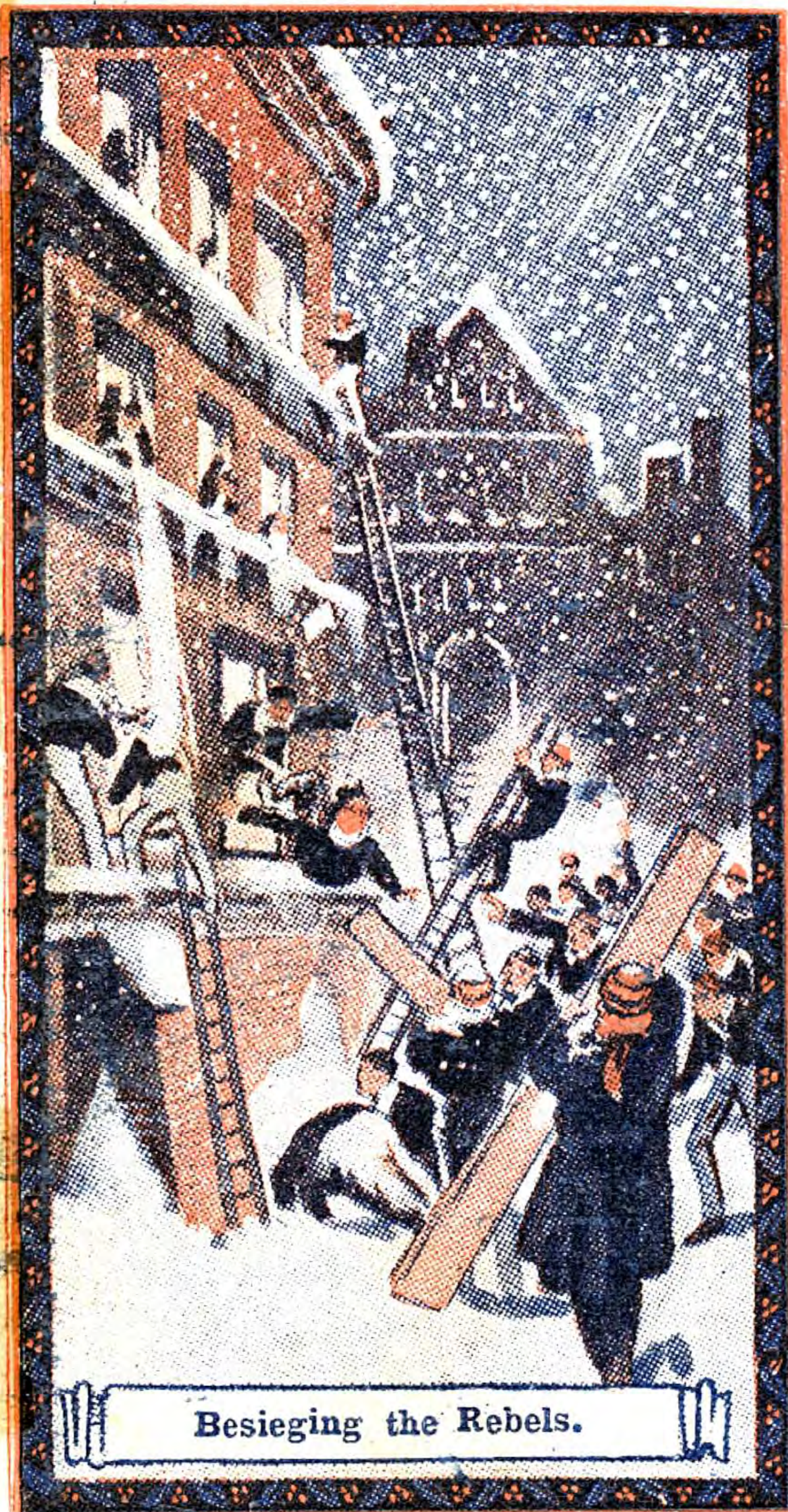


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THE **NELSON LEE** **2d**
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No. 342.

December 24, 1921.



Besieging the Rebels.

GRAND HOLIDAY CHRISTMAS NO.

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LEE, NIPPER, LORD
DORRIMORE, and the
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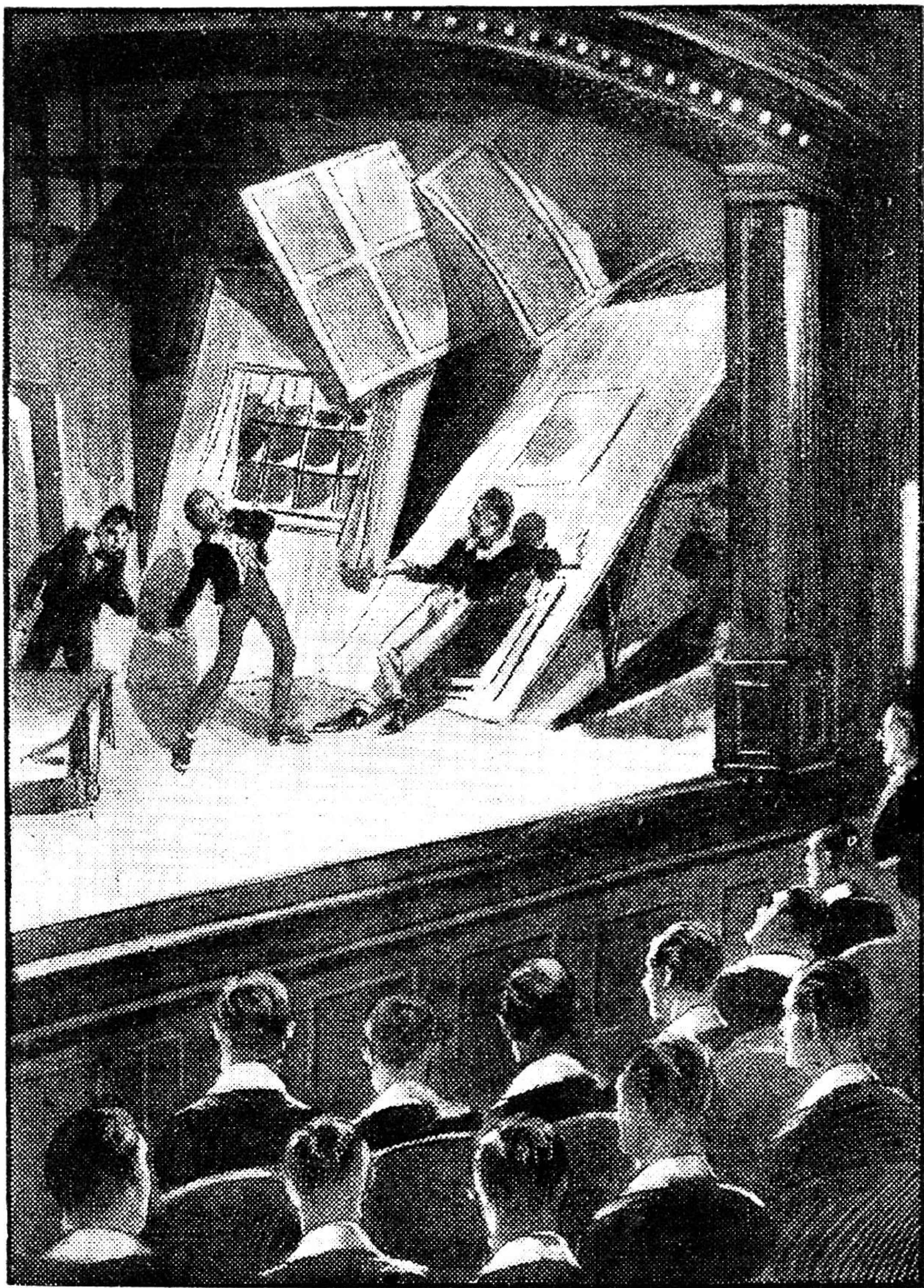
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Can be performed at home.
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THE

