaps it'll be a lesson to you."

"You—you rotter!" roared Churchman. "You penniless bounder!"

"Oh, let them lie there!" said Yorke.

He and the others moved off, leaving Churchman and Holland picking themselves up out of the gutter. Quite a number of people had seen the incident, and they heartily approved. They were given to understand, at least, that all the St. Frank's fellows were not of the same calibre. There were some of the juniors who did not believe in smoking, and who did not hesitate to show their disapproval.

"There you are!" said Christine.

"I was afraid of it."

"Afraid of what?"

"You see what this new state of affairs is leading to," said Christine.

"They're not the only fellows who are going about smoking and behaving like cads. They'll get the school into disrepute before long."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Lawrence. "Everybody will be talking, and it would be pretty rotten if some of these facts got into the newspapers."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Talmadge suddenly. "Look—look over there!"

He pointed, and the other juniors could see that he was directing their attention to the Blue Dragon; and, just emerging from the saloon-bar, were Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, and both the seniors were walking very unsteadily. In fact, it was fairly clear that they had been drinking something decidedly stronger than ginger-beer. The seniors were accompanied by Bradmore and two decidedly queer-looking individuals.

"The rotters!" said Christine, frowning. "What do you think of it? They have been drinking! The awful cads! This is what comes of giving chaps their freedom, and telling them that they won't be punished for anything they happen to do. I reckon Mr. Foxe ought to be boiled in oil for what he's done!"

"It is a bit too thick!" said Lawrence slowly.

But if Christine and Co. and Lawrence were surprised at the behaviour of Grayson and Shaw, the fellows at St.

Frank's were positively staggered. For, just at about five o'clock, Grayson and Shaw arrived, bringing with them three visitors. These visitors, of course, were Mr. Mike Bradmore, Mr. Jim Slingsby, and Mr. Peter Gaff. Incidentally, these gentlemen carried a couple of bottles of whiskey with them. They fully intended having a high old time that evening.

Such visitors had never been brought within the walls of St. Frank's before. By this time the two Fifth-Formers had somewhat recovered from the effects of the whiskey they had drunk. But they were not sorry that they had invited their visitors. They were intent upon having a roaring time that evening.

"Do I see them, or do my eyes deceive me?" asked Reginald Pitt, as he gazed at the disreputable trio. "My only hat! Did you ever see anything like it in all your life? Fancy bringing those rotters into the school!"

"By my life!" said Solomon Levi. "This is about the limit, believe me! I should think that even Mr. Foxe will put his foot down at this kind of thing."

"He ought to," said De Valerie. "It's disgraceful!"

Handforth was highly indignant.

"I'll tell you what!" he exclaimed warmly. "I think we ought to take matters into our own hands. What's wrong with going for these men and pitching them headlong out into the road?" he asked.

"Good idea!" said two or three fellows.

But Reginald Pitt shook his head.

"Nothing doing," he said shortly.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "It won't take us two minutes——"

"Perhaps not," interrupted Pitt. "but you've got to remember that these men have been invited here. We didn't invite them, I know, but they're guests. It wouldn't be right for us to pitch them out, undesirable as they may be. And, in any case, it's none of our business. As a matter of fact, it's too late—they are inside the College House now."

"If this sort of thing happens on the first day, what will the school be like within a week?" asked De Valerie. "The College House will simply go to the dogs—that's what it'll mean. The whole place is going to rot!"

"And it looks to me as if the rot has set in with a vengeance!" said Jack Grey, shaking his head. "Unless Mr. Foxe brings all the rules and regula-

tions into force again, there will be nothing but chaos."

"The Head isn't here to put a stop to it!" said Handforth. "It's absolutely awful. We shall have to do something, there's no doubt about that!"

But, after all, what could the fellows do? They couldn't very well enter the College House, and take matters into their own hands. They would only get themselves into trouble by doing so. Therefore, they decided to let things rest—for this one evening, at all events. They would see how things went on—they would be interested spectators.

And, after tea, quite a number of interested spectators collected in the Triangle, and hung about the College House. For it seemed as though pandemonium already reigned over on that side of the Triangle.

Of order there was not the slightest sign. Juniors were rushing about the passages, yelling, shouting, and doing exactly what they liked. A crowd of fellows were singing at the top of their voices in the lobby. They were kicking up a truly appalling din, and it could be heard all over the school. But nothing could be said. Mr. Smale Foxe was allowing his boys to do as they liked—therefore, nobody could interfere.

But, after all, this singing and shouting did not amount to much. The juniors were simply giving vent to their high spirits—something they had never been able to do before. If too much noise was created a prefect usually came on the scene, but there were no prefects now—and the fellows let themselves go.

In Grayson's study, in the Fifth Form passage, the two seniors were having what they called a "high old time." A more right-minded fellow would have called it a disgraceful orgy.

For this is exactly what it was. Grayson and Shaw were entertaining their distinguished visitors, Messrs. Bradmore, Slingsby, and Gaff. And the visitors, having found that they were not interfered with, were behaving in a riotous manner.

