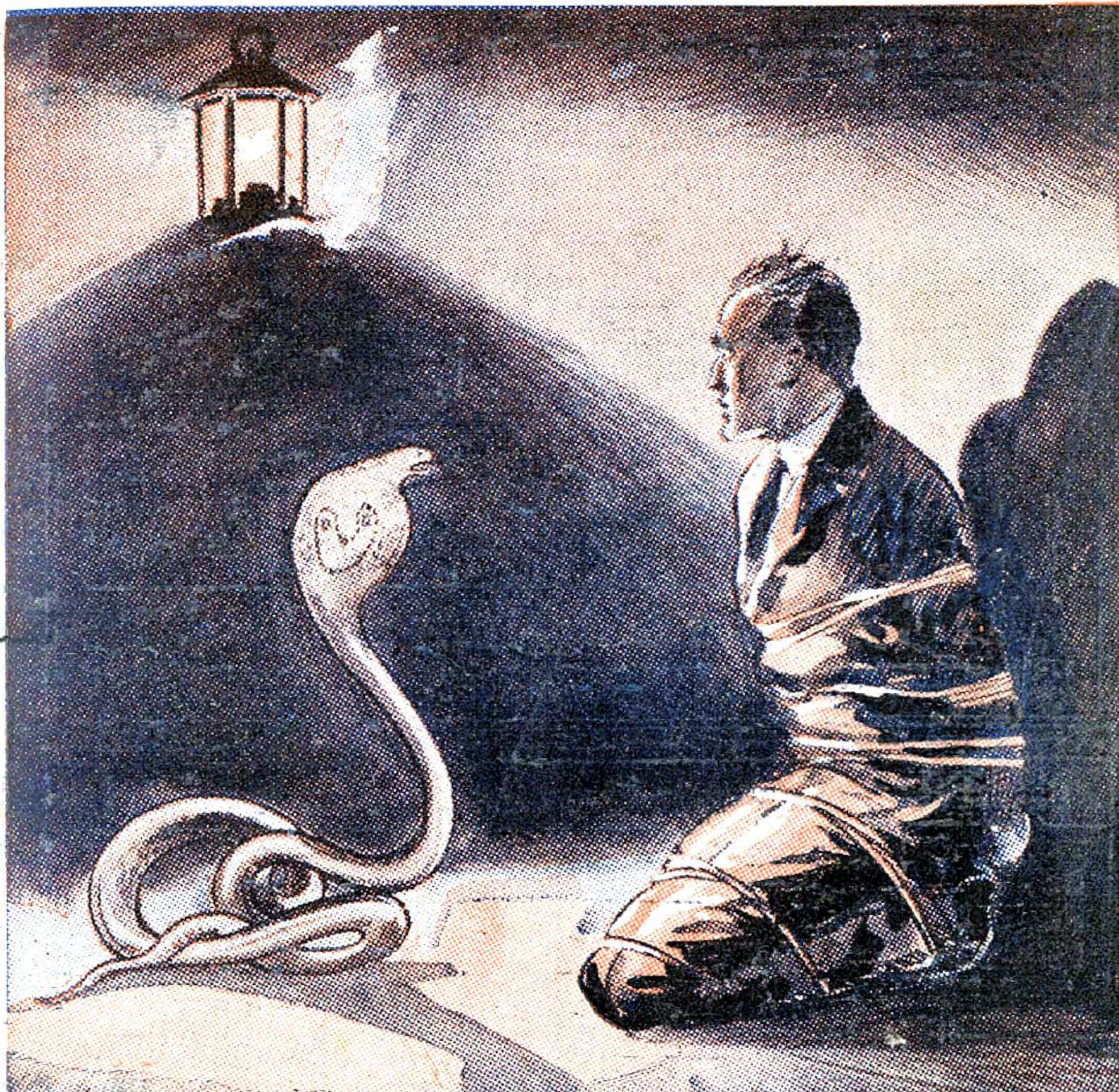


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE ARGUMENT.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD shrugged his shoulders.

"Hanged if I can see what all the fuss is about!" he said, in his sneering, unpleasant way. "Anybody might think the chap was a tin god!"

"So he is—accordin' to these fellows," said Gulliver. "They worship him!"

"Sickenin'!" remarked Bell.

The Nuts of Study A were lounging against the gateway which led from the Triangle into the playing fields. It was evening, and St Frank's was enjoying a burst of warm, welcome sunshine after a dull day.

Over on the practice pitch on Little Side, a sturdy junior was batting, and a crowd of other fellows stood round, in an admiring throng. Everything the junior did was right. He was undoubtedly a hero in the eyes of the others.

Jerry Dodd, of the Remove, was the fellow of the hour in the Ancient House.

The Australian junior had made a name for himself in one never-to-be-forgotten hour, on the previous Saturday afternoon. It was when he had saved the junior eleven from being defeated by Holmford College, when the case seemed absolutely hopeless.

Until that match, only one or two fel-

lows had known that Jerry Dodd could play cricket. The others had thought him to be a hopeless duffer at the game. But they very soon found out their mistake, and Jerry revealed himself in his true colours. It was now known throughout the school that he was a batsman of amazing capabilities. He hadn't been given an opportunity of revealing what he could do in the bowling line; at least not in a proper match.

He had entered the game on Saturday half-way through the last innings, and had scored over two hundred runs off his own bat, changing a terrible rout into a glorious victory. And, for this alone, he was honoured in the Remove as though he were—to use Fullwood's phrase—a tin god.

One of the most delighted spectators of that match had been Mr. William Dodd, Jerry's uncle from Australia. This genial gentleman was a member of the Australian cricket team, and he was due to take part in the Test matches. But at present, he was still at St. Frank's.

He had sprained his wrist rather badly, making play for him impossible. And so, during his enforced idleness, he decided to remain with Jerry. He had been filled with astonishment that the boy should have put up such a brilliant performance.

Until Saturday, Jerry had been forbidden to play cricket. His father had

sent him to St. Frank's from "down under" to study, and Mr. Dodd had believed cricket would interfere with Jerry's work. But Nelson Lee had taken pity on the junior; he had seen how hard it was for him to live his normal life without participating in his favourite game.

And so Nelson Lee had cabled to Australia, urgently requesting Mr. Dodd to send a prompt reply, giving permission for Jerry to play cricket for the school. This permission had arrived in the middle of the Saturday-match.

Jerry Dodd, as a cricketer, therefore, was something new to St. Frank's. He had suddenly blossomed out in a new line, and he was the talk of the whole school. His batting performance was, indeed, a record for junior cricket at St. Frank's.

It was quite characteristic of Fullwood to sneer; the cad of the Ancient House generally sneered at anything of a commendable nature. Moreover, he had rather a grudge against Jerry Dodd. For no particular reason, he had developed an intense dislike for the colonial boy.

"You're right, Bell; it's positively sickenin'," he said, in a loud voice. "The way they crawl over the cad turns me up!"

"Disgustin', I call it!" exclaimed Bell.

Handforth and Co. were just passing. Church and McClure, of course, would have gone straight on, but Handforth came to an abrupt halt. He was always ready for an argument, and his fist was ready at any time to deliver a punch. It was a particularly keen pleasure to punch Fullwood's elegant nose.

"What's that?" said Handforth grimly.

"Eh?" said Fullwood, with studied insolence.

"What's that you were saying just now, you cad?"

"I always thought that young gentlemen were told to mind their own business," said Fullwood calmly. "As it happens, Handforth, I wasn't speakin' to you at all, and you can go an' boil your face!"

Handforth had no intention of doing so.

"You cheeky rotter," he said warmly. "You were speaking about Jerry Dodd

—I heard you! And if I ever hear you insulting him behind his back again, I'll biff you on the nose until you can't see straight!"

"You'd better not try it on!" said Fullwood sourly. "An' if it comes to that, I'll say what I bally well like, without interference from you. You might think Dodd was a magician, the way everybody jaws!"

"He's not a magician, and there's nothing magical about him," said Handforth. "But he's the best cricketer the Remove's ever had, and he's probably one of the best cricketers in the whole world. He's not merely clever; he's simply a demon at the game. And just because the chaps honour him for it, all you can do is to sneer!"

"I'm not sneerin'," retorted Fullwood. "But it makes me fed up when I hear everybody slobberin' over the cad. What has he done, anyway? Simply knocked up two hundred runs against the Holmford juniors. Any decent cricketer could do that."

"It's a pity you don't try!" said Church sarcastically.

"Me?" grinned Fullwood. "I've got somethin' better to do with my time. Cricket is only a waste of energy; there's no bally sense in knockin' a ball about, an' chasin' after it."

"Hallo, what's the argument?" asked Pitt, strolling up.

"Oh, nothing! Fullwood's merely asking for a thick ear," said Handforth promptly.

"Are you going to oblige?"

"Of course!"

Fullwood backed away.

"Keep your rotten fists to yourself!" he said hastily. "I've got as much right to my opinion as any other chap. An' I say it's all hoah to make such a fuss about that Australian bounder. He's an uncouth, uneducated lout!"

Reginald Pitt frowned.

"I shall be delivering that thick ear if you're not careful," he said sharply.

"Dodd doesn't want any of us to fight his battles for him, I know; but I'm not going to stand here and hear you string out insults of that sort. Jerry may not be polished in the same way as you are, Fullwood, but he happens to be a gentleman."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Fullwood and Co.

"And he could teach you some lessons in manners, too!" went on Pitt

warmly. "I'll just give you a word of advice. Don't insult him to his face."

"Oh, and why not?" asked Fullwood sneeringly.

"Well, it wouldn't be healthy!"

"I'm not afraid of the rotter," said Fullwood. "As for his cricket, he needn't think that he's the most important chap at St. Frank's because he can do a bit of battin'. When you come to realise his performance, there was nothing particularly startlin' in what he did."

"I suppose making two hundred runs is a trifle?" demanded Church.

"It wasn't bad; but who was he battin' against?" asked Fullwood sourly. "Juniors, who hardly know what cricket is. Why, if Dodd was asked to stand up to Fenton's bowling, his wicket wouldn't last a minute."

Fullwood was only saying this with the object of belittling the splendid show that Jerry Dodd had put up. He didn't succeed in the object he desired; he only made his listeners angry, and the argument waxed hot. Nobody ever thought that there would be any definite result.

"That's rather a nice point!" said Pitt. "According to your idea, Fullwood, Jerry Dodd wouldn't be able to stand up to Fenton's bowling?"

"No, he wouldn't."

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"He'd wipe Fenton's bowling all over the field!"

Handforth and Co. were vigorous in their remarks.

"Oh, I don't know so much about that," put in Pitt. "I don't suppose Dodd could deal with Fenton's bowling as easily as he dealt with the junior stuff. But I'll guarantee he'd put up a good show."

Fullwood sneered. Edgar Fenton was the captain of St. Frank's, the idol of the first eleven. He was certainly the finest cricketer in the senior school; as excellent at batting as at bowling. He was a tower of strength to his side, an able leader, and a first rate fellow.

To think of pitting Jerry Dodd against this giant of athletics was hardly a fair test. But Pitt had plenty of confidence in the Australian junior.

"And what about the bowling?" demanded Handforth abruptly. "I'll guarantee that Dodd could bowl Fenton with ease."

"Piffle!" jeered Fullwood. "Fenton

could stand up to Dodd's bowling for twelve hours, an' his wicket wouldn't be in danger for twelve seconds. You can think what you like about the cad, but I have my own ideas."

"Well, I'd rather like to force those ideas down your own throat!" said Pitt grimly. "It's not my business to champion Dodd, but I'll wager that he could get Fenton out in less than ten minutes—and find his middle stump, too. And I'll wager that Fenton couldn't get Dodd out in half an hour!"

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the good of this?" he sneered. "We can't put it to the test, or I'd take your bet, and give you twenty to one."

"Same here!" chimed in Gulliver and Bell.

"I don't bet!" said Pitt curdly. "But perhaps this can be put to the test. I'll make you eat your own words, if I can, Fullwood. Fenton's just over there, and I'm going to ask him if he'll participate in the test."

"You may as well save your breath," exclaimed Fullwood. "Fenton won't lower himself by playing cricket with a hooligan like Dodd."

Pitt turned without a word, leaving Handforth and Co. to see that the chums of Study A did not slide off. Pitt went straight up to Fenton, the tall, upright, fair-haired school captain.

"Just a minute, Fenton," said Pitt.

"Hallo, what is it?" asked the prefect. "I'm just going to the nets——"

"We've been having a bit of an argument," explained Reginald Pitt. "The cad Fullwood has been making some beastly remarks about Jerry Dodd; trying to belittle his performance of Saturday——"

"I'll attend to Fullwood," said Fenton grimly. "The young cad! Dodd is a wonder, and I've got a great respect for him. In fact, between you and me and the gatepost, I'm rather sorry he's not eligible for the first eleven."

Pitt grinned.

"Well, it's this way," he explained. "It's my opinion that Jerry Dodd could find your wicket within ten minutes."

"Oh, could he?" said Fenton good-naturedly. "I'm not so sure about that."

"It's my opinion, also, that you couldn't find his wicket within half an hour," added Reginald Pitt.

"You seem to have a large amount of faith in Dodd," smiled the school

captain. "And, by the same token, precious little faith in me!"

"It's not that," said Pitt hastily. "I—I was wondering if you'd consent to put it to the test, Fenny. I know it's not usual for a junior to practise with a senior, but this is exceptional. Are you willing to take it on?"

Fenton hesitated for a moment. He was in a delicate position. If he refused, it would be taken for granted that he was afraid to face the test. If he agreed, he half believed that he would not come out with all the honours. But after all, cricket was cricket. He wouldn't lose any dignity by consenting to this proposal.

He nodded.

"Yes, I'll take it on, if you like," he said, with a smile.

"Good man!" exclaimed Pitt heartily. "Come on, it'll do on Little Side! Good old Fenton, you always were a sport!"

Fenton followed the junior, still smiling, and the other fellows wondered what was in the wind. Handforth and Co. were quite eager, for they knew by Fenton's very presence that he had consented to the proposal. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell scowled, but pretended to be well content.

"Oh, so Fenton's decided to show the young bouncer up?" sneered Fullwood. "I'm glad of that. You'll see something now, my sons! You'll see Dodd look as small as a midget. He won't be able to swank after this!"

"You rotter!" snapped Church. "Doddy never has swanked! It's not his way; he's about the most modest chap in the Remove!"

Jerry Dodd, at the present moment, was chatting with me. As a matter of fact, I was asking him how on earth he managed to get such a tricky twist on the ball. His bowling was extraordinarily ingenious.

"I guess it's just a matter of practice, chum," smiled Jerry. "Some fellows have a better knack, perhaps. And it won't do to keep to the same twist, because a batsman sort of gets used to it. The idea is to trick him."

"Exactly," I agreed. "But that's not always easy. I think I shall have to take a few lessons from you, Doddy, if you've no objection, although I can never hope to reach your form."

"I've no objection, old chum," smiled Jerry. "You see——"

"Hallo, Fenton!" I interrupted, as

the school captain came up. "Glad to see you. Anything we can do? Always ready to oblige with a few hints, if necessary. Perhaps you want to obtain a few tips about real cricket?"

Edgar Fenton grinned.

"None of your cheek, my lad," he said good-naturedly. "To tell the truth, Pitt has made some sort of a challenge. He's got an idea that Dodd could get my wicket down in ten minutes——"

"Wrong!" I said. "He'd do it in five!"