Christmas plotters



"Help!" gasped Handforth. "The whole show's falling down! Great pip! I—only just leaned—— Look out, you fatheads!" (See page 15.)

THE CHRISTMAS PLOTTERS



**(THE NARRATIVE
RELATED
THROUGHOUT
BY NIPPER.)**

A Splendid Long Complete Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's College, introducing **NELSON LEE, NIPPER**, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Shunned By His Schoolboys," "Loyalists and Rebels," "The Schoolboys' Union," and many other Stirring Tales.

CHAPTER I.

THE EVE OF CHRISTMAS.

THE wind roared and buffeted, and the snowflakes flurried down in miniature whirlwinds. Overhead, the sky was leaden, and the whole countryside in every direction was crystal white in its wintry mantle.

The morning was a rough one, and the weather conditions showed no signs of improvement. For over seven hours the storm had raged, and a very large amount of snow had fallen. It was Christmas Eve, and there was no doubt about the old-fashioned nature of this Yuletide.

I was with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, and Handforth & Co. We were out in the thick of the storm—and yet, at the same time we were not. That sounds a bit Irish, but I'll explain.

Our little party was on its way to Dorrimore Hall, the ancestral home of the millionaire sporting



peer, Lord Dorrimore. And we were travelling along the bleak, snowswept country roads in one of Dorrie's motor-cars.

It was a magnificent saloon, all enclosed, cosy, warm, and as comfortable as a well-heated room, with easy-chairs in plenty. Being a saloon, the driver was with us—and not outside, on his own.

Considering that I was the driver, this was very satisfactory. Driving a limousine is all very well, but even the best appointed of such cars is inclined to be draughty and cold during a blustering snowstorm. Besides, a fellow is apt to be mistaken for a chauffeur.

In a saloon-car it's different. We were just a merry party together, and the other fellows did not seem to think it necessary to keep their seats, comfortable as the seats were.

Handforth had just been waltzing with McClure—at least, Handforth called it waltzing. McClure had an idea that Handforth was attempting to do him a permanent injury. A pot-hole in the road brought the dance to an abrupt conclusion—Handforth falling backwards into one of the seats, and McClure sitting violently on the floor. His left foot felt in a somewhat pulpy condition. Handforth was no feather-weight.

"You—you clumsy ass!" howled McClure. "Ow! My foot!"

"Blow your foot!" snapped Handforth, struggling up. "A jolly fine driver we've got—I don't think! Making the car lurch like that——"

I half-turned, glaring.

"You unreasonable ass!" I snapped. "Do you think I can help the road being rotten?"

"Well, you can steer clear of holes and ruts, I suppose?"

"Oh, easy!" I said sarcastically. "I can see a fat lot of ruts with six inches of snow over the ground, can't I? You'd better be careful, too, my sons. If you get larking about too much you'll upset the whole giddy contraption!"

"Really, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie protestingly. "It is hardly polite to refer to Dorrie's car as a contraption. This is one of the finest motors I've ever been in begad!"

"Dorrie's got about a dozen like it," I grinned. "He's got so many

cars he doesn't know what to do with them, and they're used for about nine months out of the year by his chauffeurs. Being a millionaire, Dorrie is as careless as the dickens, and one car more or less doesn't make much difference to him. If we pinched this one, he'd probably never know anything about it!"

The sporting peer had 'phoned up to Nelson Lee the previous day—a trunk call, for Dorrie was in the country, and the gov'nor and I were at Gray's Inn Road. Dorrie had asked Lee to fetch this particular car from his West End garage, and bring it down.

But, as the gov'nor had made other arrangements, he entrusted me with the task of taking the car to Dorrimore Hall. And I had seen no reason why a few of the other fellows shouldn't accompany me.

For practically the whole Remove had been invited to spend Christmas under Dorrie's roof. By all we could hear, things were going to be lively, and Dorrie had planned the festivities on a huge scale.

Naturally, the bulk of the fellows had accepted the invitation with alacrity. Christmas with Lord Dorrimore was something to boast of. Classy as St. Frank's was, only a very few of the fellows had any intimate friendship with members of the real aristocracy. And a chance such as this was not to be sneezed at.