The study was filled with pungent cigar smoke. The table, had been cleared, and cards were being played, and there were piles of money on all sides. Not only this, but there were glasses on the table, and bottles of whiskey.

Both Grayson and Shaw had com-

pletely forgotten the word "moderation." Some of the spirit had got into their heads, and they did not care what happened. They were playing wildly, shouting at the tops of their voices, and behaving in a manner that can only be described as disgraceful in the extreme.

Mr. Smale Foxe himself had encouraged them to this excess. For the Housemaster had looked in shortly before, and had beamed pleasantly upon the Fifth Formers and their guests. He had shown an interest in their game, and had even gone so far as to accept some whiskey.

Naturally, Grayson and Shaw considered themselves safe after this direct act of encouragement on Mr. Foxe's part—and Mike Bradmore and his two pals felt they were on secure ground.

From Mr. Foxe's point of view, everything was going well.

If only he could get a good many other boys to act in this way, his object would soon be achieved. All the Housemaster's talk of experiment was bluff and bluster. His sole aim was to disgrace St. Frank's—and he was going the shortest way to work. Events of this description were more liable than anything else to cause talk and gossip, and reports in the newspapers.

Most of all, Mr. Foxe wanted to see these "goings on" reported in the newspapers.

It was getting on for supper-time now, and the noise which was proceeding from Grayson's study was truly appalling. All attempts to play were at an end. As a matter of fact, the seniors had lost practically all their money.

And now they were singing and dancing and behaving like madmen.

Out in the Triangle a big crowd of fellows watched—for the movements of those within Grayson's study could be easily seen. The light was bright, and the curtains were not drawn. It was an astounding spectacle.

Grayson and Shaw were attempting to dance a fox-trot, and they were reeling drunkenly about the study. Mr. Bradmore and his companions were joining in, too—for they, like their hosts, had partaken not wisely by too well.

The result was appalling. Practically all the occupants of the study were shouting, and were attempting to sing some kind of song. The whole scene was disgusting in the extreme, and the crowd

out in the Triangle looked on with awe. "Well, my only hat!" ejaculated Reginald Pitt. "This just about puts the lid on it! What do you think of them? Did you ever see anything so positively degrading in all your natural life?"

"Never!" said De Valerie. "What is St. Frank's coming to? This just shows what a fine thing Mr. Foxe has done for the College House. There's never been a scene like this in the whole history of St. Frank's."

"And there wouldn't have been now—only the fellows have got their freedom," I said grimly. "This is the result! Anybody with an atom of sense could have foreseen that something of this nature would take place, although I admit that Grayson and Shaw have gone a step farther than I ever dreamed of. If the fellows are suddenly given full licence—with all restrictions removed—it is only natural that they should let themselves go all out, so to speak. And those chaps of a blackguardly nature naturally let themselves go in one direction."

"I don't see why we should stand this!" exclaimed Handforth hotly. "It's—it's revolting. It's up to you, Nipper, to act!"

"Up to me?" I repeated.

"Ain't you leader of the Remove?"

"My dear chap, that's got nothing to do with it," I said. "I don't see that I'm called upon to interfere. Mr. Foxe called the tune, and he'll have to pay the piper! I expect he's wishing that he hadn't been quite so rash now."

Meanwhile, in the College House, there was almost as much interest and concern as in the Triangle. For a good many fellows—seniors and juniors—were absolutely opposed to this sort of rowdyism.

The noise from Grayson's study was so appalling that a crowd collected out in the passage. There was no doubt that both Grayson and Shaw were intoxicated. It is a terrible thing to record, but the absolute truth. The seniors had succumbed to the temptings of Bradmore and Co., and had partaken of far more whiskey than they could manage. In other words, they ought not to have had one drop.

Two Six Formers were attracted by the din, and they came along the Fifth Form passage to find out what the

trouble was. These seniors were Mills and Carlile.

It did not take them long to find out the truth. They opened the door of the study, in fact, and glanced into the room. When they were in the passage again they were looking almost scared.

"Phew! What a terrible stink of spirits and tobacco!" said Mills disgustingly. "Good gracious! This is ghastly, Carlile—absolutely ghastly!"

The other Sixth Former nodded.

"Mr. Foxe can't know about it," he said. "I think it is our duty to go along and tell him, and bring him to the scene. Once he sees this, he'll soon put a stop to it—he can't do anything else."

"Yes," agreed Mills shortly. "We'll go."

They pushed their way past the crowd of juniors, and hurried straight to Mr. Smale Foxe's study. They entered, after tapping, and found Mr. Foxe comfortably seated in his armchair before the fire. He looked round, and smiled.

"Well, young men, what can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly.

"We should like you to come along and look into Grayson's study, sir," said Carlile. "There's a terrible orgy going on there. Both Grayson and Shaw are intoxicated, and their visitors are practically as bad——"

"My dear fellow, why come and bother me?" interrupted Mr. Foxe, waving his hand impatiently. "It is only to be expected that some of the boys will rather overdo it on their first day of full liberty. Let them have their fling for this once—it will teach them a lesson they will never forget. I'll warrant that Grayson and Shaw will never get into such a condition again. Once will be enough! You may go!"