"By jings!" put in Jerry. "I say, chums, I—I——"

"You don't come on in this act, except to do the work," put in Pitt calmly. Objections not allowed, Doddy. I won't mention any names; but some frightful cads have been running you down; calling you a swanker, and all the rest of it. They said you couldn't do anything against Fenton, and so I've asked Fenny to put it to the test. You've got to agree."

Jerry Dodd looked at the school captain doubtfully.

"I reckon I don't want to push forward, Fenton," he said. "I didn't figure on anything of this sort, and it hardly seems fair——"

"That's all right, kid," interrupted Fenton. "Cricket is cricket, and if you can beat me, good luck to you. But I rather fancy you'll have some trouble. I don't think I can be accused of being boastful; but it's hardly reasonable to suppose that a youngster of your age can handle a fellow of my size."

"Size doesn't count," interrupted Pitt. "It's skill you want, Fenny. You're the best cricketer in the senior eleven, a deadly bowler and a brilliant batsman; but I maintain that Jerry Dodd is an exception. He's the kind of cricketer that only comes once in two or three generations. When he grows older he'll be famous all over the world."

"By jings!" said Jerry uncomfortably. "Cut it out, chum!"

Everybody knew what was in the wind now, and quite a lot of talk was going on. It was decided that Jerry Dodd should go to the wicket first, and Fenton should take the ball. He was to be allowed ten minutes in which to find Jerry's wicket. If he failed to do so by then, the positions were to be reversed.

We all stood round, looking on with

great interest. Then, just before we started, I had an idea. Possibly Fenton would get his man out with a catch, and it would be only fair to set the field.

There were plenty of junior cricketers present, and I spread them out all over the field, as in a proper cricket match.

"Right-ho—go ahead!" I said at length.

Fenton took the ball and went ahead. By this time, quite a number of seniors had strolled across, and they were smiling with supreme confidence. Their faith in their captain was enormous. Fenton was a deadly bowler, and in most of their senior matches more wickets fell to him than anybody else.

"Oh, he'll have no difficulty in finding the kid's middle stump," said Morrow, of the Sixth. "Rather a cheek, these kids suggesting such a thing; but I must admit it's interesting."

"It'll put the junior in his place, too," said another senior. "Just because he made such a big score on Saturday he thinks he can do anything. But he's bitten off more than he can chew this time."

Morrow shook his head.

"It's not Dodd's doing," he said. "I don't think he suggested this test. There's no swank and bluster about Dodd. He's a decent kid, I believe. I shall be rather sorry to see him look small."

It was taken for granted by nine out of ten that Jerry Dodd would be wiped out of existence by the all-conquering Fenton. Senior cricket was a very different proposition to junior cricket.

Mr. William Dodd had strolled up, and he looked on intently. Uncle Bill had great faith in his nephew, and he was aware of a tiny feeling of anxiety. Would Jerry give a good showing against the senior champion?

Fenton himself had no feelings of animosity against Jerry, but he told himself that he would do his utmost to show the crowd that a mere junior had no earthly chance against a real cricketer. In the Sixth, junior cricket was more or less regarded as a game of marbles.

The St. Frank's captain took his run, and then delivered the leather with the speed of a four-point-seven shell. Fenton was a terror for speed. The ball whizzed down the pitch, broke awkwardly, and—

Clack!

Away it went, right over to the far corner of Big Side, a magnificent drive, which plainly told of the power behind the bat. From all sides a murmur of surprise went up. Fenton stared, and bit his lip. This wasn't a good beginning.

Uncle Bill smiled quietly to himself.

"Good for you, Jerry!" he murmured. "Keep it up!"

While the ball was being hunted, another was brought into action. Jerry sent it speeding away. Fenton tried all his tricks, and although the Australian junior had a little trouble with some of the balls, his wicket was never in the slightest danger.

He seemed to anticipate every move of Fenton's, and he was prepared for it when the leather came down. The St. Frank's captain was a clever bowler, changing his tactics constantly; the batsman never knew exactly what was coming. But, somehow, Jerry had an uncanny way of guessing. At all events he never made a mistake—he never fell into the traps which Fenton set.

And the minutes passed, and Jerry Dodd still remained at the wicket, batting away coolly, powerfully and with the most confidence. Edgar Fenton was perspiring; but his redness of face was not entirely due to this.

He, the champion cricketer of the school, was being "shown up" by a mere junior!

Jerry Dodd was literally toying with his expert bowling! It was not what Fenton had expected, by any means.

Handforth gloated openly.

"Hurrah!" he yelled. "Good for you, Doddy! That's the style, old son! We'll show what the Remove can do; the Sixth ain't in it with us!"

"Now, what about your little bet?" grinned Reginald Pitt, turning to Fullwood. "Nine minutes, already, and Dodd seems fairly set. I don't fancy Fenton will get his wicket within the next fifty seconds!"

Fullwood scowled.

"Oh, I expect Fenton's off colour to-day!" he said gruffly.

Pitt chuckled, and then I slipped my watch into my pocket.

"Time's up!" I said briskly. "Ten minutes, and Dodd hasn't been dismissed. It's your turn now, Fenton. What do you think of our potted W. G. Grace?"

Fenton threw off his momentary annoyance.

"He's great!" he said frankly. "Dodd, my lad, I'm proud of you! I'm not a braggart, but any youngster who can stand up to my bowling for ten minutes as you have done—well, he's worth a mint of money to his side."

"Thanks, Fenton," said Jerry. "I'm glad! I—I hope I haven't offended you by refusin' to be bowled—"

"Oh, cut that out, you young ass!" interrupted Fenton. "This isn't a personal matter. You've proved yourself to be a better batsman than any we've got in the first eleven. I'll admit I don't like saying it, but it's the truth, and it's got to be said. Now we'll see what you can do at bowling. If you can discover my wicket within the stipulated ten minutes, I'll give you a putty medal!"

"Good!" grinned Jerry. "You'll have to kind of watch out, chum!"

I set my watch, and Fenton went to the wicket. Jerry Dodd took the ball, and a moment later he sent down his first ball. Uncle Bill watched with even greater interest than before. Jerry was doing wonders.

It was a slow ball, that first one, and Fenton swung his bat round. But, somehow or other, the leather broke in a peculiar way, and the school captain only just succeeded in blocking his wicket.

He tossed the ball back, his heart beating fast. He knew he had had a narrow escape. He watched Jerry nervously. In some strange way, Jerry always got a batsman into this condition. There was something about him which robbed the man at the wicket of all his confidence.

Jerry sent down his second ball. He took a short run, and his arm went up easily. Fenton anticipated a second slow ball. Then, just at the last second, the Australian junior's wrist shot round, and the ball fairly hissed down the pitch.

Crash!

Fenton didn't exactly know what happened. He hit out powerfully, but his bat met nothing but air. And, behind him, the middle stump of the wicket was lying over in a drunken way, and the bails were yards distant.

"Oh!"

"Clean bowled, by Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

"Well played, Dodd!"

Fenton's face was a study. He had half feared this, but he had never really

expected it to happen. He had been bowled within a minute; Jerry's second ball had done the trick!

And the result of this test was plain. Jerry Dodd, of the Remove was far superior to Edgar Fenton, of the Sixth. Better at bowling and better at batting. Fenton threw his bat down, breathing hard. He stood there with clenched fists. It wasn't an easy pill to swallow.

"Keep it up, Fenny!" shouted Morrow anxiously. "It was only a fluke!"

Fenton swung round; his bitterness completely evaporated. That shout of Morrow's was unsportsmanlike, and it cut Fenton to the quick. As a rule, Morrow was one of the best fellows breathing; and his captain's failure needed some excuse.

"A fluke?" said Fenton grimly. "Don't you believe it, Morrow. That ball was a stinger! Hobbs himself couldn't have played it! I owe Dodd an apology, and I make that apology now."

"Ap-apology!" stammered Morrow. He expected the skies to fall. The school captain apologising to a junior!

"Exactly!" went on Fenton deliberately. "I thought he was only good at junior cricket. I made a mistake. He's the best batsman and the best bowler I've ever played against. With him in the first eleven we could wipe up every team we played against. It's our misfortune that he's ineligible!"

It was a courageous speech, and just what I had expected of a true sportsman like Edgar Fenton. He took Jerry Dodd's hand, and wrung it warmly.

"Splendid, young 'un," he said. "You're a wonder!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Fenton!"

"Well played, Dodd!"

"Good man!"

Dodd was quite flushed, and a moment later Uncle Bill came up to him, and clapped him on the back.

"By gad, Jerry, I'd like to see you playing in a county match!" he said heartily. "I'd guarantee you'd set an example to the professionals, that they wouldn't forget in a hurry. Why, darn me, you'd make your mark in the Test match!"

"Say, cut it out, Uncle Bill!" protested Jerry modestly.

"And what's more, I've got an idea," said Uncle Bill, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'm not going to say any more

just now, but it might come to something. This performance of yours has shown me what you can do. If I can give you a big chance of making good, well, I'll do it!"

Jerry Dodd was quite puzzled, but his uncle would not explain what he meant. Just a little distance off Fullwood and Co. were looking very sheepish. Their estimation of Jerry Dodd's prowess had been very inaccurate.

"Well, what have you got to say?" demanded Handforth tartly.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" snapped Fullwood.

"You haven't even got the decency to admit you're wrong!" went on Handforth. "If it wasn't for soiling my hands I'd punch all your beastly noses until supper time!"

Fullwood and Co. had nothin' to say, and they sheered off. They knew that Handforth would probably put his threat into execution if they answered him back.

That little test on Little Side was the talk of the school during the remainder of the evening. Seniors and juniors alike had no other subject for discussion. Jerry Dodd, of the Remove, had completely wiped up Fenton, the St. Frank's champion. It was certainly something worth talking about.

CHAPTER II.

RAHZIN PAYS A CALL!

NELSON LEE was quite comfortable.

It was just after midnight, and decidedly close. Outside, the stars were winking rather hazily, but there was every prospect of fine weather. The whole countryside was silent and asleep. Behind the school the moon was shining down with a pale, weak light.

Nelson Lee had been at his bedroom window for some little time. It was very comfortable there, seated in an easy-chair, and he was dreamily smoking his pipe. He didn't particularly want to sleep.

At first he had sat down just for a few minutes after undressing. Attired in his pyjamas and dressing-gown, he had switched off the light, and, instead of getting into bed, he had pulled the lounge chair to the window.

At this hour it was quiet; there was no possibility of an interruption. And

the famous schoolmaster-detective, free from the scholastic worries of the day, was at liberty to think deeply on other matters.

Just now he had been looking over the problem of Jerry Dodd. He was bringing back all the details to mind. Quite recently Nelson Lee had had some astonishing adventures with a party of mysterious Indians, or Burmese, who, to the best of Leo's knowledge, were still in the district.

They had made their headquarters in a rock fissure down in the old quarry on Bannington Moor, and, for some reason best known to themselves, they were intent upon getting hold of Jerry Dodd.

Nelson Lee had some inkling of the truth. He knew, for example, that these Indians were anxious to brand Jerry with a peculiar sign. But why? What could be the reason for this? Nelson Lee was at a loss.

"The Brand of the Twin Stars!" muttered Lee absently. "Why should these men from the East come to St. Frank's on this mission? It is quite evident that they are in grim earnest. I have received ample proof of that."

More than once Nelson Lee had been in danger of his life at the hands of these men, but he did not think they meant any actual harm to Jerry Dodd. There was no doubt, however, that they had every intention of capturing Jerry, if possible.

Nelson Lee had spent a great deal of time in looking up books of reference, and he had come across one of two very interesting details concerning habits, customs, and religions of the different sects and castes of Burmah.

And he was now convinced that this mysterious little party in the district was set upon branding Jerry Dodd on his fifteenth birthday. This would fall on the Wednesday of the present week. Lee was determined that Jerry should be well guarded on that particular day.

As Lee lay back smoking in his chair, he also called to mind the peculiar incident of the golden idol. Jerry had brought this to the school, having taken it from the rock cavern while under the influence of a peculiar drug. Nelson Lee now had that idol in his own possession.

He had thought of taking direct action, but, so far, he had not gone to this length. Until it was absolutely necessary, he did not want to make the

matter public, or even to inform the police.

For Nelson Lee had an idea that there was a secret behind all this—a secret which Jerry's father would prefer to remain hidden. Somewhere or other, there was a family skeleton in the Dodd cupboard.

Therefore, although Nelson Lee had plenty of evidence, he had not yet taken official action. And he had an idea that the Indians themselves guessed that this was the case, and so they remained in the neighbourhood, awaiting an opportunity to achieve their purpose.

At last Nelson Lee roused himself. The big school clock had just chimed out the hour of one, and the detective considered it was about time he got between the sheets. The first rays of dawn would be appearing after the lapse of another two hours.

Lee took a last look out in the silent Triangle. Everything seemed ghostly. The fountain was clearly outlined in the pale moonlight, casting a long shadow over the dry gravel.

Nelson Lee's gaze wandered over towards the little plantation near the monastery ruins. Then suddenly he became rigid. He stood perfectly still, staring out at one certain spot.

Was it imagination, or had he actually seen a slight movement?

"Strange!" he murmured. "I can swear I saw a dim shadow— Ah!"

He stared harder than ever, and now he knew that he was not mistaken. Something was moving among the trees—something stealthy and well-nigh invisible. Nelson Lee could follow the movements with a fair amount of certainty.

He went first towards the little woodshed among the trees. There he paused for quite a little while. And Nelson Lee drew back well away from the window so that there could be no possibility of his being seen.

Then at last, when he had begun to think that the shadow would not reappear, he saw a slight movement quite a long way away. He knew what had happened. The intruder, whoever he was, had passed behind the woodshed, now coming into view again nearer to the school building.

There was a short stretch of open moonlight to cross, and the stranger ran with great speed, but absolutely silent. He was swallowed up in the

shadow which lay deep against the face of the Ancient House.

Nelson Lee pursed his lips. He was positive that the intruder was an Indian! The man had moved in a peculiar, snake-like fashion. No ordinary burglar or tramp could have adopted those movements. And a visit by one of the Indians was not altogether unexpected. Lee had been on the look-out for some such contingency.

He knew that he was safe from observation now. He leaned out of the window, just allowing his head to project over the stone sill. He gazed away in the direction the figure had taken. At first there was no sign of it; then Lee could discern a tiny patch of blackness moving amid the other blackness. And then, as he looked, it suddenly disappeared.

"Quite so!" he murmured. "This is eminently satisfactory. I could not have desired a better move on the enemy's part. The dusky gentleman has entered my study."

This was quite clear to Lee. The man had slipped in through the window, which he had had no difficulty in opening, since the catch was of simple manufacture. But he was not likely to be rewarded for his pains. Nelson Lee never kept anything of importance in his study.

He knew, of course, why this Indian had come. There could be only one reason. He was looking for the golden image, as he had looked on one other occasion. Then, as now, Nelson Lee had surprised him at his work. But this time the detective was far better off, for he had received full warning.

Without waiting to dress, he slipped towards the door, opened it silently, and passed out into the corridor. Then, with cat-like tread, he made his way to the staircase, and descended.

He did not waste any time in reaching his study, and he arrived outside the door without the intruder having had the slightest warning of his approach. And then Nelson Lee's movements were rapid.