Consequently, nine-tenths of the Remove would be present, the other tenth having been compelled to spend Christmas at home. And, although there had recently been trouble and strife in the Remove, all thought of hostilities was put aside. Christmas was a time of good cheer and good fellowship.

Nelson Lee would be with us, of course; but he was not making the journey at the same time, because he had gone off in his own comfortable little coupe to fetch Dr. Malcolm Stafford. For the Headmaster of St. Frank's would also be a guest at Dorrimore Hall—much to the secret dismay of the Remove. Most of the fellows were afraid that the Head's presence would act as a kind of wet blanket.

For just now the Head was not exactly popular.

The recent trouble at St. Frank's

was chiefly connected with Dr. Stafford. He had become brutal, tyrannous, and harsh, and it was the Remove which had suffered mostly at his hands. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the fellows disapproved of the Head's presence at such a merry gathering.

However, they needn't have been uneasy, for Dr. Stafford had already decided that he would spend Christmas very quietly—in solitude, for the most part, in Lord Dorrimore's stately but comfortable library. And Nelson Lee was quite satisfied with this arrangement.

For it was Lee who had suggested to Dorrie that Dr. Stafford should be invited, and the famous detective had urged the Head to accept. For Nelson Lee wanted to be near him throughout the holidays. Lee felt that the Head needed protection—that it would be unsafe to leave him unguarded.

And there was very good reason for this.

"I can't help feeling that there'll be some trouble down at the Hall," said Tommy Watson, shaking his head. "I've been thinking, and I'm jolly certain that Armstrong and his crowd will kick up a dust. It's a pity they were ever invited."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Pray don't be so frightfully uncharitable, dear old boy!" he observed. "Armstrong an' his supporters may be against us at St. Frank's, but, on a holiday, everythin' is different——"

"Will it be different?" interrupted Watson. "I'm not usually a chap to worry, but this time I can't help it. It would be all right if the Head wasn't going to be there; but his very presence will make all the chaps keep up the antagonism."

"That's a good word!" said Handforth. "At the same time, it's rot! If any of the fatheads start trouble, I'll jolly soon squash it! And I'll squash a few noses, too!"

"Of course, that won't be causing trouble, will it?" asked Church.

"Oh, well, if the Rebels ask for it, they'll get it!" replied Handforth. "Personally, I'm rather bucked by the thought that they'll be there. A few scraps won't mar the festivities in the least; they'll serve to liven things up a bit, by George!"

"If you're going down to Dorrimore

Hall with the idea of scrappin' with all the guests, the best thing we can do is to tip you out at once," I remarked. "You mustn't punch a single nose, or even raise your fist, while you're Dorrie's guest."

Handforth looked witheringly at the back of my head.

"You pitiful lunatic!" he said scornfully. "I'll punch as many noses as I like!"

"Really, old boy, you must allow me to protest," said Sir Montie severely. "Fightin' under Dorrie's roof would be shockin'ly bad form—it would, really. We can't allow it——"

"I don't care what you can allow, you tailor's dummy!" snapped Handforth. "If Dorrie didn't want any noses punched, he shouldn't have invited that Rebel crowd. It was simply asking for trouble. I'm an obliging chap—I always give anybody something they ask for!"

"But scrappin' under your host's roof is simply appallin'!" said Montie.

"There'll be plenty of room to scrap outside!"

"Begad! That makes no difference," exclaimed Tregellis-West. "You'll still be a guest——"

"Oh, dry up! We don't want any more of it!"

The subject was dismissed for the time being, but as I drove on over the snow-covered roads, I couldn't help thinking that Edward Oswald Handforth was right. It would be almost impossible to avoid a collision between the Rebels and the Loyalists. The two parties were at loggerheads.

I was the leader of the Loyalists, and most of the decent fellows in the Remove backed me up. We had undertaken to stand by the school, whatever happened; to stick to the Head and Nelson Lee.

Armstrong, of Study J, was the leader of the Rebels, and it was his policy to rebel against the authority of both Dr. Stafford and Nelson Lee. The Rebels had worked up agitation after agitation, chiefly on account of the Head's recent exhibitions of harshness and cruelty.

Nelson Lee, in his capacity of House-master of the Ancient House, was compelled to back the Head up all along the line, and so the gov'nor had come in for a lot of bitter criticism, and a

strong feeling had arisen against him in the lower school.

Armstrong and his set had named their policy, and it seemed quite simple. They wanted to drive the Headmaster and Nelson Lee out of St. Frank's, and then, having succeeded in this, their idea was to set Mr. Trenton upon a pedestal. Their ambition was to make him Head; but, failing this, House-master of the Ancient House.

Mr. Hugh Trenton was the science master at St. Frank's. Strictly speaking, he was not a very important personage on the school staff; but he had made himself very popular with a certain section of the boys. He had wormed his way into their good graces, with his smooth, oily tongue, and suave manners. Armstrong and his crowd were positively fascinated by Mr. Trenton's assumed geniality.

I was not to be deceived, and I knew well enough that the science-master was a snake in the grass. He was not to be trusted; and for these juniors to set him up as an idol was madness itself. But nothing in the world would make them listen to reason.

Nelson Lee had positive proof that Mr. Trenton was several kinds of a scoundrel; but no action had been taken, because the gov'nor was anxious to rope in a few more at the same time. There was a mystery here which was not yet fathomed—the mystery concerning Dr. Stafford's strange attacks of savagery.

However, in spite of misgivings about the Rebels, we were all determined to enjoy ourselves as much as possible at Dorrimore Hall. We certainly had no suspicion of the actual truth—we had no inkling of the strange and startling events which were destined to occur.

Our journey was more than half completed, and we reckoned to arrive at our destination just in time for lunch. In spite of the snow, we were making fairly good progress. Driving was by no means easy, for the glass in front of me was constantly smothered by the snowflakes. High speed was absolutely out of the question.

"How about Fullwood?" asked Watson suddenly. "Will he be there?"

"I suppose so," said Church.