"But, look here, sir——"

"You may go!" repeated Mr. Foxe, returning to his paper.

Carlile and Mills looked at one another. But it was obviously impossible to argue with Mr. Foxe, so they retired. And, out in the passage, they held a short consultation.

"It's amazing," said Mills. "he doesn't seem to care a bit. Why, if things go on like this——"

"There's no time for us to stop talking here," interrupted Carlile. "I'm going over to speak to Mr. Lee. Perhaps he'll be able to do something."

So the Sixth Formers hurried out,

crossed the Triangle, and were not long in finding Nelson Lee, to whom they told their story.

They explained how they had gone to Mr. Foxe, and how the latter refused to take any action.

"We thought, sir, that perhaps you might be able to do something," said Mills.

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"As a matter of fact, my boys, I have been contemplating a visit to Mr. Foxe," he said. "I have witnessed the degrading performance in Grayson's study, and I certainly think that some action ought to be taken. But you must remember that it is nothing to do with me, and I must think carefully before I interfere. I certainly do not wish to have a quarrel with Mr. Foxe. However, I will go and see him."

Nelson Lee went over, and when he entered Mr. Foxe's study the latter looked round, and rose to his feet at once.

"Quite a pleasant surprise, Mr. Lee!" he said smoothly. "Pray take a seat—"

"I would prefer to stand, thank you, Mr. Foxe," said Nelson Lee. "I have merely looked in to call your attention to the state of affairs in a certain study in the Fifth Form passage. Apparently you are unaware of—"

"On the contrary, Mr. Lee, I am fully alive to the position," interrupted Mr. Foxe. "It is good of you to come here in this way, but please let me remind you that I can conduct my own House without any advice, and without any interference from outsiders. I do not wish to be discourteous, but I insist on you allowing me to attend to my own affairs."

Nelson Lee bowed.

"Just as you wish, Mr. Foxe," he said. "But please let me warn you that if any such occurrence as this takes place again, I shall immediately take action without consulting you, and without a moment's delay."

"Oh, indeed!" snapped Mr. Foxe. "I should not advise you to take too much responsibility on your shoulders, Mr. Lee. You seem to forget that this is the first day of my experiment, and I am certain the boys will soon settle down. And then things will run smoothly; and I will guarantee that the behaviour of the College House boys in general will compare most favourably with the be-

haviour of your own boys. I will wish you good evening, Mr. Lee."

It was obviously impossible for Nelson Lee to continue the discussion. He retired, but he was looking very grim and determined as he made his way out of the College House.

The famous Housemaster-detective decided to take no action on this particular evening. But, before long, a time would come when Nelson Lee would be urgently needed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST RESULTS.

MR. MIKE BRADMORE hic-
coughed.

"Well, young gents, we shall have to be makin' a move," he said, unsteadily, and being slightly uncertain of his words. "'S gettin' late, and if we ain't careful we shall find the pubs closed afore we get to Bannin'ton."

Grayson nodded.

"Right you are, Mr. Bradmore," he said thickly. "We'll come with you, too. What d'you say, Shaw? Nice little walk, eh? Breath of fresh air, by gad—we need it, too! My head's as heavy as a lump of lead!"

Things had quietened down somewhat in Grayson's study. But only temporarily. The dance being at an end the party was just holding a discussion as to what should be done next. They were all more or less under the influence of whiskey still.

And it was agreed that they should return to Bannington. Grayson and Shaw offered to accompany their guests back into the town. They didn't really want to go, but in their present condition they hardly knew what they were actually doing.

And so, shortly afterwards, they lurched out into the Triangle. The five of them made an extraordinary spectacle as they swayed across the Triangle arm in arm. On the left was Mr. Slingsby; then Grayson. In the middle rolled Mr. Bradmore, with Shaw and Gaff on his right.

They went towards the gates, singing in discordant tones, and finding it quite impossible to steer a direct course. However, this did not worry them much.

In a thick kind of way they knew that the last train to Bannington would shortly be due, and unless they made haste to the station, they would lose it.

Bellton was practically asleep when the revellers arrived. But Bellton slept no more. For the five were singing loudly, and making noise enough for twenty. Bedroom windows were thrust open, and the outraged village folk gazed with consternation and amazement at Grayson and Shaw. The Fifth Formers could be easily recognised in the moonlight.

This affair was destined to become a scandal which would be talked of in Bellton for many a day.

Two St. Frank's seniors, rolling along arm in arm, with three coarse characters of the worst description! It was a staggering blow to Bellton, for it had never before seen a St. Frank's boy in such a condition.

Grayson and Shaw, and their guests only arrived at the station in time to catch the train. In fact, they nearly lost it, owing to an altercation with the old porter, who rightly declared that five people could not travel with four tickets. However, this matter would probably be adjusted at the other end.

The five arrived at Bannington even more merry than when they started from St. Frank's. They had lost their thick heads, and were now reckless and merry and tremendously energetic. They wanted to make all the noise they could, and they got over this by singing with much gusto as they walked arm in arm down into the High Street.

It goes without saying that a tremendous sensation was caused. People stopped and stared, for, of course, Bannington was by no means asleep, for it was still comparatively early. The time, to be exact, was just about ten-thirty.