With one combined movement he flung the door open and switched on the electric light. It was done in a flash. And there, facing a mahogany bureau, was the swarthy figure of an Indian. He had been taken utterly by surprise, and he swung round with a sharp hiss of alarm.

"Stand still!" rapped out Lee curtly.

"One movement, and I fire!"

The intruder leapt towards the window, which was standing wide open, but Nelson Lee anticipated the move. Quick as thought he flung a light chair across the room—not at the Indian, but in front of him. The man, unable to check himself, stumbled headlong over the obstacle.

Crash!

He was over before he knew it, with Nelson Lee on top of him. The detective obtained a ju-jitsu grip, and he held the Indian helpless. The man, breathing hard, muttered some words in his own language.

"No, my friend, you don't get away this time!" said Nelson Lee calmly. "Can you understand what I am saying?"

The prisoner grunted.

"My knowledge of English is extraordinary!" he muttered.

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee. "We shall now be able to converse quite freely, and, I have no doubt, with mutual interest. Our present positions, however, are not precisely comfortable."

"I am Rahzin—it is not for thou to molest me!" hissed the Indian. "Woe betide thee if harm befalls me! Thou art warned!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I don't fancy retaining this grip, my friend," he said. "I will allow you to rise—and now it is my turn to give you a warning. You will take your seat in the easy-chair, and if you make the slightest attempt to escape, I shall shoot you down. I wish to have a few words with you."

"If thou art so foolish as to release me, I shall escape," said Rahzin. "Of thy warning I pay no heed. Thou wouldst not fire thy gun, and thus arouse all thy companions in this great building."

Nelson Lee said nothing. He rather admired his prisoner for the spirit he was showing, and he knew that it would be necessary to adopt other tactics.

The famous detective was never at a loss for long. He moved his position, and kept the Indian in his helpless attitude by the application of a knee. Then he rapidly felt in his pocket and produced a handkerchief.

With this he succeeded in binding Rahzin's hands behind his back—not very securely, but sufficiently so for the moment. Then he drew out the long

cord from his dressing-gown, and made a thorough job of the binding.

Finally, he lifted the dusky intruder, and set him in the easy-chair. Rahzin sat glowering at his captor. An intense fire of hatred glowed in those fierce, strange eyes.

"I think we shall be able to chat quite freely now," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "In the first place, it is quite apparent to me that you came to this school for the purpose of recovering a small golden image, set with twin rubies——"

"The god of Rhoon," interrupted Rahzin. "It is not thy property, sahib. Why is it that thou hast interfered? Thou and thy young helper have probed into matters which are not of thy knowledge. For this thou shalt pay dearly. Our secrets are not thy secrets."

"As a master at this school it is my duty to protect my scholars," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "You have menaced a boy named Jerrold Dold——"

"Thou art mistaken, sahib," said the Indian. "We bear the lad no ill will. It is not our intention to harm him. But our business with him is not thy business. Woe betide thee if thou heedest not this warning. Thou art right in saying that I came here for the golden image. Wilt thou let me take it?"

"Not so fast," said Lee grimly. "Why have you come here? Why are you and your friends in this district?"

"It is not my will to answer, sahib."

"What is the name of your chief?"

"He is called Parteb Ghan by our own people."

"Can he speak English?"

"A little, O white man."

"And he is to be found in the rock fissure of the old quarry," said Nelson Lee. "You see, Rahzin, here is the golden image you seek so urgently."

The detective took the little thing out of his pocket—an idol of solid gold, crudely carved, with two rubies in the eye sockets. Rahzin sat forward, wrenching at his bonds, his eyes glittering.

"Thou art right—it is the image!" he said tensely. "Thou wilt give it to me, O sahib, and let me go hence?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Oh, no!" he replied. "I have another plan, my friend. I am afraid you must remain in captivity for the

time being. I cannot possibly consent to make any bargain with you. I have decided upon a course of action, and what that happens to be does not concern you."

Nelson Lee's tone was brisk, and he did not waste any further words. He crossed over to Rahzin, and loosened the cord about his ankles. The man was now able to hobble along, although with difficulty.

"What art thou doing, sahib?" demanded the Hindoo.

"You will stand up, and do precisely as I say," replied Nelson Lee. "You are my prisoner, and I should advise you not to attempt any trickery. Now then—stand up! Walk before me as I direct!"

Rahzin did not like it, but he was not in a position to complain. Sullenly he rose to his feet, and walked across the study to the door, with Nelson Lee in close attendance. The detective was on the alert for any sign of mischief.

However, the prisoner could do nothing, and at length he found himself far away in the rear part of the Ancient House, slowly descending some stone steps into one of the unused cellars. Nelson Lee had decided to leave Rahzin locked up until the morning, when he would either be released or handed over to the police. It all depended upon what happened during the night.

If possible, Nelson Lee did not want to bring the police into the matter. His aim was to avoid publicity. Parteb Ghan and his fellow Indians knew this, and they took chances which otherwise they would have avoided.

Rahzin found himself in a small stone cellar with only a tiny grating in one wall, and a heavy oaken door, which was provided with bolts on the outer side. For him to escape was impossible.

He knew what the scheme was now, and he maintained a sullen silence, refusing to reply to Nelson Lee when the latter addressed him.

The detective made sure that all was secure, and then he quickly mounted the cellar steps, and was soon striding back to his study. In his hand he held the turban which Rahzin had been wearing. He had a reason for taking this, and it was fairly certain that Lee had no intention of going back to bed. There was important work to be done,

and the sooner he set about it the better.

Lee certainly did not return to his bedroom, but only for a short time. He was about to slip off his dressing-gown when he suddenly paused, and stood thinking for a moment or two.

"Yes, perhaps it would be as well," he murmured.

Then he nodded to himself, and smiled.

Nelson Lee left the bedroom.

CHAPTER III.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

"NOT a word, young 'un—wake up!"

The voice came to me in a dreamy kind of way. I knew that it belonged to Nelson Lee, and I sat up in bed, rather heavy with sleep for a second or two. I wondered if I had been dreaming, or if I had actually heard the gov'nor's voice.

All was dark in the Remove dormitory. The only sounds were those of the sleeping juniors around me, and a selection of snores which were suspiciously near Handforth's own particular bed.

The moonlight was shining faintly in through the windows, doing very little to disperse the prevailing gloom. A black shadow hovered over my bed.

"Is—is that you, sir?" I whispered.

"Yes, Nipper."

"Well, I'm blessed!" I said. "I thought I was still asleep, sir! What's the idea? What's the time? It's still pitch dark—"

"The time is between one and two," interrupted Nelson Lee. "We cannot talk here, Nipper. Out of bed with you, and slip on a few things. I want you to come with me at once."

I was all attention.

"Where to, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Never mind where to—I will explain later," replied Lee. "When you have dressed, go down to my study and wait, but you'll probably find me there. There is work for us both, Nipper."

"Good!" I muttered. "I won't be two shakes, gov'nor!"

He nodded and passed out of the dormitory. It did not take me long to slip into my clothes. I was full of curiosity, and I wondered what Nelson Lee's plans were, and where we were off to at this late hour of the night.

I realised, of course, that the errand was connected with Jerry Dodd and the mysterious Indians. This was to be another move in the gov'nor's campaign against the strange men from the East.

It was not long before I went down to Nelson Lee's study. I found the gov'nor already there, attired in an old Norfolk suit, with a soft collar. He didn't look particularly smart, but he was prepared for business.

"Good lad!" said Lee briskly. "We'll get off right at once."

"Where to, sir?"

"The same place as before—you remember our jaunt the other night," said Nelson Lee. "This time we shall have a trump card in our hands, Nipper; and I do not fancy there will be very much danger."

"It was rather a near thing last week, sir," I said. "Those murderous Indians threw us down into that well, and it was only by a piece of luck that we escaped with our lives."

Before another five minutes had elapsed, we were striding along the moonlit road towards Bannington Moor. And Nelson Lee proceeded to tell me of his plans.

I was very surprised when I heard that one of the Indians was safely couped up in the Ancient House cellars. And now I understood the position a little better. And I became keen.

"Oh, so you've collared this chap, and you're going along now to tell his pals?" I inquired. "If anything happens to us, the prisoner will suffer?"

"You have hit the idea, Nipper," agreed Lee. "Rahzin is being held as a kind of hostage—you understand? It is my intention to interview the chief of these men. If I am made a prisoner, I shall explain that Rahzin is safely under lock and key, and will find himself in the hands of the police to-morrow. I fancy that will make my own position fairly secure."

I felt doubtful.

"But supposing they ignore what you say?" I asked. "Supposing they won't believe that Rahzin is a prisoner?"

"I fancy they will believe my story," said Lee grimly. "I have the fellow's turban on me, to exhibit as a proof of my statement. It is not my intention to bargain with those dark-skinned rascals; but, as I have already told you, Nipper, I wish to deal with them privately, if possible. It is my plan to

find out what their game is, and to send them about their business. Of course, if this fails I shall have no alternative but to call in the aid of the law."

"Well, I don't mind admitting that I'm a bit anxious, sir," I said. "We nearly got done in last time, and—and — Well, it's a risky proposition. I'm not scared, or anything like that, but these Indians might do awful things if they get hold of us, and chance whether Rahzin ever gets free."

"Quite so, Nipper—that is why I have brought you."

"Eh?"

"I think my articulation was distinct," smiled Lee.

"But—but I don't catch on, sir," I said. "Aren't we both going to this rock fissure, or cavern?"

"We are both going to it, but we shall not both enter—"

"What!" I exclaimed, grasping the gov'nor's arm. "Do—do you mean to face those rotters alone, sir?"

"Yes."

"Oh, but—but that's madness, gov'nor," I protested. "I—I—"

"My dear Nipper, please remain calm," interrupted Lee. "It would be madness for us both to enter at once. Prisoners both, we could do nothing. After you have heard my plan, I think you will agree that it is the best that could be adopted. I shall enter, and seek my interview with Parteb Ghan."

"And what then?"

"You will have a time limit of fifteen minutes, Nipper," pursued the gov'nor. "If I do not return within that time, it will be your duty to investigate, and to drag me out of any hole I may have tumbled into. A great responsibility will rest on our shoulders, my boy. On the other hand, it is quite possible that these Indians will realise the wisdom of treating me with respect. In that case, I shall reappear before there is any necessity for you to act. I am bringing you along merely as a kind of safeguard."

"That's all very well, sir," I grumbled. "But how long will it take those rotters to stick a knife in your back? A few seconds, and then what will be the good of me coming in? I don't like the idea at all!"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I'm afraid you are unduly pessimistic, young 'un," he said lightly. "It is necessary that we should take certain

risks in a case of this kind. I shall be well on my guard, and I do not fancy —"

"There's another thing," I interrupted. "They might drop you down that water-pit again, sir."

"That thought does not worry me," smiled Nelson Lee. "Having escaped from the place once, I could easily escape again. I am determined to get at the truth, and the only method of doing so is to act boldly. The opportunity has come to-night, and I am seizing it."

I was still very uncertain, although it flattered my vanity a little to realise that Nelson Lee had brought me along to help him in case of serious trouble. I told myself that I would not fail.

We arrived at the quarry, and found the old place enshrouded in gloom. That portion of the quarry which we were making for was completely in the shadow—pitchy black. And we picked out our way foot by foot, taking great care to avoid making any noise.

At last we arrived at the entrance to the rock fissure. It was only a mere slit in the face of the rock, invisible even in broad daylight. One would never imagine that an entrance existed, for the formation of the rocks was very peculiar.

Nelson Lee hardly said a word. He simply whispered that I was to keep on guard, and he warned me to keep my revolver close handy. Then he plunged into the dark fissure, realising at the same time, that he was embarking on a risky adventure.

Nelson Lee used his electric torch. He proceeded cautiously, taking his time. The distance to the central cavern was only short, and he arrived within sight of it within two or three minutes.

He now switched his torch off, and progressed in the dark. Just ahead he could see a yellowish glow, and as he came within view of the cavern, he saw that several curious oriental lamps were burning. There was a brazier, too, and the air was heavy with incense.

Unseen himself, Nelson Lee looked on at the scene for a few seconds. There were three Indians present, one quite an elderly man with grey hair, and brown, wrinkled, leathery skin. He was evidently the chief of the party—Parteb Ghan.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

He walked boldly forward, without

any attempt at making a dramatic entry, and without any display of arms. The Indians started up, staring at him with their intense, fierce eyes.

Two of them drew long daggers, but Nelson Lee raised his hand.

"This is a peaceful visit," he said quietly. "Do not be alarmed, my friend. It is not my intention to—"

He could get no further. Parteb Ghan rapped out an order, and Nelson Lee was seized. Unable to resist against these odds, he was quickly searched, and his revolver was taken from him. At the same time, the little golden image came to light. It was seized upon eagerly by his captors.

The old chief took it with a shaking hand.

"You see, I was prepared for something of this kind," said Nelson Lee calmly. "I have walked deliberately into your hands, but I do not think you will harm me. You can speak English, Parteb Ghan?"

The old man looked up.

"I speak—a little," he said brokenly. "You foolish. Come here and die. No escape from here."

"I thought well before coming," said Nelson Lee. "I anticipated you would seize me as you have done, but I shall soon be released. I have brought back the image you have been seeking. Are you not grateful? Does it appear that I have come here for the purpose of quarrelling?"

"Thou art wise," said Parteb Ghan solemnly. "Come here—good! Bring wondrous image of Rhoon. Good! What we seek we now have. But thou wilt not go. Impossible. No return for thee!"

"Perhaps we had better talk seriously," said Nelson Lee. "You have got the idol, and you must know that I intended it to be returned to you. But what of Rahzin? Do you know where he is?"

The old man wrinkled his eyes up.

"Rahzin?" he repeated. "Has he not returned?"

"Rahzin is a prisoner in my hands," said Nelson Lee. "Know you that, Parteb Ghan. If ill befalls me, Rahzin will suffer!"

"Thinkest thou I care?" demanded the old Indian mockingly. "Rahzin may go—it matters not. We have thee, and thou shalt suffer the penalty for interference. There can be no escape."

"Think well before you harm me," said Nelson Lee, still perfectly cool.

"Remember you are in a different country to your own, and the penalty for killing a man here is—death. You have no enmity against me, my friend. I would only know the truth. What connection have you with the boy, Jerrold Dodd?"

Parteb Ghan wrinkled up his eyes.

"Fool!" he exclaimed. "I tell nothing. Our secrets are not for thy ears. So, enough talk!"

Nelson Lee had been afraid of something of this kind, although he had certainly hoped that the Indians would be willing to listen to reason, especially as they had recovered the golden idol. The detective was convinced, in fact, that his precautionary measures had been wise.

He thought rapidly.

By making a supreme effort he might be able to get free from these men, who, apparently, little cared what fate befell the faithful Rahzin. They had Lee in their clutches, and Rahzin could be forsaken.

Lee was almost certain that he would be able to obtain his liberty, but there would be a great amount of risk attached to an open fight. He was unarmed, whilst these rascals possessed knives. Moreover, they were looking out for a sudden dash on Nelson Lee's part, and their blades were already bared.

The detective's calculations had gone wrong. He was aware of this, and it rather unsettled him. He had not reckoned that Parteb Ghan would harm him after bringing the image back, and after stating that Rahzin was a prisoner. Lee's visit, in fact, had been quite futile.

But there was one thought that gave him comfort.

"Over ten minutes have already elapsed," he murmured. "Nipper will soon be entering the fissure. I do not fancy these men will act drastically. It is not their way to spill blood unless such a move is imperative! Quite possibly, Nipper will be in time."