"What absolute rot!" snorted Handforth. "Fullwood—the biggest

cad in the Remove! I reckon it's a shame for Lord Dorrimore to invite him. Everybody knows that Fullwood and Co. are rank outsiders."

"I suppose Dorrie thinks that such things ought to be forgotten at Christmas-time," remarked McClure. "And, after all, what does it matter? We manage to rub along at St. Frank's—and Fullwood's always with us. So I suppose we can manage at Dorrimore Hall. Anyhow, I'm not upsetting myself about it."

"You never upset yourself about anything!" said Handforth tartly.

"Not even about you, I suppose?" asked McClure. "Why, it's nothing but upsets at St. Frank's—every day the same—from morning till night!"

Handforth rose to his feet.

"Are you suggesting that I cause upsets?" he demanded ominously.

"Oh, don't be an ass——"

"Are you suggesting that I cause upsets?" roared Handforth.

"Well, yes, if you must have the truth!" snapped McClure. "You know as well as I do that you're always causing rows—— Hi! Leggo, you ass——"

"Steady on, Handy!" gasped Church.

But Handforth was already pulling McClure out of his seat. He knew quite well that his chum was perfectly right—that most of the upsets at St. Frank's were of his own making. But this only served to make him all the more violent.

"Now, you rotter, you're going through it!" he snorted. "I'm going to punch your nose until you apologise. Here's one to start with!"

Biff!

Handforth's fist didn't strike McClure's nose, however. That junior ducked in the nick of time, and Edward Oswald's fist swept past, and as he staggered to keep his balance, his knuckles came into violent contact with the back of my head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tommy Watson. "That was unrehearsed—— Oh, my goodness! What the dickens——"

It all happened in a second.

I had been quite unprepared for that sudden blow—and Handforth's knuckles were by no means soft. My head was thrown forward, and it happened that

I was negotiating a sharp corner in the road at that very moment.

The speed of the car was moderate, or there might have been a serious disaster. As it was, I was pitched forward on to the steering-wheel, and before I could regain control, the car bumped over the rough ground at the side of the road, and ploughed itself deep into a snowdrift.

The ground had seemed quite level, but, actually, it dipped away sharply here, the hollow being filled with soft snow. We simply plunged into it, and came to a dead stop, at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

"Great pip!" said Handforth. "What's happened?"

I turned round, red with indignation. "You silly fathead!" I shouted.

"Look what you've done now!"

"Look what I've done!" yelled Handforth. "Who's driving this car—"

"That's nothing to do with it!" I retorted hotly. "You bumped into me, and before I could wrench the steering-wheel round, we plunged into this drift. It's absolutely hopeless to get out of it now, without help from another car. We're in over our wheels—properly bunkered, in fact."

Handforth snorted. "Are you trying to blame me for it?" he demanded tartly. "A jolly fine driver—I don't think! You go and pile us up in a giddy ditch, and then you try to excuse yourself by holding me responsible!"

"Dear old boy, it was your fault—it was, really!" said Sir Montie gently. "You struck Nipper violently——"

"How can I help that?" roared Handforth. "I tried to hit McClure, and he dodged! If you think you can bluff me, you've made a bloomer!"

I grunted. "Oh, well, it's no good making a fuss about it," I said. "It's done now, and we've got to get out of it the best way we can. But I thought something like this would happen if Handy started larking about. I warned him not ten minutes ago."

Watson opened the door, and we all emerged into the cold, biting air. Snow was still descending, and the wind was high. Up and down the road, as far as we could see, there was no sign of a living soul. We apparently had this

stretch of country to ourselves; and there had been no other traffic along the road recently, since there were no other tracks in addition to those made by our car.

One glance at the position was enough for me.

"Hopeless!" I said grimly. "Just look at it, you chaps! The blessed car's half buried——"

"Is she damaged much?" asked Church.

"Damaged—no!" I replied. "I don't suppose the enamel's even scratched. But we can't shift a yard until we get help; and it'll probably need a traction-engine to pull us out of this snowdrift."

"It was all Handy's fault——" began McClure.

"Oh, don't start all over again!" I interrupted. "Talking about it won't make the thing any better. The best thing we can do is to get inside and wait until something comes along."

"Why, half a minute!" exclaimed Watson suddenly. "I think I can see—— Yes, by Jingo! There's a car coming now!"

He was staring down the road, in the direction that we had come, and as I strained my eyes I could see the faint outline of a big covered car coming along through the snow. It was travelling in the same direction as ourselves, and would overtake us within a minute or so.

"Here's luck if you like!" I exclaimed, my face clearing. "I didn't expect a car to come along for at least an hour, and here there's rescue in sight straight away."

"I knew it was coming!" said Handforth airily.

We waited by the side of the road, and as the approaching car drew nearer, I stepped forward, and held up my hand. The driver at once applied his brakes and slowed down. He was evidently intent upon stopping.

I ran forward swiftly, in order to jump on the footboard before the car actually came to a standstill. It was a landaulette, and I was hoping that it was empty—it would be easy enough to tip this chauffeur into lending us a hand.

Then I received a bit of a surprise. A voice sounded—quite distinctly, for the car was a quiet one.

"Don't stop, Turner!" it exclaimed sharply. "Drive straight on!"

The chauffeur half-turned his head.

"But——"

"Drive straight on!" ordered the voice curtly.

The next moment the driver accelerated, and gathered speed at once. The car ploughed away through the snow, and was soon swallowed up amid the rapidly falling flakes. Watson, Handforth, and the others all uttered exclamations of surprise and furious indignation.

But I was startled.

For, although I had seen nobody, I had recognised that voice—the voice from within the car. And I knew that the man who had given the orders to drive on was none other than Mr. Hugh Trenton, the science-master at St. Frank's!

This was indeed a surprise. In the first place, why did Mr. Trenton wish to avoid us seeing him? Clearly he had reckoned that his voice would not carry beyond the driver; he had no idea that I had heard his words.

There could be only one explanation of Mr. Trenton's strange conduct. For some reason best known to himself, he did not want us to know that he was in this part of the country—that he was, in fact, travelling in the same direction as ourselves—towards Dorrimore Hall!