The revellers marched down the High Street, bellowing popular airs, and they had quite a crowd of followers, who were all talking excitedly, and were wondering why the police did not interfere.

But, so far, Grayson and Shaw and the others had not offended the law.

Of course, a great many people recognised the two St. Frank's seniors, and there was a great deal of talk and discussion. It was of great interest to note that two reporters of the "Bannington Gazette" witnessed the whole occurrence. Moreover, they produced their notebooks and made a few jottings.

"Disgraceful—that's what it is!" said one worthy shopkeeper, who had been brought to his door. "I never saw anything like it in all my life! Those boys will be expelled to-morrow, without any doubt!"

Meanwhile, the theatre was commencing to disgorge its audience. Christine and Co. and Ernest Lawrence were among the people who came streaming out. The juniors had thoroughly enjoyed the performance, but they were now feeling rather anxious.

"Jolly good show!" said Yorke approvingly.

"Rather!"

"That's all very well, but look at the time!" said Bob Christine. "Great Scott! Nearly twenty minutes to eleven!"

"What does it matter?" grinned Talmadge. "No questions asked, my son."

Christine shook his head.

"I don't like it, and it's no good saying I do!" he exclaimed. "After this, we're not going to take any advantage of this freedom business. I've been thinking it over, and I've decided that it's not right."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Yorke.

"We ought to set a good example to the other chaps," went on Christine. "And that's what we're going to do in future. Of course, I'm not sorry we came to see this show; it was jolly interesting, and we all enjoyed it. But after this we'll stick to the proper school rules, just as though they were all in force."

Lawrence nodded.

"That's what I think, too," he said.

The other juniors were not quite so hearty. But, inwardly, they knew that Bob Christine was right. Even though they had got their freedom—even though they were not compelled to stick to rules and regulations—it was only right that they should act in a proper way, and going to a theatre and arriving back at St. Frank's at half-past eleven could not exactly be called right and proper.

Certainly, their amusement had been innocent and quite wholesome, for the performance they had seen was an excellent one in every way. But they would lose sleep, and, consequently, they would not be as fit as usual the following day.

"Yes, we sha'n't do it any more," said Christine. "Now we'll buzz and

got our bicycles, and be off back to the school."

"I'm jolly hungry——" began Talmadge.

"Can't help that," said Christine. "it's late enough now, and I don't suppose for a minute that we shall be able to get any grub at this hour. We've seen the show, and we shall have to sacrifice supper. We shall enjoy breakfast all the better to-morrow."

"That's a fat lot of consolation," grunted Talmadge.

They were just about to make their way to the place where they had left their bicycles when they were attracted by a series of shouts which came from a spot further down the High Street. People were running there, and quite a crowd was collecting. The juniors came to a halt and looked.

"Seems to be a row of some kind there," remarked Yorke.

"Oh, a brawl of some kind, I suppose!" said Christine.

"Let's go and have a look at it."

"My dear chaps, you don't seem to realise that we've got to get back to St. Frank's!" said Bob. "We can't waste time by watching a drunken brawl!"

Just then a Bannington youth came by, grinning.

"Some more of 'em, 'ere!" he ejaculated, addressing nobody in particular, but indicating the juniors. "They don't seem to be quite so drunk as the others, but I s'pose they'll be fighting afore long!"

He passed on, still grinning, and Christine and Co. gazed at one another.

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

"Goodness knows!" said Talmadge.

"Drunk! I'm blessed if I can understand——"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Christine, a startled voice. "Do—do you think he could have meant that some of our chaps have got boozed? Fullerton, for example. He's an awful little scamp, and he might have been with some bad company. There's certainly a brawl going on over there."

"Let's go and have a look!" exclaimed Yorke.

This time Christine did not object, for he wanted to make certain, and he and his chums hurried down the High Street until they came to the spot

where the crowd had collected. They had some difficulty in pushing their way through. There was an open space in the centre, where several figures were moving about, quite obviously engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight.

Lawrence was the first through the crowd. He wormed his way in between the people, and soon found himself watching the combatants. He received a tremendous surprise, and he was indeed startled.

For Grayson and Shaw, of the Fifth, were engaged in a drunken tussle with two rough-looking men, whom Lawrence had never seen. They were, as a matter of fact, Mr. Jim Slingsby and Mr. Peter Gaff. Mike Bradmore had vanished.

There had been a bit of a quarrel over nothing in particular, and the revellers, instead of continuing on amicable terms, had come to blows, and now they were scrapping with one another in earnest, and Grayson and Shaw were getting the worst of the battle. They were being knocked about quite brutally.

Lawrence's blood boiled.

He was quite disgusted with the Fifth-Formers, and he told himself that they deserved all that they had received. But, at the same time, it incensed him to see these two ruffians attacking the two boys, and it incensed him still more when he noted that the crowd was making no attempt to go to the rescue of Grayson and Shaw.

Lawrence clenched his fists and sprang forward. He seized Grayson, and gave him a terrific heave which sent him flying backwards. The next moment Shaw was treated in precisely the same manner. They fell in a heap, and now Ernest Lawrence was facing Mr. Slingsby and Mr. Gaff.