In any case, there was nothing that Nelson Lee could do, for, while he was thinking, a loop of rope was slung over his shoulders, and drawn tight, pinioning his arms to his sides.

This did not displease him in the least, for it proved that he was not to be done away with on the instant. In point of fact, Nelson Lee was quite

relieved. He figured that this would allow me a chance to get into the cavern. No watch was being kept, it seemed, for these strange Orientals were not expecting any other visitors. They apparently took it for granted that Nelson Lee had come alone.

The rope was passed round and round, so that it was quite impossible for him to move. Not only his hands were bound, but his feet also. He was placed in a kneeling position, with his hands behind his back, and with his feet secured to his wrists. It was thus quite impossible for him to work the ropes loose, even if he had had the chance.

What could be the meaning of this? Why had he been bound in this way? If the Indians were to kill him out of hand, surely this trouble was unnecessary. Then, with a little chill, Nelson Lee remembered that well-like pit of water. To be cast into that, bound as he was, would certainly mean death. The detective's thoughts were rather bitter now. He realised that he had been rash—even foolhardy—in entering this place and allowing himself to be captured.

His fears did not materialise, for, after being carried for some distance through the rock fissure, he was deposited in the bottom of a curious hollow basin, quite dry, and of peculiar formation. It was quite a natural dip in the rocks, very similar in appearance to a gigantic fool's cap in an inverted position.

Nelson Lee found himself in the bottom of this natural cup, with steep, smooth sides all round. Had he been unbound, he could easily have reached the lip, and scrambled to safety without trouble.

As it was, he could only squat there, helpless.

What were the Indians about to do?

It was not long before Nelson Lee knew the dreadful truth.

Only one flickering lamp had been brought into this part of the fissure, and it cast a feeble, ruddy glow into the rock basin. Nelson Lee's shadow, behind him, was grotesque and strange, moving about as the flame flickered.

He felt more helpless than he had ever felt before. He knew instinctively that his captors were about to resort to some diabolical expedient to finish him off. They had done this in preference to the more simple method of using

their knives. It was certain to be horrible.

And, indeed, it was!

Something dark—something which looked like a coiled piece of thick rope—was thrust into the rock basin. It slid down with a soft noise, finally coming to rest in the basin, within four feet of Nelson Lee.

The detective's gaze was fixed upon it. Although he looked outwardly calm and impassive, his heart was beating rapidly, and suddenly he was seized by a feeling of nauseating horror.

The thick piece of rope was moving—slowly uncoiling itself!

"Great Heaven above!" muttered Lee. "A cobra!"

He had made no mistake, and the famous detective fully believed that his last few minutes of life had come. There could be no escape from such a dreadful reptile as this.

A cobra!

Leo had had one or two experiences with cobras during visits to India. He thought rapidly, and realised that his chances of escape were negligible. The deadly hamadryad, otherwise the king cobra, is amongst the most dangerous snakes on earth.

This particular specimen was small, being not longer than five feet. But Nelson Lee had encountered cobras of over twelve feet in his time, and he had never argued with one.

An argument with a cobra generally leads to one conclusion—death; but not for the cobra. It is generally futile to attempt to run from one of these snakes. The only method is to act drastically, and at once. Shoot it, or beat it to death with a stick.

For cobras have an alarming turn of speed. And it is also said that they are the only snakes who will attack a human being on sight; and if the human being runs, the cobra will give chase, pursuing its victim for miles, until the latter falls exhausted, or until the cobra itself is exhausted.

And the bite of the cobra is deadly. Nelson Lee knew well enough that if this reptile struck, he would be dead within a very few minutes. Helpless as he was, he could do nothing to defend himself.

But it seemed to Lee that the cobra was half asleep, for it uncoiled slowly, moving its head about in an aimless fashion. Apparently it had not caught sight of the detective yet.

Leo believed that it had been drugged; no doubt it had been kept in a box or a basket, and had only just been aroused. Even as Nelson Lee was thinking this, the snake raised its deadly head, and Lee became aware of two baleful, glittering orbs. At the same time a strange, hissing noise emanated from the creature. Nelson Lee well knew what this hiss meant.

Fear was practically unknown to him, but just at this moment his skin tingled, and he was aware of a curious sensation at the roots of his hair. Unbound, he would have felt confident. Even unarmed, with only his bare hands to defend himself, he would have put up a fight for his life.

But here he was, absolutely helpless, unable to lift a finger. And this awful thing in front of him was deadly; its first bite would mean death. And Nelson Lee could do nothing.

A more horrible predicament could not be imagined.

He watched the snake in a fascinated kind of way, and dimly wondered if he would be able to keep it at bay by the sheer power of his will. It was his only weapon, and he was determined to use it. The cobra was now alert, and his head was raised higher. As Nelson Lee gazed upon it, the neck portion of the snake distended, forming a kind of hood. This is a peculiarity of the cobra.

And there it sat, with its hooded head swaying slightly to and fro, and with that hissing sound escaping from its viled mouth. Nelson Lee could see the strange black and white marks on the back of the hood—the marks which resemble a pair of spectacles.

It was liable to strike at any moment.

Nelson Lee stared into those awful eyes with all the concentration of which he was capable. He was tempted to lower his lids, to shut out the hateful sight. But if he did this, the end would be swift and sudden—the cobra would realise that he was the master.

There was a steady, deadly glitter in the snake's horrible eyes—a glitter which seemed to possess power. In spite of himself, Nelson Lee felt almost sick and giddy. Yet he concentrated all his efforts, and, so far, he was the master. Never for a second did his gaze falter; not once did his eyelids blink. He transfixed the cobra with a steady, all-powerful stare.

It was a kind of hypnotic battle.

For the moment, Nelson Lee had the

upper hand; but how long would it last? He could not keep this up for ever, and the instant the spell was broken, the cobra would strike. And when it did strike, Lee would be unable to lift a finger to protect himself from the reptile's wicked fangs.

The perspiration poured from Nelson Lee's face and body. The mental effort was enormous. His energy was being used up in this one tremendous battle of will-power.

And even now he realised that it was all in vain; he knew that sooner or later he would be compelled to give in. The snake would be the winner in the finish. Human endurance could only last for a certain time.

It was a ghastly drama.

The cobra seemed to know that it was helpless—that it was being held in this condition by the power of its victim's eyes. And it lay there, its tail lashing furiously, its hood fully expanded, its head thrown back, and its venomous eyes glowing like live coals.

Truly, this was a formidable enemy.

The end was near at hand. Nelson Lee felt his muscles growing limp; he felt that this terrible battle could only last a few seconds longer. The slightest movement on his part would end the thing at once. The least flicker of his eyelids would cause the snake to strike.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the gov'nor's peril, I was making my way into the rock fissure. I had kept a strict watch on the time, and my anxiety grew apace. After fifteen minutes had elapsed, I was still absolutely alone, and I knew that something had happened which had altered all of Nelson Lee's plans.

He had reckoned to be out before now. He had not come. It was time for me to enter the fissure, and make investigations. As I plunged into the darkness, I felt strangely perturbed.

I knew what these men of the East were; I knew that they were grim and deadly, and that they would stick at nothing. My anxiety for the gov'nor was overwhelming, and a terrible fear took possession of me that Nelson Lee had met with foul play.

As I stumbled along through the pitchy darkness, all sorts of terrible thoughts flashed through my mind. What had happened? How had these Hindoos dealt with Nelson Lee?

A knife, perhaps, thrust into his back from behind. A thin piece of cord

drawn round his neck and pulled tight—— No, that was too horrible. I refused to allow such a thought to enter my head, and, instead of picturing the worst, I tried to look upon the brighter side of things. Perhaps Nelson Lee had beaten his onemies by this time. He was armed, I knew, and perhaps he had compelled the Indians to surrender. And while I was thinking in this way, I hurried on, never pausing for a moment, and never thinking about any possible danger. My one desire was to get to Nelson Lee's side.

If any peril was to be faced, I wanted to be with Nelson Lee. The uncertainty of this whole adventure—the absence of any definite knowledge—it rather unnerved me, and filled me with dread.

And then suddenly I became aware of a faint glow just ahead. I crept on cautiously now, walking with a cat-like tread, and holding my revolver in my fist, fully cocked, and ready for instant action.

The glow came from a spot right ahead, from between two narrow walls of rock. I was making for this when I saw another gleam to my left. Turning my head, I found an opening through the blackness, and there was the central cavern, with the glowing brazier in the centre. But there were no little lamps. I paused, my heart beating rapidly. I could see a man's figure near the brazier. It was kneeling down, and, fortunately, the man's back was towards me.

I had made no sound; he knew nothing of my presence.

I realised that he was the chief of this band—Parteb Ghan, or whatever his heathen name was. And he appeared to be prostrating himself in religious prayer. Where were the other Indians?

And, above all, where was Nelson Lee?

I thought of that glow ahead, and decided not to wait. I slipped across the opening without revealing the fact that I was there, and then I slipped noiselessly forward towards that glow between the rock walls.

I heard no sound, but I knew that the Indians must be there. Why had they left the central cavern? I hurried on, but I almost dreaded every step that I took, for I instinctively felt that the gov'nor was in dire peril.

And then in a moment I came upon the scene.

I don't think I shall ever forget that picture. It took me by surprise, and held me transfixed; it held me motionless with horror and something akin to deadly fear. It was the very first time I had ever felt positively terrified.

I was in a curiously handy place for observing the scene. I gazed over a kind of rock ledge, which rose up in front of me, forming a barrier. On the other side of this ledge the rock sloped down into another cavern, and the floor of this cavern was like a large, dry pit, with smooth sides.

On the opposite side to me were the figures of two or three Indians, crouching down behind boulders, and watching the pit with intent interest. They knew nothing of my presence. I had moved with the noiselessness of a Redskin, and, so far, I had not exposed myself. I was in a dense, black shadow.

But the whole picture lay before me. There, at the bottom of the dry pit, lay Nelson Lee, with his hands bound behind him, in an utterly helpless position. The light from the flickering little lamps revealed the gov'nor's features to me. I could see that they were gleaming with perspiration, and his face had a drawn, set expression which rather terrified me.

Not two yards from him, also in that pit, I could see a snake—a cobra, with its hooded head raised, and with its tail lashing. I didn't realise that it was being held in subjection by Nelson Lee's force of will. It seemed to me that the reptile was on the point of striking.

An involuntary gasp of horror left my lips.

"Gov'nor!" I shouted hoarsely.

It was the most fatal thing I could have done; but I did not do it knowingly, or I should never have uttered a sound. It was an unconscious effort on my part, and I was not responsible.

But the spell was broken.

Nelson Lee was startled by my voice breaking in upon him. He glanced up—and this action on his part was involuntary, too. And even as he allowed his gaze to wander from those glittering orbs of the snake, the terrible thing happened.

With a fierce hiss, the cobra struck.

It shot out, and Nelson Lee uttered a sharp cry of horror. At the same second he threw himself sideways. Bound as he was, this was the only action he could take. The cobra struck him fully in the chest. Then the dread-

ful thing withdrew, still hissing, prepared to strike again—this time with deadly effect. Perhaps it was deadly even now—I did not know. I was sick with fear.

Then I caught a glimpse of my revolver. It had a magical effect upon me. In my hand I had the power to blow this foul thing to atoms. My fear left me, my confidence returned, and in a flash I was on the alert.

All this had happened in a few seconds. Even now the cobra was in the act of striking. Its head, with that grim hood, was held ready, poised for a second in order to take aim.

I could not have been in a more favourable position. Nelson Lee was not in the line of fire. I held my revolver as steady as a rock. How I did so, I can't imagine, for a second before I had been shivering with emotion. I pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The report was loud, and it echoed again and again. There was a tiny film of smoke hovering about. The acrid fumes got into my eyes, and a second or two elapsed before I could proceed.

Then, with my heart in my mouth, I stared into the rock basin. I hardly knew what I expected, but I half believed that I had missed, and that Nelson Lee would be there, writhing in his last moments of life.

Exactly the opposite was the case.

The cobra lay a quivering mass, his dreadful head half blown away. And Nelson Lee was safe, at least, he was still quite conscious.

"Quick, Nipper!" he shouted. "Fire again; fire at these demons! They'll have no mercy on you if you are caught!"

The three Indians were on their feet. I levelled my revolver, and fired. I did not want to hurt them; somehow, it needs a tremendous nerve to fire a revolver point blank at a human being. I aimed for the rock.

But I was shaky now, and immediately following the sharp crack came a wild, agonised howl—a shriek of pain.

One of the Indians clasped his arm to his side, and staggered away. My bullet had pierced the fleshy part of his forearm. The other Indians did not wait. They disappeared into the darkness.

"Good lad!" I muttered. "Wo



A moment later Jerry got into the basket. The lid was quickly put down, and again Pharoah went through his performance.

must go—this place is too warm for us!"

I don't exactly remember how we got into the open. I know that we dashed through the fissure regardless of bruises from projecting portions of rock. The Indians did not pursue us, and the reason for this was fairly obvious.

They, themselves, had scooted back into the deep recesses of the fissure, probably believing that I was out to pump lead into the whole bunch of them. They had taken fright, and this gave us an opportunity to get clear.

At last we stood in the old quarry, under the blessed sky, and with perspiration streaming from us. We didn't utter a word until we were up on the moor, safe from all possibility of pursuit.

"Oh, gov'nor!" I gasped. "Why did you risk it?"

Nelson Lee breathed hard.

"Chastise me, Nipper; I sha'n't mind!" he exclaimed huskily. "I deserve it. Yes, it was foolish—needlessly so. I ought never to have entered that fissure. It is not often that my calculations go wrong, but I must admit failure on this occasion. The Indians proved too tricky for me."

"That—that cobra!" I muttered. "I—I thought——"

"Don't think of it at all, Nipper; thrust it out of your mind," interrupted Lee. "Before you came, I had a dreadful experience, but I will not speak of it."

"You were bitten, sir—the cobra struck you——"

"Fortunately, I dodged, and the snake's effort was futile," said Nelson Lee quietly. "It struck against my coat and waistcoat, and these articles of clothing protected me. But if you had not fired at that moment, death would have been inevitable."

"Oh, my goodness!" I said. "What a terrible adventure, sir. It's a wonder your hair hasn't turned grey—it's a wonder you ain't dotty! How did it happen? Why did you allow yourself to be bound up?"

Nelson Lee explained the circumstances, and together we walked across the moor towards St. Frank's. The cool air did us good, and when we finally arrived at the school, we were both feeling very much better.

"Oh, by the way, gov'nor," I exclaimed. "What about Rahzin?"

"We will have a look at him now,

and in the morning he will be handed over to the police," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "And, what is more, after to-night's experience, I shall thrust aside my scruples. Publicity or no, I must take drastic action. And, if possible, I intend to get the whole crowd. I shall interview Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police, at the earliest opportunity."

We were soon within the Ancient House. Then we passed along the passages until, at length, we arrived at the cellar door. It was just as we had left it. Lee switched on the electric light, and we descended the stone steps. We found ourselves in a passage, with many cellar doors on either side of us. Some were used as store rooms, some were empty, and one was tightly closed, and the bolt shot home. Nelson Lee made for this one. It was astonishing to me that the gov'nor showed practically no effects of his nerve trying ordeal.

"Let me have your revolver, Nipper," said Lee quietly.