And as I stood in the road, I set my teeth and felt strangely uneasy. There was something significant in this—something vaguely sinister. My peace of mind was by no means improved.

Dr. Stafford would be at the Hall—and Dr. Stafford was the man whom Mr. Trenton had been secretly plotting against during all the past weeks. The obvious conclusion was that Mr. Trenton was following up his victim.

Undoubtedly there was mischief in the air!

CHAPTER II.

DORRIE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY!



FATTY LITTLE beamed with delight.

"This is what I call a party!" he said, as he stuffed half a banana into his ample mouth. "By gravy, there's grub everywhere! Grub and

sweets, and fruit, and everything a chap's heart desires!"

"To say nothing of his tummy!" observed Pitt. "Kindly take notice, you chaps—the one and only Fatty has enough to eat for once! If he ever manages to survive after this party, it'll be a miracle! He's gained about four stone since he arrived already!"

Fatty Little grinned amiably.

"Oh, don't rot!" he said. "What I like about Dorrie is that he does a thing in style—there's no half-and-half business about him. Ripping meals, and plenty to eat when a fellow gets peckish. Little snacks here and there, you know—they give a chap an appetite for real grub."

Fatty Little, as a matter of fact, had not stopped eating since he arrived. When he got tired of something solid, he went on fruit, and from fruit to chocolates and other sweetstuffs—and then back to sandwiches and pastry. How in the world he managed to eat a proper set meal when the time arrived was quite beyond the understanding of ordinary mortals. But Fatty's capacity seemed to be unlimited.

And there was no doubt that Dorrie's party was a grand affair. Dorrimore Hall was a place of laughter and brightness and warmth. Electric lights blazed everywhere, great log fires burned in every room, and there was an air of genial good-fellowship among the guests.

Lavish in all things, Lord Dorrimore had not spared his pocket now. The Christmas decorations were the most wonderful I had ever seen. One received an impression that a carnival was in progress, or something of the kind.

The big lounge hall—ages old, with its black, oaken rafters and wide, open firegrate—was festooned with strings of tiny, gleaming electric lights, in all colours of the rainbow.

They glittered and twinkled from the ceiling, down the walls, and made a scene of brilliance which would have put cheer into any heart. Then there were other decorations, and an endless amount of holly and mistletoe.

The great dining-room was decorated in very much the same manner, and all the old corridors and staircases, usually so grim and sombre, were now ablaze

with lights. And laughter rang out in every corner of the great old Hall.

A whole army of servants were in force, and as for the Christmas fare, I doubt if any other household in the kingdom had such splendid varieties. It was just the kind of party to gladden junior hearts.

The guests were very numerous.

Most of the Remove fellows were on hand, including such undesirables as Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. But Lord Dorrimore had made no distinctions. He had invited the whole Remove, and every fellow who could manage it had turned up, knowing full well that Christmas at Dorrimore Hall would beat all records.

Then, of course, there were others.

Sir Montie's aunt, Lady Helen Tregellis-West, was with us, and Montie's guardian, too — Lord Westbrooke. Violet Watson—Tommy Watson's sister—had come, and Ethel Church and Agnes Christine were also members of the party—to say nothing of quite a number of young ladies we had not met before. Dorrie declared that no Christmas party could be a success without plenty of girls.

It was essentially a youthful gathering. There were no old fogeys to put a damper on the spirits of the young people. Montie's aunt was a brick, and his uncle—Lord Westbrooke—a regular old sport.

Dr. Stafford, of course, would be at the Hall, but not exactly as a member of the party. The Head of St. Frank's knew only too well that his presence among all the juniors would act as a kind of wet blanket. It grieved him to realise this; but, after the recent events at St. Frank's, nothing else was to be expected. The Head had not given the boys cause to exactly love him.

Indeed, only a few fellows knew that Dr. Stafford was there, and these could be trusted not to spread the news broadcast. It had been Nelson Lee's idea for Dr. Stafford to be under the same roof as ourselves. The guv'nor had told Dorrie point blank that he could only come to the party if the Head came, too; and Dorrie had promptly replied that a special suite of rooms would be set aside for the Head's benefit—there were plenty of rooms at the Hall.



A little phial was gripped firmly between the mysterious intruder's fingers. The hand hovered over the wine-glass. (See page 18.)

Nelson Lee's idea, of course, was to keep his eye on Dr. Stafford; or, to be more exact, he wanted to see that Dr. Stafford came to no harm. For the guv'nor knew that the Head was a much injured man. His recent attacks of brutal violence had not been of his own making. The Head was the victim of a plot. Nelson Lee had suspected this all the time, but he was now in possession of positive proof.

Only a short time before we left St. Frank's, the guv'nor had experienced something of an extraordinary nature. He and I were the only persons in the world who knew of it—and we should both remember the affair to our dying days.

Lee had partaken of one of Dr. Stafford's throat tablets—quite innocent-looking, medicinal sweets—and within half an hour he had changed into a murderous, wild-eyed savage.

Nelson Lee became another being—a cruel, heartless monster whose one desire was to take life! I had come to the gov'nor's study at the very crucial moment, and it was only by a miracle that I escaped destruction. I shall never forget the night I spent, wrapped in a blanket, outside the door of Nelson Lee's study.

The anguish, the untold misery, had been almost too great to bear.

But in the morning Nelson Lee was himself, and all my misery was turned to joy. The effects of the dreadful stuff had worn off; and Lee was grim and cold. Before the school awoke to its daily routine, Lee had taken the box of throat tablets from the Head's study, and had made an analysis.

In every tablet he discovered the presence of some unknown drug—a drug which Lee could not recognise or place. But it was evident that Mr. Trenton had used this means to his end. He had dosed Dr. Stafford with his ghastly concoction by means of these harmless-looking tablets. All unconsciously, the Head had fallen into the cunningly laid plot.

Exactly what this drug was, Nelson Lee did not know, and all the analysing in the world made him none the wiser. It was Mr. Trenton's discovery, and the gov'nor's feelings against the science-master were grim and harsh. For any human being to use such a terrible drug upon another man was little short of murderous; it was hideously horrible.