"You confounded brutes!" shouted Lawrence hotly. "The best thing you can do is to clear out of this before you get hurt! If you touch those chaps again, I'll knock the pair of you down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd.

And it certainly did seem ludicrous for this junior schoolboy to speak to those two ruffians as though they were a couple of street urchins. As for Mr. Slingsby and Mr. Gaff, they stared at Lawrence open-mouthed.

"Why, you young brat, if you don't

"Top it, I'll give yer a swipe across the ear that'll put you to sleep for a week!" roared Mr. Slingsby.

"An' I'll 'elp you!" said Mr. Gaff thickly.

They both hurled themselves at Lawrence at the same moment, fondly imagining that they would knock the junior down and wipe him out of existence. Somehow or other, this did not exactly happen.

Mr. Slingsby came to the conclusion that his left eye had inadvertently come into contact with a brick wall, and Mr. Gaff received something in his mouth which felt, to his dazed mind, like a battering-ram.

As a matter of fact, Lawrence had simply delivered two blows—a right-hander and a left-hander—in swift succession. The schoolboy boxer had perfect confidence in himself, and he knew that he could deal with these ruffians with one hand, if necessary.

After the pair had recovered slightly from their first shock, they charged again. This time Lawrence really let himself go.

Crash! Biff! Slam!

He drove home his blows with all his force, and the half-drunken pair received more punishment in that minute than they had probably received for years. One of them went flying backwards, and lay groaning on the ground. His companion staggered for a moment or two, and then fled, his lip bleeding, and his nose frightfully swollen.

"Good for you, kid!" said somebody in the crowd.

Lawrence turned swiftly, and his eyes flashed.

"It's a pity some of you couldn't have put a stop to the fight!" he shouted hotly. "Grayson—Shaw! The best thing you can do is to get out of this as quickly as you can! You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves!"

Christine and Co. came bursting through the crowd.

"Buck up!" gasped Christine. "Where are the asses? The police are coming!"

"What!" panted Grayson, from the rear.

"The police—about a dozen of them!" ejaculated Talmadge. "If you fellows are caught, you'll be hauled off to the lock-up!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Shaw faintly.

And there was not the slightest doubt that Talmadge spoke the truth. The police were arriving—as usual, when the brawl was at an end! And they arrived just a shade too late, for when they found themselves on the spot, the participants in the affair had vanished, and the crowd was melting, too.

Christine and Co. and Lawrence, without any hesitation, rushed the Fifth-Formers off in their midst. Grayson and Shaw were too bewildered and dazed to do anything on their own account. Left to themselves, they would certainly have fallen into the hands of the police.

Christine and Co. had saved them from this shocking disgrace.

And when they had reached the outskirts of Bannington, a halt was called. Then some of the juniors went back for their bicycles, and Grayson and Shaw were left to walk home alone; they were just about capable of doing it.

Christine was looking very concerned as he and his chums were riding home.

"It's about the worst thing that could possibly have happened," he said. "There'll be an account of that affair in the newspaper to-morrow. Ye gods and little fishes! Think of it! Two St. Frank's fellows found drunk, fighting in the High Street!"

"I wonder what Mr. Foxe will have to say about that?" asked Lawrence grimly. "Perhaps he'll make a bit of an alteration in this wonderful experiment of his. In my opinion, it's a dismal failure!"

Christine felt very glad now that he and his chums had gone to the theatre, for they had been able to rescue Grayson and Shaw from the results of their own folly.

The following morning the two Fifth-Formers were feeling shaky, sick, and generally awful. Their heads ached abominably, their eyes were heavy, and they were pale. The effects of their little "razzle" were obvious.

But both Grayson and Shaw, although they would not admit it, were extremely grateful to Christine and Co. for having rescued them in the Ban-

nington High Street, and the two rascally seniors made up their minds that they would be more careful in future.

Naturally, the whole school was talking about the disgraceful affair, and not only the school, but the whole district. For, sure enough, quite a long report of the incident appeared in the Bannington Gazette that morning.

The affairs of the College House were still in a state of chaos. Mr. Smale Foxe's experiment was quite obviously turning out badly—that is, in the opinion of every right-minded person.

But Mr. Smale Foxe himself, in the seclusion of his own study, told himself that his scheme was working to a point of perfection which he had never hoped for. His object was to bring absolute disgrace upon the fair name of St. Frank's. And he was certainly being most successful!

Mr. Foxe gloated triumphantly as he read the report in the local paper. This was quite excellent; but Mr. Foxe was not satisfied.

"Before many days have passed these reports will be appearing not only locally, but in the London dailies!" he muttered tensely. "By heaven! I have started this thing now, and I shall not be satisfied until it is finished!"

But Mr. Smale Foxe was reckoning without the Remove!

For before long, in spite of all his efforts, he was destined to discover that the Remove had no intention of standing by, idly watching. In truth, the Remove, led by Bob Christine, took a hand in the game, which was to lead to most surprising and unexpected results!

The "rot" in the College House had commenced! But how far would it go?