I handed it over, realising that Lee himself had lost his own weapon. He shot back the bolts, and then flashed the electric torch into the interior of the dark cellar. The next moment he strode in. He flashed the torchlight from side to side.

"Well I'm hanged!" ejaculated the gov'nor.

I quickly went into the cellar with him. One glance was sufficient to show me that it was empty. I was startled, looked at Nelson Lee queerly, and then took a deep breath. There was something uncanny about this.

"He—he's gone, sir," I exclaimed.

"Undoubtedly, Nipper."

"But you locked him in——"

"I put him in the cellar, and securely bolted the door—just exactly as we found it," said the gov'nor. "As you see, there is no possible method of escape, except by the door. Those Indians or Burmese are slippery customers."

"But—but it's impossible, sir!" I protested. "If the door was bolted, he couldn't have got out! It—it's something like magic, gov'nor!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear Nipper, there is a very commonplace explanation of this little surprise," he said. "There can be no doubt that Rahzin had a companion with him, who was waiting outside. No

doubt he saw us go out, and he at once guessed that Rahzin had met with disaster. So he simply came in and investigated. He might have been watching at one of the windows; perhaps he saw us going towards the cellar. In any case, he succeeded in releasing Mr. Rahzin, and the pair made themselves scarce."

"And what are we going to do now, sir?"

"Well, I've an idea that you are going straight up to bed," replied Nelson Lee.

"And you, sir?"

"Well, I'm not sleepy, and I have a mind to potter about a bit outside," replied the guv'nor. "No, you needn't be alarmed, young 'un. I sha'n't run my head into any danger. You have saved me once to-day, and for that I commend you warmly. I do not intend to take any more chances."

And, less than five minutes later, I was up in the Remove dormitory. And I fell to sleep wondering what Nelson Lee's activities would end in. And very soon I was dreaming about cobras a mile long and as large as drain pipes. I dreamed of hordes of Indians and caverns thousands of feet in the earth.

But when the rising-bell rang I was feeling quite refreshed, and myself.

CHAPTER IV.

JERRY DODD'S BIG CHANCE.

"WELL, sir?"

I was rather relieved to run across Nelson Lee almost as soon as I came down. He was in the lobby, looking quite bright and fresh, and he was frowning. This wasn't a very good sign.

"Oh, Nipper, I suppose you want to hear the result of my pottering?" he said, with a smile. "As a matter of fact the result was precisely nil. I could find no traces of Rahzin and his companion, and I am fairly certain that the Indians have left the old quarry."

"Then everything's all right?" I asked.

"On the contrary, everything is all wrong," said Nelson Lee. "It will be Dodd's birthday to-morrow, and I'm fairly certain that these Indians will attempt to make some move," said Lee. "We shall have to be strictly on the alert. But we cannot talk any further on the subject now."

This was quite true, for a crowd of juniors were coming along. Of course, I said nothing to them regarding my adventure of the night.

But Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were soon in possession of all the facts. It was very seldom I kept anything from them.

They were rather startled when they heard, and Tommy was decidedly indignant, because he had not been awakened, too. I patiently explained that his presence would not have improved matters.

There was a good deal of talk this day, regarding the Bannington fete and flower show, an annual holiday for all the good people of the local town. The Bannington fete was considered to be the most important occasion of the year, and fine weather was always longed for. But, naturally, as a general rule, flower-show day was either windy, rainy, or both.

"Looks like being fine for the fair this year," remarked Conroy minor, as he strolled with Jerry Dodd in the Triangle. "The barometer is high, and there's every prospect of this fine weather continuing. I suppose you'll come?"

"Well, I wasn't figuring on anything like that, but maybe I'll have a look in," said Jerry. "I'm not great on flower shows, chum. They don't interest me a heap."

Conroy minor grinned.

"My dear chap, you don't understand," he said. "The flower show is only for the old folks. We sha'n't need to look at it. But there'll be a fair there; roundabouts, swings scenic railways, cocoanut shies, Aunt Sally's, and all the rest of it. There's tons to interest a chap—particularly if he's got a nice lot of tin in his pocket."

"I reckon we sha'n't need to worry about that," said Jerry. "I've got a pocketful of cash, and I might as well spend some of it."

"Good!" said Conroy heartily. "The Bo'sun and I will stick to you like glue, my son. In the afternoon there'll be a cricket match; and that ought to interest a marvellous champion like you—"

"Say, cut it out!" smiled Jerry. "A cricket match, by jings! That sounds rather good; but will it be a real match, or only—"

"A real match!" interrupted Conroy minor. "Of course, it'll be real, and a topping one, too. Bannington rather

fancies itself at cricket. The town club is the best for miles round, and there are some pretty decent clubs in the neighbourhood, too. The best men of all the local teams will form an eleven to play against Eastshire."

Jerry's interest was thoroughly aroused.

"Eastshire County!" he exclaimed.

"You bet!" said the other junior. "Of course, it's only a charity match, and it's played every year; the local clubs against one of the counties. This year it'll be Eastshire. They haven't been doing very well in the championship games, and the local clubs are hoping to whack them. The professionals usually regard it as a kind of joke; that's because they nearly always wipe the amateurs to bits. If the local clubs can only beat the county team, they'll go dotty with joy. The professionals have only been beaten once in these Bannington charity matches since the fixture was first inaugurated—that's the right word, I think," added Conroy, with a grin.

"Yes, it sounds real good," said Jerry.

Very shortly afterwards he was talking with his uncle, Mr. William Dodd. The Australian professional was rather interested. Uncle Bill was unable to appear in the Australian team at present, owing to a sprained wrist.

"We'll have to go, Uncle Bill," said Jerry.

"Yes, certainly," said Mr. Dodd absently. "It'll be rather good. Tomorrow, eh? A charity match? Against the county of Eastshire? By George! I wonder—I wonder—it's only a charitable affair, and it's possible that—well, anyhow, I'll see what I can do!"

Jerry stared.

"What do you mean, Uncle Bill?" he asked. "I don't get you."

Uncle Bill chuckled.

"No, of course you don't," he replied. "We'll have another conversation about this later on, my lad. While you're at lessons, I'll run over to Bannington, and—and see about some seats in the pavilion. We can't miss that match."

Jerry was still rather puzzled by his uncle's animated tone. Evidently an idea had come to Uncle Bill, but he didn't explain what this was. And when morning lessons were well under way,

Mr. William Dodd went off to Bannington.

He strolled down the road with the intention of catching the mid-morning train to the local town. It was a fine, hot summer's day, with the sun shining from a cloudless sky. The dust in the lane was thick.

He was half way to the village when he observed two very curious individuals in front of him. One was huge; an enormous man attired in a check suit which seemed too small for his gigantic frame, and a soft felt hat which perched on the top of his bald head like a fly on an egg.

His companion was as tiny as the other was large. He was an insignificant man, with a bird-like expression, and a nose which resembled a beak. His clothing hung about him in bags.

These remarkable gentlemen were the famous firm of Podge and Midge, the celebrated detectives. At least, they considered themselves to be detectives, and they had been in the neighbourhood for some little time. In fact, they were greatly interested in Jerry Dodd and all his movements.

So far, they had only succeeded in getting on to wrong trails, and getting themselves into ridiculous scrapes. As detectives they were a wash-out. But they didn't know this; Mr. Podge's opinion of Mr. Podge was an exalted one. Mr. Midge was too weak to have an opinion; he was merely Mr. Podge's echo.

Uncle Bill was interested in these strange gentlemen. They were curious-looking beings, and could not fail to excite interest. Mr. William Dodd wondered if there was a lunatic asylum in the district. He also wondered if the inmates were allowed to wander abroad at will.

Politeness forbade him to gaze at the firm of Podge and Midge as he was passing. He looked straight down the lane. And then Mr. Podge spoke.

"One moment, my dear sir—one moment, please!" he puffed.

Uncle Bill paused.

"I beg your pardon?" he said politely.

"Allow me to introduce myself, and my colleague," exclaimed Mr. Podge, presenting a big card with an elegant flourish. "I may mention that we are fully aware of the fact that you are Mr. William Dodd."

"Good!" said Uncle Bill. "I seem to

be well known—Why, what? 'Podgo and Midge, the Deadliest Sleuths on Earth! Cash or Deferred Payments! Cases Investigated While You Wait----' Ifn, ha! Ahem! Pardon me, sir!"

With great difficulty Mr. Dodd kept back his laughter. That business-card was a scream. He placed it in his pocket-book, mentally deciding to preserve it carefully. It was unique.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," said Uncle Bill gravely. "May I inquire how you knew my name?"

Mr. Podgo smiled largely, and Mr. Midge tittered.

"It is our business to know things, sir," said Mr. Podgo grandly. "We are aware of all things. We discover secrets which have never been disclosed! We make a business of unravelling facts! We are Podgo and Midge—is not that enough?"

"Ahem! Of course—of course," said Uncle Bill hastily. "Do I understand that you wish to speak to me?"

"I perceive that your own powers of deduction are acute," observed Mr. Podgo. "Yes, my dear sir, we wish to speak to you. The boy, Jerrold Dodd, is your nephew?"

"Sure, he is."

"You have come from Australia?"

"I have."

"For what purpose?"

"Well, I thought about starting a rabbit farm," said Uncle Bill gravely.

"Oh, indeed!" puffed Mr. Podgo. "An excellent idea, my dear sir—a magnificent idea, indeed! What do you think, Mr. Midge?"

"Oh, undoubtedly, Mr. Podgo—undoubtedly," said Mr. Midge.

"Rabbits can be bred easily," went on Uncle Bill solemnly. "Think of the possibilities! A canning factory for canned rabbit pies! A fur factory for making coney-skin coats for the ladies! The whole animal can be used!"

"Inside and out!" said Mr. Podgo. "You will become a millionaire, sir!"

Uncle Bill nearly exploded. Never for a moment had he believed that these marvellous detectives would be deceived by his humorous piece of banter; but they had swallowed his statement whole.

"We wish to speak of your nephew," went on Mr. Podgo. "Is he in danger?"

"I really cannot explain much on that point," replied Uncle Bill. "In any

case, gentlemen, my train is due to start within seven minutes, and I am afraid I must bid you 'Good-morning!' Please excuse me!"

"But, my dear sir, we wish to question you—"

"I'm sorry—no time!" said Mr. Dodd.

He walked on, leaving Podgo and Midge staring after him. He was nearly bursting with laughter. So these were the wonderful 'tocs' who were watching over Jerry! They would have made their fortunes on the music-hall stage.

Uncle Bill was soon in Bannington, and then he sought out the captain of the cricket eleven, which was due to play on the morrow.

When he returned to St. Frank's he was in a good humour, and morning lessons were just over. The juniors were streaming out into the sunny Triangle, to spend the leisure hour before dinner.

Jerry came out with Conroy minor and Tom Burton.

"By jings! There's Uncle Bill!" said Jerry, hurrying forward. "Say, he's beckoning to us, too! Come on, chums!"

Dodd was popular in the Remove. He was regarded as a fine sport, and one of the very best. He was rather glad of the audience just now.

"Did you book the pavilion seats, Uncle Bill?" asked Jerry.

"The—the seats?"

"Yes; for to-morrow's cricket match—"

"Ah, yes, of course!" said Mr. Dodd.

"As a matter of fact, Jerry, another idea has come to me. I want to know what you think of it. This match, I understand, is to be played for charity?"

"That's it, sir," put in Handforth.

"Of course, it'll be a bit of a rag-time affair. These Bannington clubs think they're smart, but they'll be smashed to a pulp by the giddy professionals. It'll be a one-sided business all the time. I think the Bannington people look upon the game as a joke."

"Well, that doesn't matter much," said Mr. Dodd. "I don't think it will be a joke, and it would be rather rich if the local champions beat the county."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared at the thought.

"And, in my opinion, there will be a distinct possibility of a win for the amateurs—if you play, Jerry," said Uncle Bill calmly. "What do you think of the idea?"

Jerry stared.

"If—if I played!" he echoed. "Played in a match against professionals! Against a county team! By jings! That would be terrific——"

He broke off, shaking his head.

"Wouldn't you like it?" asked Uncle Bill.

"Like it!" echoed Jerry, his eyes glittering. "Say, it would be fine! But it can't be done, uncle. They wouldn't think of accepting me in the team. They're men—all of them. How could I play—a junior schoolboy? I reckon this is a sort of joke, eh?"

"Of course it's a joke—it couldn't be anything else!" said Handforth.

Mr. Dodd chuckled.

"As it happens, I'm serious," he said smoothly. "What I want to know, Jerry, is this: Would you like to play against Eastshire County in the match to-morrow afternoon?"

"Sure, I'd like it!" said Jerry eagerly. "I'd give anything, Uncle Bill. Against professionals! By jings, what a chance! But it can't be done—so what's the good of talking about it?"

"I thought you'd like the scheme," said Uncle Bill calmly. "Well, Jerry, it's all fixed up."

"What?" gasped Jerry.

"Fixed up?" yelled Handforth.

"Arranged and settled," said Mr. Dodd. "This morning I have interviewed the captain of the eleven. By a piece of luck, one of his men was called away to London to-day, and he was in a bit of a fix about a substitute. I suggested you, Jerry, and he agreed. Of course, it needed a bit of persuasion on my part."

Jerry fairly danced with excitement.

"But—but, Uncle Bill!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "It's too good to be true! A place in a team that's playing against Eastshire County! Oh, by glory, what a chance! What an opportunity to see what I can do!"

Conroy minor, Handforth, and all the others could hardly believe their own ears. Jerry Dodd to play in the big Bannington match against Eastshire County! Quite suddenly that match had assumed a tremendous importance, which it had previously lacked. A St. Frank's fellow was booked to appear in the match.

The news spread like wildfire. Most of the fellows flatly refused to believe it, and said that it was nothing but a

yarn. Such a thing couldn't be true. It was altogether too ridiculous.

But, after a while, the sceptics were convinced. There was a great deal of excitement, and quite a lot of enthusiasm. Scores of juniors—and seniors—suddenly made up their minds to be present at the charity match. Hitherto they had evinced no particular interest in the event.

"Of course, it's a lot of rot!" said Chambers of the Fifth. "And like this Australian kid's nerve, too! Well, it'll show him up!"

"Show him up?" repeated Phillips.

"You bet!" said Chambers. "It'll show him up properly. He may have accomplished a good performance against the Helmford juniors, but when he gets up against these professionals, he'll be simply nowhere. Bowled first ball, probably; and he won't be able to have a look in at the bowling."

Phillips was rather doubtful.

"Well, I'm not so sure," he said. "That kid is hot stuff, Chambers—as hot as cayenne pepper! And I've got an idea that he'll put up a decent show—even against professional cricketers. I shall be interested to watch, anyway."

And this was the general verdict.

Everybody felt convinced that Jerry Dodd would be a dismal failure in the big match. Yet, at the same time, everybody hoped that he would make good. Jerry was very popular, both with the juniors and with the seniors.

When Nelson Lee got to hear of it, he was somewhat sceptical.

He saw Uncle Bill during the afternoon.

"I'm not quite sure whether it will be wise, Mr. Dodd," he said frankly. "I had planned to keep Dodd within the school during the whole day."

"But why?" asked Uncle Bill.

"You seem to forget that to-morrow is the fifteenth—and Jerry's birthday——"

"No; I was remembering that," interrupted Mr. Dodd. "I thought it would be very fine for Jerry to have this treat on his birthday—— Ah, but I see what you're driving at. You are thinking about the Indians?"