Mr. Trenton's object, obviously, was to drive the Head into fits of violence, which would ultimately lead to his being driven from the school, disgraced and discredited. And nothing would please Mr. Trenton better than to see Nelson Lee sent from St. Frank's with him.

In the meantime, it was the science-master's policy to ingratiate himself into the good books of the boys—seniors and juniors. And Mr. Trenton had succeeded remarkably well, for he was the most popular master in the school.

Until he arrived, Nelson Lee had been the general favourite; but a great change had come about. Lee was no longer honoured by the juniors, and Mr. Trenton was looked upon as a kind of hero. And all this had been achieved by cunning—clever, fiendish cunning.

Nelson Lee had been compelled to maintain discipline in the school. At all costs he had prevented the boys from revolting. And thus it appeared that the gov'nor had supported Dr. Stafford's savagery, and the boys had turned against him in shoals, as school-boys will. They saw only on the surface, and they remembered nothing of the gov'nor's past actions. They judged him solely and simply by what he was doing at the present, and it seemed to them that he was supporting a policy of tyranny and brutal harshness.

But Lee was merely biding his time. Before long he would be ready to strike, and then the whole truth would come out—then Dr. Stafford would be publicly exonerated and cleared. Once the whole truth came out, everybody would realise that sympathy was due to the Head—not condemnation.

But just now Christmas had intervened, and so hostilities were forgotten. The fellows could raise no objection to the fact that Nelson Lee was a guest under the same roof as themselves. It was well known that he was Lord Dorrimore's closest friend, and it was only natural that he should be there.

For the most part, the juniors seemed to have no thought for St. Frank's, or for the memories of the recent trouble at the old school. They were enjoying themselves immensely, and meant to obtain the full amount of pleasure from the good things that were set before them.

I had made no mention of the fact to the others that Mr. Trenton had been in that car which had failed to stop. But I was feeling rather uneasy about the incident, and I had lost no time in telling Nelson Lee. The gov'nor had not seemed very surprised.

"It merely shows, Nipper, that we were wise in bringing the Head under Dorrie's roof," he remarked grimly. "We can see after him here, and Mr. Trenton's activities will probably come to nothing."

Needless to say, we had arrived at Dorrimore Hall, safe and sound—although rather late. No other vehicle had come along that snow-swept road until an hour and twenty minutes had elapsed. When it actually did arrive, it proved to be a mail-vain—a huge motor. The driver was genial enough, and he

delayed the mails specially for our benefit. The snowed-up car was hauled clear of the drift in a very short space of time, and we continued on our way cheerfully. But we saw that Handforth got up to no further tricks.

And now we were at the Hall, and all the other guests were there, too. Everything was bright and warm and happy. No thought of danger or criminal plotting entered the minds of the guests. It seemed impossible that anybody should be making trouble at such a time as this.

But I soon discovered that the juniors themselves were not exactly guiltless of plotting. The Rebels, in fact, still remained Rebels. The Christmas surroundings made no difference to them.

My own chums, and all the other Loyalists, were willing enough to bury the hatchet during the Christmas holidays. But the Rebels, led by Armstrong, seemed disposed to make trouble almost from the start. This is what I had feared, and it proved that they were not true sportsmen.

Our first day at the Hall—or, rather half-day, since we did not arrive until nearly evening—was necessarily a somewhat muddling time. We had to sort ourselves out, unpack our togs, and so forth. It was not until the next day that we felt really at home. This, of course, was Christmas Day, and things began to get nicely warmed up and lively. The festivities proper would not commence until Boxing Day; but junior schoolboys are high-spirited kind of creatures, and games and practical jokes were not long in commencing.

I could write a whole lot about the Christmas dinner—the tremendous joints, the plum-pudding, and so forth. But, after all, should only make you feel jolly envious, and make your mouths water. Fatty Little, naturally, absolutely surpassed himself, and it was generally predicted that he would be a helpless invalid for the rest of the vacation. In the evening, however, Fatty's appetite was as gigantic as ever. The more he demolished, and the richer the good things, the more he seemed to want. Fatty's constitution was amazingly sound.

Being a Sunday, games were not exactly the thing, and so the fellows would have to wait until the following day before events got moving rapidly. On

this evening—Christmas night—singing in the drawing-room, reading, and chatting was the general order of the evening.

And to the juniors, who were fairly itching to get up to mischief, this enforced idleness was somewhat hard. Fatty Little was the only fellow who didn't mind—he could put in all his time at feasting.

Some of the fellows were in the drawing-room listening to a few songs. Others were trying to get up some quiet parlour games—which were permissible on Sunday evening—and still more were reading before the fire in the great lounge hall, or lounging about, chatting.

I noticed that Armstrong and Griffith and Doyle had gone to a corner of the hall, and were talking together in subdued whispers. That their conversation was a secret one was evident, for they kept their eyes well open to see that nobody else came near.

"I wonder what those bounders are up to," I murmured, frowning.

"I'd like to know that, too!" said Pitt. "Look here, Nipper, I don't reckon it's the thing for these Rebels to be plotting and planning while they're under Dorrie's roof. It's rotten form!"

"Frightfully rotten—it is, really!" agreed Sir Montie.

"Plotting and planning?" I repeated.

"Yes."

"Well, I'd hardly say that——"

"But I tell you they are," declared Pitt. "I've noticed them whispering together all day—in twos and threes, and in all sorts of odd corners. Tucker seems to be as much a ringleader as Armstrong."

I frowned.

"Tucker's coming out of his shell," I said grimly. "Since this trouble about the Head began the young ass has been agitating and talking all sorts of rot. And these Rebels have been listening to him."

"Rather!" said Jack Grey. "Nipper's right, Reggie. Do you remember that time T. T. trotted out some wild scheme about his precious Brotherhood of the Free?"

"Rather!" said Pitt. "The young fathead talked about forming a Schoolboys' Union, and seizing the school, and running it on the Soviet principle, and

all that sort of piffle. We kicked him out of Study E for it."

I nodded.