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

I regret that I have not had space during the past few weeks for one of those little chats about the paper which many of you, I know, would like to see as a regular feature on this page.

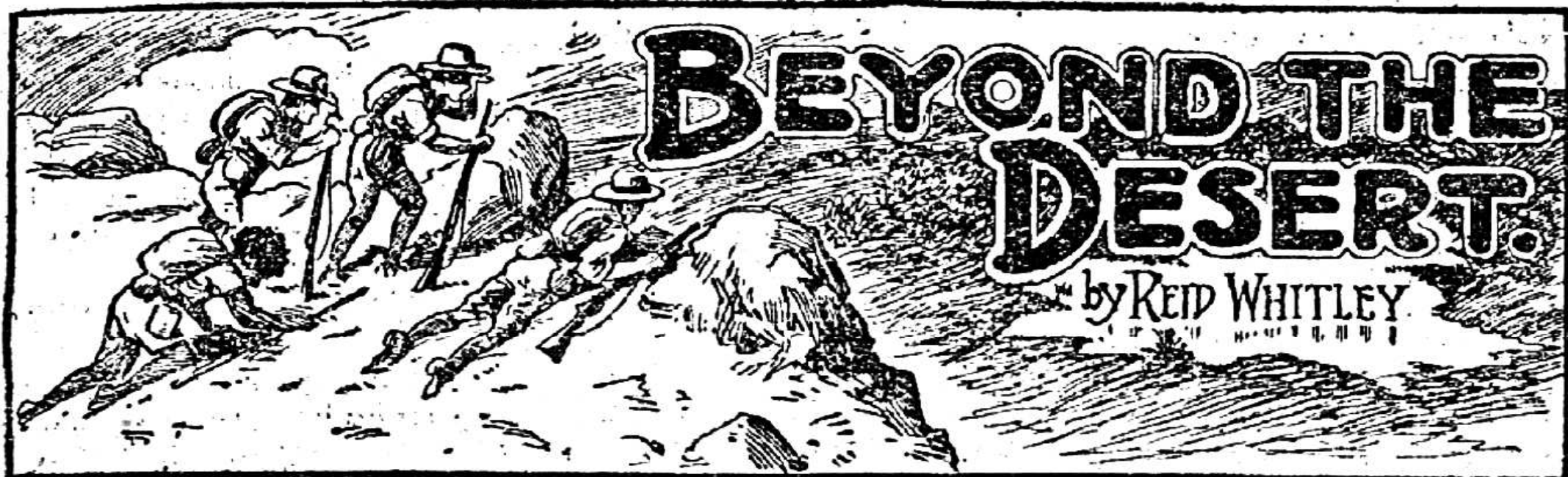
So much appreciated was the map of St. Frank's and its environs that I hope soon to publish other interesting things about the school.

It has been suggested to me that I should get Nipper to run a school magazine in the "Nelson Lee Library." This is not a bad idea, but as it will mean adding a few more pages to our paper I shall have to consider it very carefully. I shall probably have more to say about this suggestion later on.

Talking about the present series, however much we may be inclined to kick against rules and regulations, Mr. Foxe's plan to abolish them in the College House is a good example of their necessity. Even the boys themselves, who have something of the Army spirit of esprit de corps for their school, see the need for law and order. Led by the Remove, an attempt will be made by the boys to enforce the regulations, which Mr. Foxe has deliberately allowed to lapse, by the formation of a Court of Justice, composed of members of the Remove. How delinquents are caught, tried, and punished for breaking the school rules will be described in next week's story: "THE SECRET TRIBUNAL."

THE EDITOR.

Start To-day This Grand New Australian Serial!



AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE BY AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR.

INTRODUCTION.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding are the sole survivors of a shipwreck off the Australian coast. They had come from England to settle in Australia, and were going to Cairns, where lived Jack's uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been away three months in the interior, the two Englishmen decide to go in search of him. Tom Anson, an Australian with whom they become acquainted, makes up the party. After fifteen days' march over burning desert, parched with thirst and exhausted with fatigue, they come to a water-hole. But it is dried up!

(Now read on.)

The Professor's Message.

"I VOTE we stay for an hour, then start," said Maxwell. "But, first of all, I want to know whether there's anything under this pile of stones. There might be some message from my uncle, you know."

He walked over to the cairn, and began to dislodge the stones. Harding helped him, occasionally flashing a light on the pile. Presently the rays fell on something oblong, which reflected them. It was a metal box, a botanist's collecting-case. He pounced on it, and hauled it out of the cavity in which it had lain.

Maxwell opened it, and unfolded the sheet of paper it contained. As he had anticipated, it was a message from his uncle. It began by asking the finder to take it to the nearest police officer or magistrate, and then continued:

"On reaching this place I found an old gin dying by the water-hole. She told me a long, rambling tale about a lake which lay in the south-west. There was a green valley, she said, but it was guarded by bunyips, and anyone who fell in it could never return. She was positive about this, for she said she had seen the bunyips with her own eyes, from a hill overlooking the valley. She said that

there was one water-hole within a short day's march of here, and gave me directions. It lies south-west, and near it is a tall, conical rock, which is visible for a considerable distance. From this water-hole to the valley is two days' march across waterless desert, still south-west.