"Precisely," said Lee. "The fifteenth of the month is the very day that must be watched. Jerry's movements must give these Indians no opportunity of getting hold of him."

"Well, surely he will be safe enough on a cricket field?" smiled Uncle Bill. "Daring as they are, these mysterious gentry cannot interrupt a cricket game and kidnap one of the players. He will probably be safer at this Bannington affair than anywhere else."

"Well, that is one way of looking at it, I must admit," said Nelson Lee. "And perhaps you are right. In any case, I have no intention of disappointing Jerry by forbidding him to play. By the way, Mr. Dodd, how did you manage it?"

Uncle Bill chuckled.

"At first the idea was pooh-poohed," he said. "The captain of the Bannington men declared that he would make himself a laughing stock by playing a St. Frank's junior. But he had heard of Jerry's fine performances, and was impressed. And I rather think my recommendation had some effect."

"Naturally," smiled Lee. "You are quite a famous man, Mr. Dodd. As one of the star batsmen of the Australian Eleven, this is as it should be. I can quite understand the Bannington captain accepting your advice as excellent. Personally, I believe that the boy will do well."

"Good!" said Uncle Bill. "It's his big chance. Under ordinary circumstances he could never get an opportunity of playing against professional cricketers. But this is a charity match, and of no great importance in the sporting world, so the Bannington skipper has taken a chance—a chance which, I am convinced, will turn out excellently. But to-morrow we shall see."

I was very enthusiastic when I knew all the details, and I sought Jerry out at once, and wished him luck. And practically every fellow in the Remove came to a decision. There would be no waiting for dinner on the morrow. As soon as morning lessons were over we should get our bicycles and buzz straight off to Bannington. We could get plenty to eat on the fair-ground, and we should have a chance of seeing the side-shows before the match commenced.

Just before bed-time, Nelson Lee buttonholed me in the lobby.

"There's one thing I want to say to you, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "You are going to Bannington to-morrow. I believe—to the fete and the cricket match?"

"Rather, sir!"

"Well, I want you to keep your eye on Dodd, if you can," said Nelson Lee. "As long as he is with a crowd of juniors he will be safe, but if he happens to wander off alone—well, keep him within sight."

"It may be difficult, guv'nor, but I'll do my best," I said. "I quite realise that it wouldn't do for Jerry to be left on his own—to-morrow, of all days. It's his birthday—the fateful fifteenth!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and passed along. But neither he nor I had the slightest inkling of the extraordinary events which were destined to occur on the morrow.

CHAPTER V.

THE EGYPTIAN WIZARD!

"COME on, you chaps!"
"Begad! What rippin' weather for the fete!"
"Rather! Couldn't be better!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson and I strolled on to the fair-ground at Bannington. The great afternoon had arrived, and the weather, contrary to usual custom, was gloriously fine. It was, in fact, a blazing hot summer's day.

So far, the fete had been a tremendous success. It was now quite early, for we had rushed off immediately after being released from morning lessons, without thinking about dinner. There were all kinds of stalls on the fair-ground where we could purchase supplies. Over half the Remove had come.

Jerry Dodd was with Conroy minor, Tom Burton, and several others. He had been over to Bannington with Uncle Bill during the morning, having been excused from lessons, and he had been introduced to Mr. Newman, the captain of the Bannington team. He was now feeling light-hearted and serenely happy, and he was filled with a strong determination to play the game of his life during the afternoon.

But an hour or two would elapse before the game commenced, and so he was taking the opportunity to have a walk round the fair. This was quite an interesting place, and there were scores of attractions.

On this particular day Bannington gave itself over to pleasure.

It was the one day of the year for the town—a day of gala attire and happy

laughter. Of course, only the more sedate folk went to the actual flower show. The younger people were content with the other attractions.

Girls in silks and voiles and muslins were to be seen everywhere, laughing and thoroughly enjoying themselves. Flannels and straw hats among the men were general; and, naturally, there were enormous quantities of children.

They all made a wonderfully colourful picture against the background of intense green.

On all sides there were the white canvas tents of the side-shows, the refreshment-rooms, and so forth. There were two well-known bands playing in different parts of the ground, and there were coconut shies, roundabouts, swings, and scores of entertainments of a similar character.

The fair itself had been planted, as was customary, quite near to the old Bannington Abbey ruins. These were ivy covered and in a state of complete decay, only a broken wall projecting up here and there. The abbey had been built in the fourteenth century, and had stood the test of time well.

It was one of the chief attractions of the fair to explore the ruins, and there were any amount of guides for this purpose.

The cricket ground was some little way off, and, at the moment, this was deserted. It would be safe to say, however, that during the afternoon the enclosures would be packed. This cricket match was a great draw.

At no other time of the year was such a famous team as Eastshire to be seen at Bannington, and the townspeople took the opportunity to watch a first-class game. And on this afternoon there would be more than usual interest displayed, owing to the fact that Jerry Dodd was included in the home eleven.

There had been some scathing comments on the captain's decision, for it was generally considered by the sporting people of the town that he had made a blunder. What good would a boy be in the team? No matter what he had done in school cricket, how could he hope to put up a show against the county men?

However, this would remain to be seen.

And, in the meantime, the much discussed junior was enjoying himself. With his own two study chums, and with Handforth and Co., he went on the

roundabouts, and viewed one or two interesting side-shows. And then the knot of juniors went gaily on their way. There was a good deal of laughter when they all stopped outside a tent where an enormous poster announced the fact that the fattest boy in the world was to be seen for the sum of twopenny.

Fatty Little happened to be near by, and Handforth grinned.

"Come on, Fatty—we'll go in here," he said. "I'll guarantee that you beat this freak into fits. There couldn't be a fatter boy than you, and if you buck up, you'll be able to set up in opposition!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on—let's go in!"

The juniors went crowding into the stand, each paying their money to a gentleman in a rusty frock-coat, who stood at the door. When the juniors got into the tent they simply yelled, for the fat boy proved to be a mere skeleton in comparison to Fatty Little's enormous bulk.

"You'd better interview the proprietor," grinned Church. "He'll offer you double salary if you'll consent to be on view!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great doughnuts!" said Fatty indignantly. "Of all the giddy spoofs! This chap ain't fat—and, if it comes to that, I'm not fat. I'm just a comfortable size. How you chaps can live is what puzzles me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

They crowded out of the tent, and then they happened to run right into Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and Pitt.

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "Some more of our crowd. I say, you chaps. I should advise you to patronise the fat boy——"

"Rats!" said Conroy. "You can get a view of this one free of charge!" he added, indicating Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where's the great leader?" asked Church.

"Nipper?" said Watson. "Oh, he's gone off with Mr. Lee, I believe."

As a matter of fact, I had. Both the gov'nor and I had seen that Jerry Dodd was quite safe in the midst of a big crowd of juniors, and no possible harm would come to him. In a crowd like this he was perfectly safe.

Besides, I had warned him not to shift away from the others. He understood

perfectly, and promised me he would remain with the juniors all the time. And they were certainly having some sport.

"We haven't been on the scenic railway yet," said Handforth. "I vote we go at once——"

"Rats!" said Fatty. "What about some grub?"

"Oh, you can go and get some grub, if you like," said Church. "We had a snack not long ago, and there's plenty of time yet. My idea is to have a good feed just before the match, then we shall be all right for the afternoon."

"Good wheeze!"

"Couldn't do better," said Handforth. "Now, what about this chap? My hat! What have we here? Something good by the look of it. Let's have a squint!"

They were pushing their way through the crowds, and noticed that quite a number of people had gathered round a kind of roped enclosure. Just behind these ropes a tent could be seen.

But it was not the usual kind of tent, for it only had three sides. The side facing the public was missing, thus it was possible to look right into the tent. The juniors crowded up to the ropes with interest.

It was not long before they found out the nature of the entertainment. Over the top of the tent there was a big sign, and this announced to all and sundry that the owner of it was "Pharoah, the Wonder-worker of Egypt."

The gentleman in question was now making ready to give his entertainment. The juniors had arrived at the right moment. They helped to swell the crowd, and the magician decided it was an opportune time to begin his show.

"Oh, it's all spoof, I expect," said McClure.

"That doesn't matter," put in Church. "We might as well look on. There's no entrance fee, either."

"Yes, but he'll send the hat round, you can bet your boots!"

The juniors were not deterred by this possibility. Jerry Dodd was still with Conroy minor and Tom Burton, and they, too, stopped near the ropes. Pharoah, the Egyptian wizard, was within his open tent.

He looked a very impressive individual — dark-skinned, with a black,

square-cut beard. He was attired in rich, flowing robes. It was quite obvious that his beard was false.

"I'll bet his name's Joe Smith, or something like that," grinned Conroy. "Look at his beard! And I expect that brown stuff comes off!"

"I shouldn't be surprised!" chuckled Jerry. "But he may be clever."

They continued watching. Pharoah stood in the centre of a large red carpet. Near him there was a big basket—an ordinary wickerwork affair something like an extra large laundry basket, quite plain and unornamental.

Pharoah stepped forward, holding up a hand impressively.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me pleasure to see you," he exclaimed, in deep tones. "I like to entertain you. Yes? Much mystery—I puzzle you a big lot. If you are pleased, you pay. If you not pleased, give nothing. Yes—no?"

The crowd listened, and waited.

"I'll bet he won't get much out of me if the show isn't worth seeing," muttered Handforth. "I thought he was going to do some conjuring—juggling with billiard balls, or something of that sort."

"Well, so he is, I suppose," said Church. "I dare say that basket contains all his paraphernalia."

"All his which?"

"His—well, his props, you know."

Pharoah held up his hand again.

"Pardon, ladies and gentlemen, but I like quiet," he said loudly. "You help me? You not talk? Yes—no? It is good—for my show. I must have quiet. I please you a lot—I give you good entertainment. Much magic."

"All right, old false beard—get on with it!"

"Not so much chin-wagging!"

"We want to see what you can do!"

"It is well," said Pharoah gravely. "My show not very grand, but clever. Yes—no? I say it plain—very clever and mysterious. You will agree soon—I know. Much mystery and strangeness. My assistant—he come. I show you."

With a flourish the magician opened the basket, and, from within, appeared another figure attired in rich robes. This figure was smaller, and also brown-skinned and adorned with a false beard.

"Marvellous!" said Handforth blankly.

"How did he get there?" gasped Church.

"Ain't it wonderful!" grinned McClure.

They were being facetious, of course, and many people in the crowd chuckled. But Pharoah was quite unperturbed, and he indicated his assistant with a wave of his hand.

"I introduce Mahmed, my assistant," he said gravely.

"Three cheers for Mahmed!" said Handforth. "Now let's see what you can do. What a giddy fraud—there's nothing else in the basket!"

"Wait and see—he hasn't started yet," grinned Pitt. "Just you wait until Marmalade gets busy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Golden Shred!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Pharoah, the Egyptian, gazed severely at the interrupters.

"You are unkind. Yes—no?" he said reprovingly. "You spoil my entertainment?"

"Give him a chance, you youngsters!" said an elderly man.

"Well, why doesn't he do something?" demanded Church.

The wizard beckoned to his assistant, and they lifted up the basket; in fact, they went through a whole performance. They opened the lid, and exhibited the basket clearly, showing that it was quite empty and in no way was it possible for any false bottom to be in existence.

"You see?" exclaimed Pharoah. "No trick—real empty basket. You wish to examine? I willing to allow it. The carpet—quite plain—solid ground underneath. You believe it so?"

"That's all right, whiskers!" shouted somebody. "You ain't acting on a bloomin' stage, with trap-doors. It's solid ground all right!"

Everybody was quite prepared to believe this statement, for, of course, there was grass and stone beneath the carpet, Pharoah's tent having been pitched on the solid earth.

"You satisfied?" said the wizard. "Watch!"

He and Mahmed put the basket back, and the assistant fetched a long piece

of gaily coloured material. Pharoah waved this about mysteriously, and then placed it over the basket. Finally, he covered the basket completely.

"Ooozi-boko—slap bang!" muttered Handforth. "The basket vanishes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But the basket didn't vanish, since this was quite impossible. The cloth was removed, the basket lid opened, and there, within, reposed quite a solid-looking table. It was brought out, and placed on the carpet. The spectators were completely mystified, and certainly impressed. Where had the table come from?

"Dash it all, that was pretty smart, anyway," said Conroy. "How did that table get into the basket?"

"Goodness knows!" said Jerry.

"Oh, there's some spoof about it, you can bet," remarked Handforth. "It's a folding table, I suppose, and it must have been concealed in the lid. That's the way they do these things, you know."

"So!" exclaimed Pharoah. "Now I do something more. Yes—no? You watch—you will be surprised. I great magician."

Mahmed climbed into the basket, and sat down. The lid was closed, the same mystic passes were made with the gay cloth, and then Pharoah muttered some mystic words, waving his hands. He whipped off the cloth, and lifted the lid.

The basket was empty!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Pitt. "How the dickens is it done?"

Everybody was startled.

"There can't be any trap-door—that's impossible," said Church. "There must be some other way out. My goodness! The chap's clever!"

"Rather!"

"You see?" asked Pharoah. "Empty! No trick—Mahmed no longer here. By my magic I make him vanish. No other man can do this—I great wonder worker. I mystify you a lot—yes, no?"

He turned the basket over, and the very fact that he could lift it proved that it was quite empty. He walked all round it, proving that there was no secret and invisible cavity behind.

Pharoah closed the basket, placed the cloth on the top, and again made the

mystic passes. A minute later it was opened, and Mahmed walked out as solid as ever, none the worse for his magical disappearance act. All the juniors looked on in silence now for they were greatly impressed.

"Wait, I not finished!" said Pharoah, as one or two of the spectators started drifting away; probably in anticipation of the hat. "I want you believe this genuine—no trickery. No other man in world can perform basket trick. I the only man. I make all this myself."

Pharoah came nearer to the ropes, and looked up and down the crowd.

"You believe?" he asked. "I want you help me. Will somebody come? Will somebody enter basket?"

Complete silence.

"I promise no harm," went on Pharoah. "Just come in basket for minute. I give you nice present if you come. A boy—yes? I promise not hurt. Only for just little time. Come—you will do it?"

Still nobody responded.

Pharoah became personal; he pointed to Handforth promptly. "Nothing doing, old son!"

"I sorry—no wish to offend," said the magician. "Just a trick. Cause no harm, and gives you present. You, young master?"

He pointed to Reginald Pitt.

"Thanks, I'd rather be excused," replied Pitt smilingly.

"You oblige me?" said Pharoah, facing Jerry Dodd. "Please, young sir—no hurt you."

"By jings, I'd rather not, if you don't mind," said Jerry.

"You afraid?" asked Pharoah.

"No, I'm not afraid, but——"

"I disappointed," said Pharoah sadly. "I not think British boys show fear—what you call?—white feather? You coward?"

Jerry Dodd turned red.

"No, I'm not a coward," he replied. "Dash it all, I'll do it, if you like."

"You ass!" muttered Conroy.

But, under the circumstances, Jerry Dodd could hardly have refused. And a moment later he crossed over the ropes and placed himself in the big basket. The lid was quickly put down, and again Pharoah went through his performance.

When the basket was reopened, Jerry Dodd had gone. The basket was empty. The crowd had been expecting this, and waited with interest. Pharoah lifted up his hand.

"I must be careful," he exclaimed gravely. "I send Mahmed to fetch white boy back. Can do nothing else. Watch—great trick!"