"Yes, and he went straight to Study J, and Armstrong took him in," I said. "Armstrong was pretty harmless until T. T. got in the same study. That young bounder is the cause of nearly all this trouble, with his mad ideas!"

"But they can't come to anything, surely?" asked Grey.

"Well, I don't think they'll come to much," I replied. "We'll see to that. The Loyalists will get busy if Armstrong goes too far. And you mustn't take too much notice of this hole-and-corner whispering. I suppose the asses think they look clever, and they're probably trying to impress us."

"Pity they couldn't have waited until the holidays are over," said Singleton. "We can't exactly have a row, but these Rebels seem to be asking for trouble. It would be awful if it came to a scrap under Dorrie's roof."

"I've noticed Fullwood and Co., too," said Watson. "Personally, I'm willing to overlook all bad feeling for the present—it's Christmas-time. But if those rotters will persist in making trouble, I'm game enough for any rag you like. I reckon the Rebels ought to be taken outside and rolled in the snow."

"Good idea!" said De Valerie promptly.

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's grab the bounders and——"

"Steady on—steady on!" I broke in quickly. "Don't be such asses. It's Christmas night, and we can't do anything like that. To-morrow morning, if you like, but not now. Why, we should be worse than they are. Just leave them alone for this evening, and——"

I was interrupted by a sudden commotion from one of the corridors.

Thud!

"Yow!—Yaroooh!"

Thud!

"And that's another one for luck!" roared a well-known voice.

"Handforth!" I said grimly. "Oh, the fathead! Fancy punching anybody to-night!"

"Can you imagine him not punching anybody?" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I strode out into the corridor, followed by the other fellows. And we were just in time to see Handforth pushing back

his sleeves with the evident object of improving upon his first fistic endeavour—not that this needed any improvement.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood was on the floor—holding both hands to his face, and moaning to himself. He appeared to be in a state of considerable agony, and he was dusty and somewhat rumped.

"Get up, you cad, and I'll knock you down again!" said Handforth invitingly. "Are you going to get up, or shall I yank you up?"

"Stop that, Handy!" I exclaimed sharply.

Handforth turned, glaring.

"Who told you to interfere?" he roared. "I just caught this rotter red-handed, and I'm going to teach him a lesson that he won't forget in a hurry! Talking against his host! The sneaking worm!"

"If you want to give Fullwood a hiding, wait until to-morrow," I interrupted. "It'll keep until then, Handy. Don't cause a commotion to-night—it wouldn't look at all well. And what's Fullwood been doing, anyhow?"

"He's been acting the cad, as usual," replied Handforth hotly. "Not three minutes ago I caught him talking to Merrell, and he was saying that Dorrie's a fool for being friendly with Mr. Lee, and that when the next term starts both Mr. Lee and the Head will be sacked! Do you think I'm going to listen to that kind of talk?"

"Who asked you to listen?" snarled Fullwood, getting to his feet. "You—you spyin' beast! I didn't say anythin' of the sort—I was only jokin'. You come sneakin' up like a shadow——"

We were obliged to seize Handforth firmly, or he would have committed a further assault on the spot. Fullwood pulled himself straight, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. He gave us his old bitter, contemptuous glance of hatred. Christmas-time made no difference to him. A leopard can't change his spots!

"Lemme go, you rotters!" gasped Handforth, struggling. "I want to——"

"Smash him—eh?" I broke in. "Well, you're not going to—although he deserves it. Can't you realise, old son, that it would be bad form to start a fight while you're a guest in Dorrie's house? And on Christmas night, too!"

"Shockin'!" said Tregellis-West, horrified.

Handforth grunted.

"Well, what shall we do?" he demanded, with the air of one who puts a poser. "Tell me that! We can't play games—we can't yell about the place until to-morrow. A chap must do something!"

"Well, we can probably improve on nose-punching as a time-killing occupation," I observed. "Strictly speaking, this party doesn't start until to-morrow, and then we shall have so much fun and enjoyment that it'll easily make up for a quiet Sunday evening. We want something that'll occupy us."

"Rather difficult to think of," said Pitt. "We might go to one of the empty reception rooms and write some copy for the next number of the magazine——"

"Don't you reckon you've done enough writing for once?" interrupted Watson. "That giddy play of yours in the Christmas number, ought to last you for a bit——"

"By Jove!" interrupted Jack Grey. "I've got a good idea—a regular brain wave, in fact! Why shouldn't we produce that play?"

"Eh?"

"Produce it!" went on Jack. "The chief characters in it are Handforth and Nipper and Tregellis-West. They're all here—they can play their own parts as easy as anything! And it would be rather good to produce it to-morrow evening!"

Handforth regarded Grey witheringly. "You poor fathead!" he said, in a pitying voice. "Do you think we could learn the parts by to-morrow evening? Do you think——"

"Easy!" I interjected. "It's a good wheeze, Handy. Why shouldn't we produce that play, as Jack says? There's no reason why we should rush it through for to-morrow evening, but it could easily be done if we wanted it. The play's only a short one, and all the parts are easy. The members of the cast only need to read up their parts, and a couple of rehearsals will be ample. I think we ought to go into this properly."

"But is the play really worth producing?" asked Handforth.

"You—you ass!" said Pitt, glaring. "Of course it's worth producing! Didn't I write it?"

"That's why I'm asking!" said Handforth calmly. "Now, I had an idea for a play——"

"You're welcome to it!" I broke in. "One play's all we need, Handy, and yours can lay in store for a bit. I expect it's about Black Jack the Highwayman, or Crossbones Ned, the gory pirate! And we can't produce costume pieces at a day's notice. This little thing of Pitt's is easy—no special scenery, no special effects, and no special clothing."

"That's the idea!" said Pitt. "I'll be the producer and stage-manager. You chaps can play your parts easily enough, because you're the characters in the play——"

"Wait a minute!" I grinned. "There's a chance here to provide a novelty. I'll play the part of Handforth, Tregellis-West can be himself, and Handforth can play me. That ought to provide some fun!"

"But it's a serious play!" objected Pitt. "You don't want to muck it up!"