"She died shortly after telling me this, consoling her last moments with a pipe of my tobacco. We buried her. I am setting out at once, as the water here is nearly exhausted. I advise anyone who comes here not to linger, but either to return, or try for the water-hole I have mentioned."

Then followed the signature of Herbert Maxwell, and the address to which the message might be sent.

"A short day's march, eh?" muttered Anson, as Jack concluded. "And Worlee is a very long one. Shall we risk it? What do you think?"

"I say, let us go on," said Harding. "We came out to look for the Professor. We're hard on his tracks. It would be a pity to turn back, 'specially as' it seems doubtful that we'd ever reach Worlee. But what are bunyips?"

Anson smiled grimly.

"Nobody knows, least of all the black fellows who believe in them. Some say they're beasts that live in water-holes; but, anyhow, if you see one you die of it, so naturally you get no first-hand information. Myself, I believe they tack the name on to any big beast, but I'm not certain. Still, we're in the way to find out. Mebbe they're the sort the Professor was after."

Their minds made up, they rested for a while, then, shouldering the tank that remained intact, into which they carefully poured the little water they had salvaged, they set out, after replacing Professor Maxwell's note in the cairn, with an addition stating that they were following his trail. It was unlikely that anyone would come that way, but it was comforting to leave some link with the outer world.

Thanks to a pocket-compass and Snaplus, who walked ahead, occasionally picking up

the trail with the flash-lamp, they made fair progress. The hard training of warfare had taught the three to keep on going even when every fibre cried out for rest. So they marched doggedly on in the wake of tireless Snaplus.

Yet towards dawn even that son of the wild began to wilt. He halted.

"This fellow want drink," he announced.

"If we stop we'll stiffen," grunted Maxwell. "But we'll halt for a minute."

They drank, and revived a little, then ploughed along once more. The air was somewhat cooler, but the sand under foot was still hot. It hung about them in a cloud as they shuffled on.

It grew lighter, then, with but a short interval of twilight, the sun rose—and then there, little more than a mile ahead, stood a tall rock, an obelisk almost as regular as though it had been carved by men.

A thin cheer burst from the cracked lips of the three, and even the indifferent Snaplus chuckled.

"All right, boys. Now we sha'n't be long!" croaked Anson. "I hope the professor left another cairn to mark the water."

He had, though, indeed, there was little need, for they found the place readily enough—a pool among rocks fed by a spring. Around it some bush had sprung up, and there was a patch of grass, very refreshing to eyes seared with the everlasting glare of white and yellow sands.

They drank sparingly at first, then, little by little, lying beside the pool, and feeling their parched bodies expand as dry sponges do when plunged in water. Then they ate, and, rigging a blanket across the top of a couple of bushes to screen them from the sun, fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

It was late in the afternoon when they awoke and searched the cairn, where they found another note of Professor Maxwell's, briefly announcing that he was about to start in search of the hidden valley.

"If I find it, I anticipate the happiest results," he concluded. "It may be that I shall discover animals and plants differing considerably from others of the continent. Cut off from the outer world, they should have developed new species, or perhaps preserved the old ones which have long been extinct elsewhere. Who knows?"

"Who knows!" echoed Jack. "Perhaps we may find him there. Meanwhile, let us eat and drink and rest for a day or two."

"More especially drink," murmured Harding, and suited the action to the word.

For two days they rested, planning their dash into the unknown. If they had but had the lost water-tank they would have felt easier, though, as Jim pointed out, they would not have been able to carry it far. Snaplus made a trip of a few miles by himself, and returned to report that the trail was quite clear.

Then, very early in the morning of the

third day, long before dawn, the party shouldered their baggage, and set out on the trek that might very well bring them to their death.

The Secret Valley.

TWO days had passed. Again it was morning as the four, all in the last stage of exhaustion, crawled wearily up a seemingly endless slope towards a skyline dotted with huge, fantastic-looking rocks. Their water supply had given out on the evening before. They had abandoned the now useless water-tank and the bulk of their provisions, and pressed on. If they did not find the lake for which they searched before the heat of noon overtook them, it was likely that they would never require food again.

Snaplus still kept a little ahead, and though the trail was now not so clear, he could still trace it. Moreover, far ahead, but plainly discernible in the dawn-light, Maxwell thought he saw another of the cairns with which his uncle had marked his progress, perched on the summit of one of the rocks.

"It's a race with the sun," he said, between cracked lips. "If we get to water by midday all's well. If not, good-night!"

The slope grew steeper, the sun hotter. Harding, whose legs had not yet quite recovered from the grueling inflicted by the octopus on the wreck, began to lag behind. At last he dropped on all fours and began to crawl. Maxwell, hardly in better case, saw his plight, and halted, as did Anson. Together they hoisted him to his legs, and, linked together, staggered on.