The assistant got in the basket, and closed the lid down. Two minutes later Mahmed had vanished, too. How on earth the pair had disappeared was a mystery which the audience could not attempt to explain. And, while this was going on, the rest of the fair was in full swing on all sides—noisy roundabouts, Aunt Sally's, and all the rest of it.

Pharoah frowned, and stroked his beard.

"It difficult!" he exclaimed. "They both gone! I must fetch!"

Without another word, he turned, climbed into the basket, and closed the lid down. The spectators waited, wondering what would happen next. Everybody was of the opinion that this basket trick was an exceptionally fine thing.

"He's a jolly long time!" said Handforth, after a while.

"I expect they'll all appear from some other place," said Pitt. "That's about the truth of it. We can't see from here, but there must be a way out, probably through the back of the tent. It looks empty to us, but they may be an illusion. These chaps use mirrors, and all sorts of things."

Several more minutes passed, and still there was no sign of any return. And now the juniors were getting fed up. The other people were impatient, too. What did this long delay mean?

"Oh, rats!" said Conroy, at last. "I'm sick of this!"

"So am I!" snorted Handforth. "We'll have a look!"

"You ass! You mustn't——"

But Handforth took no notice. He leapt over the ropes, and went to the basket, and threw the lid back. The thing was quite empty. Handforth bent down, and felt about, as though searching for something hidden within. But the basket was certainly full of nothing more solid than air.

Then Handforth, to the interest of

all the spectators, pushed the basket aside. He walked round it. There was nothing whatever to account for the amazing disappearances.

The carpet was intact, as it had always been. Handforth stamped heavily, but there was not the slightest doubt that he was on solid ground.

And the tent itself was simple—it contained no trick curtains at the rear, by which this thing could have been worked. And, gradually, Handforth and all the others were beginning to look scared. They weren't worried about the disappearance of Pharoah and Mah-med. It was the fact that Jerry Dodd had vanished which caused the fellows to be alarmed. The crowd of towns-people was quite excited.

"My only hat!" said Handforth. "I don't like this at all! It's—it's uncanny! Where the dickens can Dodd have got to? Look here, Church, you'd better buzz off as hard as you can and find Nipper, and Mr. Lee, too!"

"But—but——"

"There's something fishy about this," went on Handforth grimly. "It's Dodd, too, and there have been some queer things happening to him lately! I shouldn't be surprised if this was done deliberately! Rush off and find Mr. Lee!"

"Right you are!" said Church breathlessly.

He hurried away at once.

"And you'd better fetch the police," went on Handforth, turning to McClure. "I don't like the look of the business at all. What does it mean? They've gone—and this basket is empty."

How did they get away without us seeing them?"

Jerry Dodd had vanished.

It was the fifteenth—his birthday—the very day on which Parteb Ghan and his associates had planned to brand the Australian junior with the mysterious sign of the Twin Stars.

And, although the other fellows didn't know it, there was not the slightest doubt that the Burmese had got hold of Jerry Dodd, by means of this trick. In the open daylight; in the very heart of Bannington Fair. Jerry's enemies had succeeded in getting hold of him.

For sheer audacity and daring, the trick could hardly have been equalled. Until it was too late not a soul had suspected that anything was wrong. And yet the thing was now obvious and undeniable.

Jerry Dodd had been spirited away.

What had become of him?

It is hardly necessary for me to add that Jerry was quite safe and sound, and that the explanation of the basket trick was a simple one. It was Nelson Lee himself who investigated the mystery, and who probed the whole matter to the bottom. But I cannot tell of these events now. They must be recorded in their correct place.

The present episode was at an end; but an even more exciting one was to follow.

As for the cricket match, well, Jerry Dodd did play. He played a game which was to be long remembered in Bannington. But I'm saying too much. The time for setting down these events has not quite arrived.

THE END.

HOW WAS THE BASKET TRICK ACCOMPLISHED?

The Explanation will be given in Next Week's Story:

"THE BRAND of the TWIN STARS!"

This Exciting Story also Describes What Happened to Jerry Dodd while in the Hands of his Captors.

THE SWIMMING LESSON

*A Splendid Complete School Story
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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Arnold's Plan.

IT was a blazing hot afternoon, and the river down by the swimming pool looked tempting. Rawson major turned away his head with a grunt of disgust, remembering that there was no chance of a dip before four, and that the early summer swimming races were to be held within a fortnight.

There was another thing which was troubling him, the House Fours were to be rowed off on the three days before the swimming, and Potter's House, of which he was captain of boats, was still without a cox.

Brandle, last year's cox, had been putting on flesh in a way that was absolutely appalling. He weighed close on nine stone, and Potter's were a light crew, though fast.

The only really light youngster was a new boy, called Stiffe—"a red-faced little worm, who had swatted for a scholarship"—the expression was Rawson's. When not doing other fellows' Latin exercises under compulsion he was generally found whimpering in a corner, someone having had a spare moment in which to kick him.

It was considered on all hands that Stiffe was by no means an acquisition to Potters. The house was athletic, they frankly discouraged scholars—generally with a fives bat. It was Rawson's last term, and he wished to leave Potters at the head of the river.

Last summer sheer luck had dropped them back three places. This year they had a fine crew, well together, and exceptionally fast, but they were light, and certainly not prepared to handicap themselves with nine stone dead weight in the stern.

Stiffe weighed a bare seven. His head was the heaviest thing about him. But there was one fatal objection, he couldn't swim, and there were the most stringent regulations that a boy who could not swim should on no pretext whatever enter a boat.

Steering, which in a racing shell—especially bumping ones—is a fine art, could be hammered or kicked into him in a week, but the swimming was the stumbling-block. Stiffe had an absolute

horror of the water. He was a nervous, sickly little worm—again the expression is Rawson's—and so far no one had been able to coax him down to the swimming pool.

Rawson was so perturbed in spirit that it was not until he had been ordered to construe for the third time that he even heard the master speaking, and then he was ignominiously hauled up at the second line.

He met Stiffe after school, and grabbed him by the left ear.

"Come here, you little beast!" he said, giving it a twist. "You've got to cox our four, do you hear? Now, don't be a young idiot, and look as if someone was going to kill you. There are a dozen youngsters who would jump for joy at the chance. You'll get your house colours, and your cap, but you've got to learn to swim, and learn jolly sharp, too. Cut off and get your towel and come down with me. No skulking!"

Stiffe looked glum.

"Please, Rawson, I'd rather not, really I would! I—I've got a lot of things to do. Gibble told me that he wanted his Latin exercise by tea-time, and—and—"

"And you're a beastly little funk," interrupted Rawson, with contempt. "Haven't you the decency to take a little pride in your house? I tell you you've got to learn to swim, whether you like it or not, and jolly quickly, too!"

Stiffe looked as if he were going to cry, and Rawson, who was in deadly earnest, tried diplomacy.

"Look here, I'm sorry if I jawed you. It's not half bad fun swimming; there's nothing to be scared about. I'll teach you myself, and I'll promise honour bright not to duck you. Now cut off and get a towel. Mind you," he added, as an afterthought, "if you don't come there'll be trouble. I shall be back from a trial inside an hour."

Rawson turned off, and Stiffe, on the verge of tears, bolted to his study and sported his oak. He had not the faintest intention of being dragged to the river by wild horses even. He had been spoilt at home by a well-meaning

aunt and a weak-minded though learned tutor, and having been accustomed to have his own way so long, it had still not been hammered out of his head that a fit of sulks was not a universal remedy.

The afternoon passed and no Stiffe appeared. Rawson fumed and raged after waiting a whole half-hour; but he kept his own counsel.

At tea-time Stiffe emerged, hoping that the worst was over. He saw Rawson walking towards school with the house-stroke, but neither of them paid the slightest attention to him. Convinced that his sulks had been effective, Stiffe assumed an almost jaunty air after chapel. But, unfortunately for him, he was not present to overhear a conversation in Rawson's study, at which six other senior members of Potter's attended. Rawson was spokesman.

"We've got to have him, you chaps, so it's no good arguing about it, and if he won't learn by kindness he must be driven. We can't very well carry him to the bathing-place by force, it's close on half a mile. You're senior prefect, Arnold, you must send him down with a message—anything 'll do. He can't refuse to do that, it would mean a study lickin' to begin with."

"Unpatriotic little smug!" said Arnold, with a snort. "I'll fix him! It means all the difference between being top of the river or losing another place, and it's the last time you and I will have a chance of rowing, Rawson, old man. I've got it! Look here, Radishes"—the junior master—"takes river roll this week, and young Stiffe sucks up to him no end. I'll fag him down to Radishes every afternoon with the roll call. The rest you chaps must look after. As prefect I can't very well mix up in it officially. But I'll guarantee that he's down there each afternoon at four-thirty."

Next afternoon accordingly he called Stiffe just at the end of school, and, handing him the printed roll, bade him take it to Radishes—he said Mr. Mullins, since it was an official and prefectorial order—"and mind you're not late," he added.

The one thing in his short school life which had thoroughly cowed and oppressed Stiffe was a fear of the masters, and an unholy respect for prefects in general, and a desire to conciliate them.

He took the roll reluctantly, but without dreaming of disobeying, and trotted down the half-mile path to the river.

Mr. Mullins, who was an enthusiast on the subject of flint arrow-heads and other similar treasures, bade him wait till call over.

This meant that Stiffe himself would be obliged to attend river roll, a fact the wily Arnold had been fully aware of, and which Rawson and the others had calculated on.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Regeneration of Stiffe.

AT exactly the half hour, Radishes, a mild-mannered man in glasses, and with a pocketful of muddy flints, came hurrying up and mumbled through the roll whilst the boys clustered round him. As Stiffe lingered

near to answer his name, Rawson and three or four others gathered unostentatiously but lovingly round him, whilst Arnold, from a distance, watched matters with an appreciative eye.

Stiffe, all unconscious of impending fate, squeaked adsum to his name and prepared to bolt.

He hadn't taken two steps, however, before Rawson's strong arm wrapped itself round his shoulders, and at the same moment a towel was flung over his head—a very wet towel with strong stifling properties. Radishes, being short-sighted, noticed nothing—even if he had, he would only have regarded it as a piece of horse-play.

Rawson and the rest frogs-marched the luckless and unpatriotic youngster to the bank near the header board. Three of them were gracefully attired in bathing slips, and these sprang one after the other into the water—Rawson first.

"Now then," he shouted, "off with his sweater and shoes, and chuck him in. I'll soon teach him to swim."

One of the conspirators wrenched off the sweater; another yanked away the canvas shoes. Then they took him by the head and heels and swayed him to the edge of the bank.

"When I say three," called Rawson, popping up, seal-like, from an under-water dive. "One—two—three!"

"All for the good of the house, ducky," said the fellow at his head.

"Now swim," said the stroke of the four who was engineering the other end, and they let him go out with a final swing.

Stiffe, being light, travelled well through the air. There was a fine, fast drop from the bank as well, and he landed, mostly anyhow, clear in the centre of the pool.

He emerged spluttering and clawing like a cat. Rawson stretched out a long arm, and placed a hand under his chin.

"Now, strike out, you young varmint, or I'll let you drop. Ah, you would claw, would you?"

The supporting hand was swiftly withdrawn, and Stiffe's red head momentarily disappeared.

Someone on the far side bolstered him up to the surface again. Again he clawed, and again his agonised soul yearned for the river bed. When next he returned to light and air, jerked upwards from below by Rawson, a vestige of common sense restrained him from opening his mouth so that the river flowed in bodily, and a blind instinct suggested to him that the safest thing to attempt to claw would be the bank itself. He therefore made desperate efforts to reach it, striking out and kicking furiously at the same time. To his amazement, he didn't sink anything like so suddenly as before, and in a dim, wet, half-drowned fashion, he heard Rawson calling out words of encouragement somewhere close to him.

At length, with the aid of a friendly shove from behind from someone his feet touched solid ground, and he clambered up to safety.

the water streaming from his pockets, and the last vestige of sulks washed away, but at the same time vowing that no power on earth should get him near the river again.

To his horror, however, Arnold called him up again after dinner the following day, and ordered him to take down the roll as before.

"Please, Arnold, I can't," he whimpered. "I really——"

"What the deuce do you mean? You're a first-term boy, and liable for general fagging!" said Arnold curtly. "If you refuse I'll give you a sturdy licking at tea-time! Don't answer; be off with you!"

Too scared to protest further, Stiffe was compelled to obey, half hoping that Rawson would not see him, a hope speedily shattered, for that worthy met him at the second stile and carefully escorted him down.

He struggled, kicked, tried to dodge, but the only result was that he became half strangled by the grip on his sweater; and once again, as soon as roll was over, he was ignominiously chucked in and made to struggle along as best he could. They were careful not to hurt him, but they were most determined that by hook or by crook he should learn to swim.

Whether their methods would have succeeded in the long run or no is open to doubt, had it not been for a piece of pure luck. He was scurrying back to school very wet and white with rage, when he happened to pass Brandle, the ex-cox, swaggering in the full glory of house colours.

The latter hailed him.

"Here you, Stiffe—you lucky young dog! Arnold tells me you're picked to cox the house boat—and you a first-term kid, too! They make out that I'm too heavy, which is rot; besides, I can always save them half a length at the bend. However, Arnold tells me I'm to coach you next week—you'll get your cap. I never heard such luck in my life! I was in my second summer when I got mine—a fourth-term chap!"

Stiffe checked and stared. Brandle to him was a very important personage, entitled to speak to the seniors on terms of equality—a boy who till then had scarcely considered it worth while to do him the honour of smacking his head.

He listened, wet but respectful, whilst Brandle enlarged on the mysteries of the art of steering, all the way back to school, and incidentally on his own particular skill.

"Never be afraid of shouting at 'em, and never touch your rudder if you can possibly help it—see I—unless, that is, you want to give the boat behind your wash"—and so forth and so on, with much earnest repetition.

That night Stiffe went to bed with a hazy notion that it must be rather a pleasant thing to be able to swagger about in the house colours—pale blue and white—and to patronise other chaps.

Next afternoon, to Rawson's huge delight, he deliberately went in off the bank without waiting to be clutched.

"The kid'll turn out all right yet," he confided to Arnold. "I gave young Brandle the tip to talk to him a bit."

Stiffe passed the test just after the swimming races were over, and passed fairly easy, for he had got rid of all feeling of funk.

It was a nervous moment for him perched on his narrow seat on the first of the three nights of the racing, his arms strained out behind him on the crossed rudder strings, the fingers of his right hand cramped with the tension on the cork; the next boat a short sixty feet in front of him, another the same distance astern.