Snaplus, despite his hereditary hardihood, was suffering hardly less than the whites. He staggered as he walked; only sheer force of habit kept him to the trail. The heat haze began to dance before the wearied eyes of the whites. It seemed to them that the rocks ahead were prancing and jumping mockingly, as though they rejoiced that more victims to the lure of the desert were about to be sacrificed before them. A little more and the three would have been prepared to swear that the twisting, writhing shapes were alive.

Suddenly a cool breath fanned their dry faces. A breeze laden with moisture had sprung up. It seemed to come from beyond the summit of the ridge, and it brought a trifle more of energy to the drooping men. Maxwell's bent back straightened, his mind, which had been beginning to wander, cleared.

"Here's where we go over the top, boys!" he cried, in a voice that tried to be ringing and only succeeded in croaking. "Let's make a break for it. Pull yourselves together. Ready? Go!"

And, amazing to say, the three began to run, staggering and gasping, yet gallantly, as though they were moving against the foe.

They reached and passed Snaplus, who, bewildered and nearly done, yet found energy

(Continued on page III of cover.)

enough somewhere in his bone-lean carcase to grunt and stagger after them.

One hundred yards—two—three! The summit was near. The three sunburnt faces were grey, the black one blue, but they reeled on, came to the edge of the ridge, recoiled a pace and dropped on the baking sand, utterly exhausted, but triumphant, for below them lay a valley—a very paradise of greenery, with a lake of considerable size in the midst, its waters sparkling in the sun.

Snaplus came up, looked, and fell on his face.

"One fellow, big water. - One fellow, heap fellow bunyip!" he groaned, and lay silent.

For a while no one stirred or spoke. That last spurt had been a piece of heroic folly for which they had to pay. They had used up almost the last ounce of vitality—yet not quite all, for the sight of the water below renewed the sluggish life in their veins. Slowly and painfully Maxwell sat up.

"It seems to be a sort of canyon, with high cliffs all round—except just below here. There's a slope."

"Yes, but it's sand," put in Anson. "Once we set foot on that it'll begin to slide. We'll never get back that way."

"Well, we sha'n't mean to—in the meantime, at all events. See, there go a flight of ducks, and there's something moving in that patch of underbush. We sha'n't starve. Come along. If we wait too long here we won't have strength left to face that descent."

He rose, and buckling his pistol-holster and cartridge-belt closer, drew taut the straps that held his pack on his shoulders. The others did the like. Only Snaplus lay still. Anson stirred him up with the butt of the gun he carried. Snaplus groaned wearily.

"Heap fellow bunyip down by water," he said.

"You heap die if you stay here. We three fellow kill bunyip if we see him," replied Anson. "If you don't come, you one dead fellow, for I shoot you."

He prodded him in the ribs with the muzzle, and Snaplus rose reluctantly.

"Bunyip eat this fellow," he said resignedly, and followed down the further slope.

Although cliffs that seemed unclimbable walled the valley as far as eye could see either direction, the professor's trail had brought them to the one spot where it might be entered, for here there had been a fall rock at some time long before.

Sand had covered the debris in a long even slope which ran steeply down to the head of a gulley far below, beyond which lay a thick tangle of brush. The upper part of this slope was held in place somewhat by rocks, but from the look of the rest, Maxwell judged that they would have to take the risks of a long slide over a loose surface.

"We'd better go together. Anson take the head. Squat down, and he pack ahead of you to fall on if

into anything. Harding, you go next and hang on to Anson. Snaplus goes next, and I will take the rear."

"When you'll get the benefit of any loose stuff that comes flying after us," growled Harding, but obeyed none the less, for, having agreed that Maxwell should be leader, they gave him unquestioning obedience.

In this order then they sat down on the sand at the point where the steep of the slope began.

"All ready? Here goes!" cried Jack, and let go the point of rock to which he had been holding, shoving himself away at the same time.

Instantly they began to slide, slowly at first, then with an ever-increasing rapidity till they were shooting downwards at a pace as great as any toboggan ever attained on a snowslide.

In vain Maxwell attempted to brake by digging his heels into the sand. He merely increased the cloud of sand debris that followed them without slackening their pace perceptibly.

The slope was terribly steep and fearfully long. In that dazzling heat haze which hung above it, it had been impossible to estimate just how long it was, and now they were surrounded by a smother of light sand which prevented them from seeing anything.

The slide seemed to last for hours, though, in reality, barely forty seconds elapsed after they had gained impetus before Anson gave a howl and thrust his pack before him. Next moment the four were thrown in a tangled heap amidst a clump of bushes and saplings which luckily yielded to the impact, while over them rushed an avalanche of sand and small stones.

Fortunately, there were no heavy fragments or they might have been hurt. They escaped with a peppering, severe enough to make them howl with what breath was left them, as, little the worse for the rush, they clawed their way out and staggered forward.

One thought, and one only, was in their minds—water. Reeling, stumbling, half-blinded with dust, their dried lips cracked and bleeding, they blundered through the brushwood and came to the edge of the lake. Casting aside their packs, heedless of possible snakes or alligators, they waded into a foot or so of clear water sparkling on a sandy beach and lying down

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Editors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited. The Subscription Rates: Inland; 11s. per annum, for six months. Sole Agents for South or Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Imperial News Company, Limited. **March 5, 1921.**