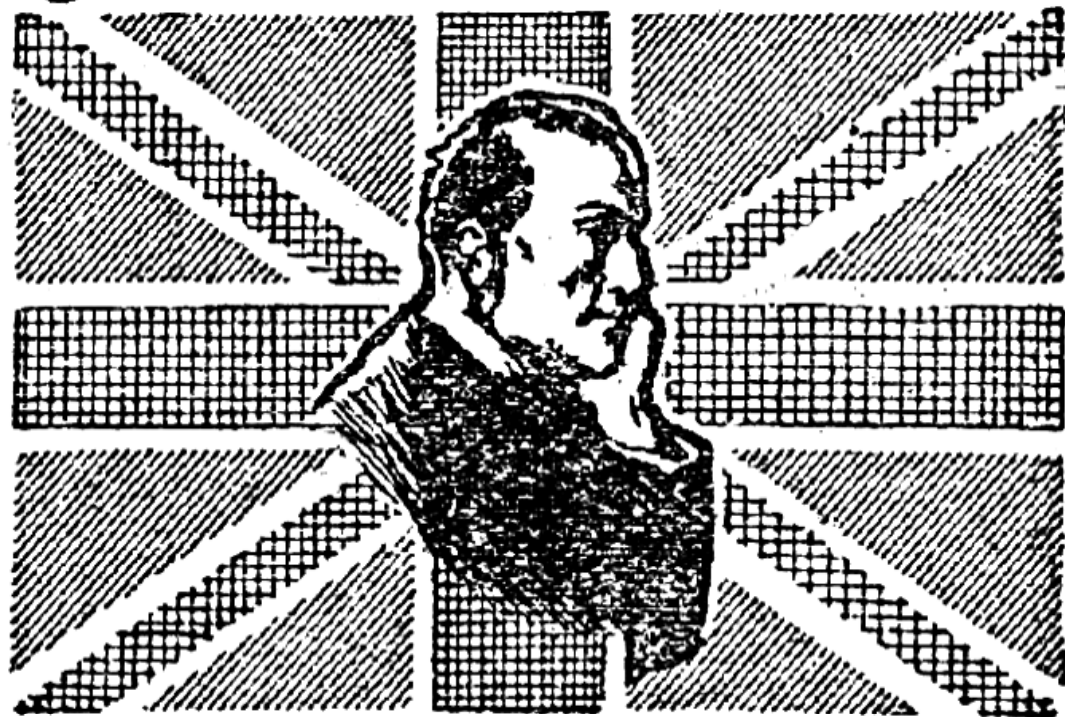
The counting of the seconds seemed an eternity—ten—five—four—three—two—one! Then bang!—a deafening report just above his head, the cork released, and the rush and heave of the initial spurt. Potters made their first bump inside the half distance that night; and Stiffe, for the first time in his life, tasted the sweets of popularity, for he had steered well—uncommonly well. Even Brandle admitted so much.

Partly owing to his light weight, and partly because his initial nervousness was over, he proved himself an adept in the art. Potters bumped on every succeeding night, and ended up top boat. Never once did Stiffe undergo the feeling of seeing the bow of the next boat astern creeping up past his elbow.

Nowadays he tries to patronise Brandle, and talk him down, but he is still a light weight, and has learnt to know a danger signal when he sees one. Brandle's hitting powers are improving with practice.

THE END.

Sexton Blake



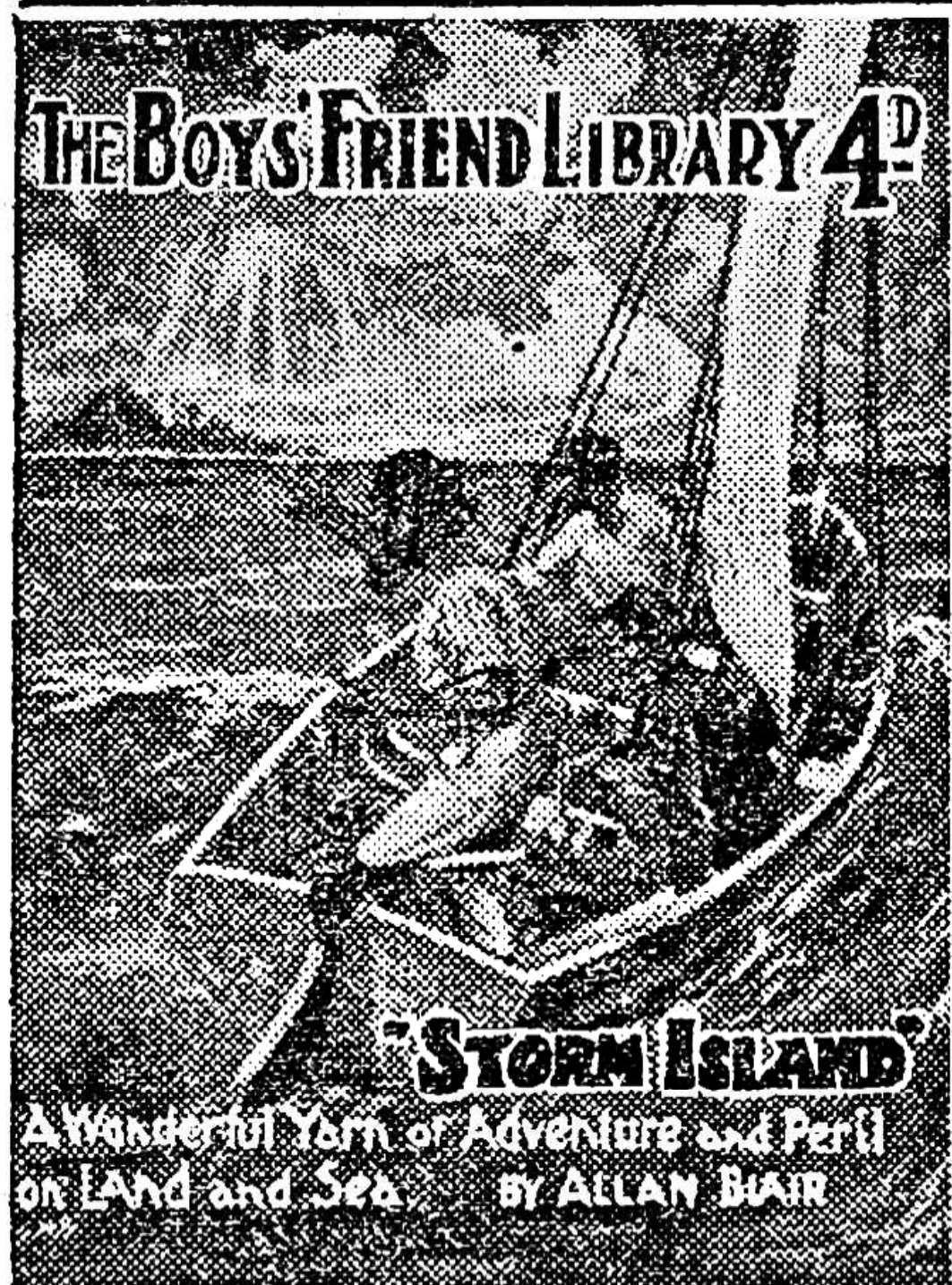
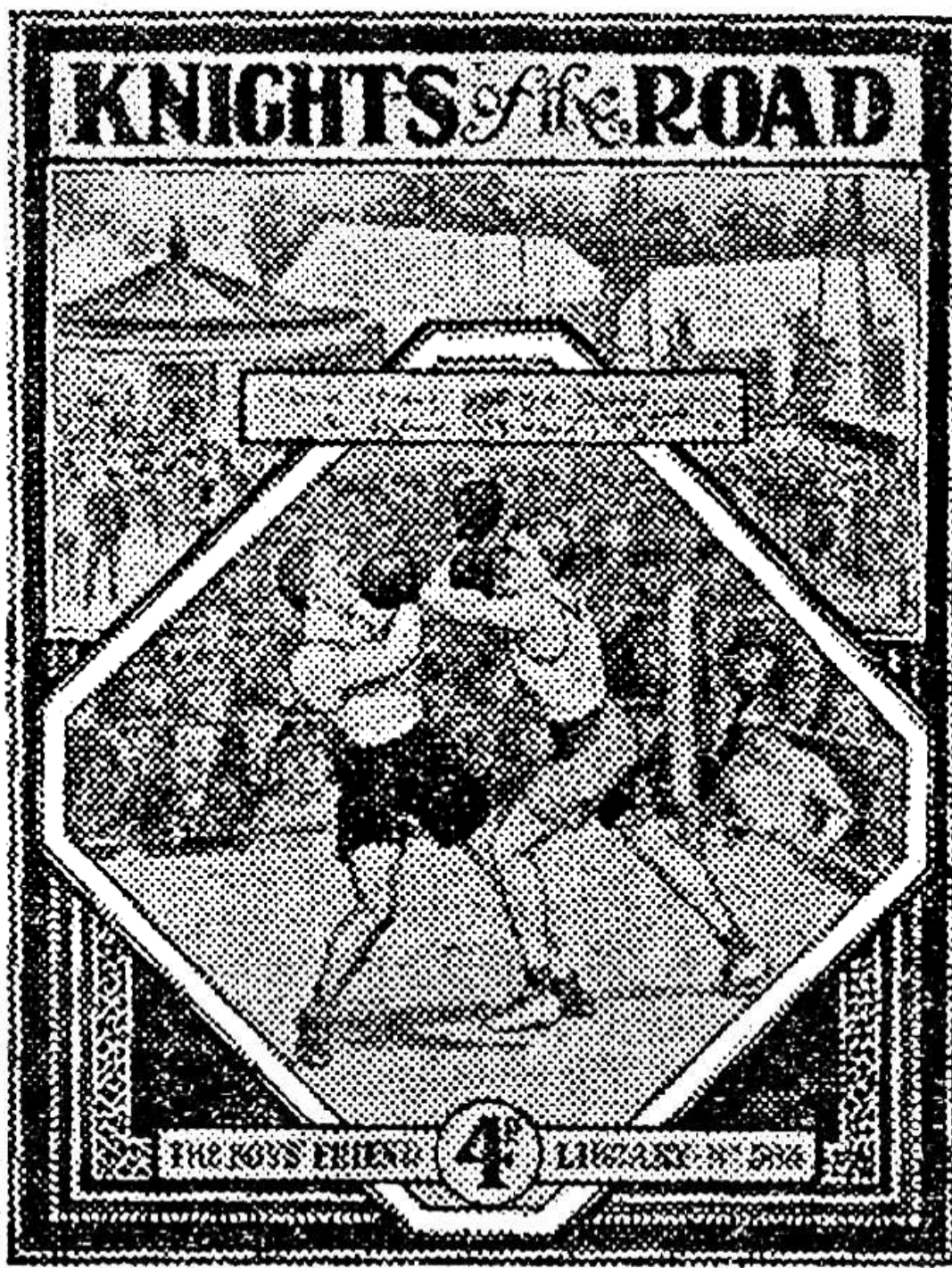
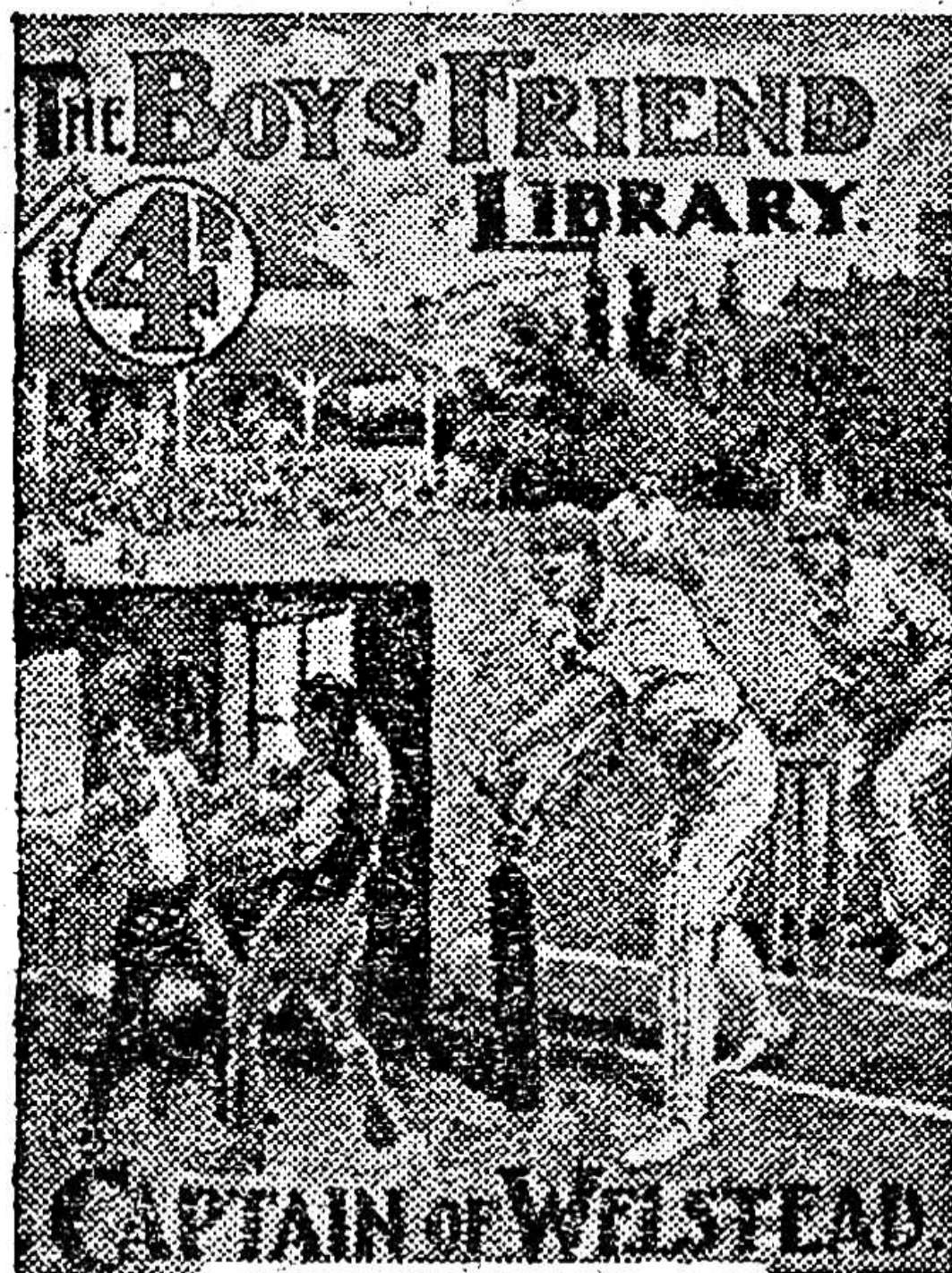
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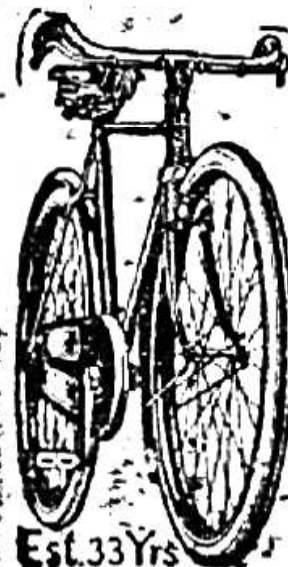
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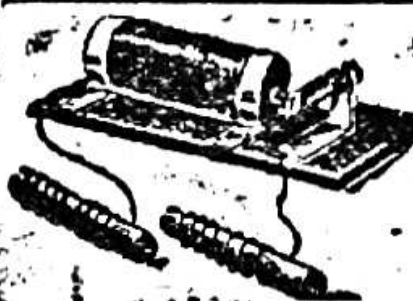
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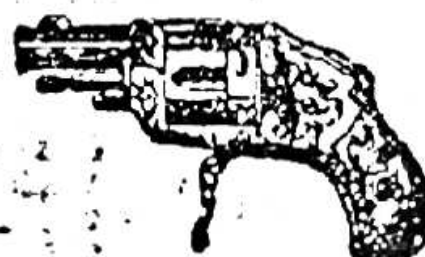
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