"My dear chap, it's a Christmas party, and if there's a bit of humour in the play, all the better. And it'll be rather good to see Handy portraying me on the stage! And you can bet your boots that I'll get Handy's character off true to life!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Right-ho!" said Handforth. "I'm game."

And, without any further argument, it was decided.

CHAPTER III.

NOT ACCORDING TO REHEARSALS!



HANDFORTH shivered. "My hat! What a gale!" he exclaimed. "It's getting worse every minute, by George! Good thing we found some shelter——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "Who told you to say 'By George'? That's not in your part, you ass! I'm supposed to be saying that, and I'm not in the habit of using 'By George!' as an expression."

"Oh, don't quibble!" said Handforth. "As soon as ever we start rehearsing all you can do is to interrupt!"

It was Boxing Day, and there were six of us in one of the smaller reception-rooms. We were, in fact, rehearsing "The Secret of Mill Cottage," in readiness for the evening, for we had decided to present it that night, after all. The

parts were only small, and we had put in some good practice the previous evening and during the morning. Pitt, as producer, had been driving us pretty hard.

Nevertheless, we had had plenty of time to enjoy ourselves in other ways during the day. It was now getting on for teatime. Dorrie's party was a huge success, and all the guests were enjoying themselves immensely. To-day had been one long round of joking and laughter and good fellowship.

But the evening promised to beat everything. A tremendous programme had been mapped out. There would be uproarious parlour games, singing, dancing, and feasting. And, as an interlude, Pitt's little playlet was to be presented about midway through the evening.

In all probability, the production would have been postponed until the next day, but snow had been falling rather heavily, and most of us had been prevented from going out. Had the weather been fine and keen, we should probably have been skating all the morning.

Being compelled to remain indoors, however, the six of us chosen for the characters in the play took our various parts and learnt them off by heart. In the meantime, Reginald Pitt was enthusiastically making active preparations for the evening. Dorrie entered into it with equal spirit, and he placed half a dozen men-servants at Pitt's disposal.

And wonders were performed. In the big baronial hall an excellent stage was rigged up, with curtains, footlights, and everything complete. Chairs were provided for the audience, and everything made ready. The scene was set exactly according to Pitt's description in the play.

"If we're goin' to do the thing at all, we'll do it properly," said Lord Dorrimore. "I reckon this little play will go off splendidly. And it'll provide a change, too. Anyhow, my sons, you won't have to complain of the audience. There'll be a packed house, by gad! And we'll have an orchestra to play an overture and to serve up incidental music!"

Dorrie had already engaged a company of musicians to provide the music for the dancing, and it was arranged that this orchestra should be in attendance in the "theatre." If everything went off well, the whole thing would be a huge success.

And now, in the quiet hour before tea, we were going through a first rehearsal

in the privacy of one of the smaller rooms. Handforth would persist in acting himself, although he was supposed to be me. For the life of him, he couldn't get out of his own character. But, as Pitt pointed out, this would probably be humorous.

And Handforth made a tremendous fuss because he said that I was taking him off, instead of portraying him. We were beginning to think that it would have been far better if we had left Handforth out of it altogether.

The cast was an unusual one, and it was arranged like this:

Nipper, Edward Oswald Handforth; Edward Oswald Handforth, Nipper; Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Himself; Mrs. Willis, Walter Church; James Willis (her son), Bob Christine; The Stranger, Cecil De Valerie.

All the characters in the play were being acted by juniors. Church was shaping very well as Mrs. Willis, and it seemed likely that he would acquit himself well when it came to the actual performance.

"Go ahead! We shall never get the rehearsal over if we keep having these interruptions," said Grey. "I'm supposed to be prompter, and I've got to see that you chaps are word-perfect in your parts. Now, then, Montie, 'Shelter' is your cue. Go ahead with your lines."

"Certainly, old fellow," said Sir Montie. "Begad! Let me see. Dear old boys, we are intrudin'—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We can use this room—"

"You fathead!" I roared. "Montie's saying his lines!"

"We are intrudin'!" repeated Tregellis-West, glancing severely at Handforth. "This is frightfully nervy of us—it is, really! We had no right to enter without bein' invited."

"Rats!" I said, stalking forward, and speaking in an exact imitation of Handforth's tones. "What else could we do? We hammered and hammered, and nobody came, so we walked in—"

"You insulting rotter!" bellowed Handforth explosively.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is that supposed to be me?" hooted Handforth.

"Yes, by Jingo! And it's exactly like you, too!" chuckled Grey. "How on earth Nipper does it is beyond me! He's got you off to a 'T,' Handy!"

"Well, if Nipper's going on the stage like that, I've finished!" said Handforth flatly. "It's an insult—a libel! Just as if I roar like a bull——"

"Of course, you're speaking softly now, ain't you?" asked Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you want a thick ear, Walter Church, you'd better say so!" bellowed Handforth loudly. "I'm not going to be libelled——"

"Oh, dry up, and let's get on!" sighed Jack Grey.

After a bit of trouble, we were allowed to proceed. Handforth seemed highly offended by my performance, yet I was doing my best to enter into the character I had to play. I began to think it would have been better to have left things in their proper order. However, the result would probably be worth the trouble, so we didn't mind.

We got through the rehearsal with complete satisfaction, and decided that one more run through would be enough. Of course, it mustn't be supposed that we had got to this stage easily. We had put in hours and hours of hard work.

Somehow, I had a feeling that there would be some disasters during the public performance. Handforth would never get through the play without doing something wrong. But, if it was turned from a drama into a farce, it would be an improvement, for laughter was what we needed to make everybody feel happy.

During the early part of the evening dancing was in full swing. But those of us who were connected with the play had other things to think about. We had the big hall to ourselves, and we had a full-dress rehearsal, while Pitt managed all the effects, "off," and saw to the final arrangements. To my surprise, Handforth went through his part without a hitch, and my hopes began to rise. The play would probably be a big success, after all.

The time fixed for the show was nine-thirty, and soon after nine the audience began to assemble. All the guests were eager to be present; there would not be a single absentee. Dr. Malcolm Stafford, of course, would remain away. But I hardly regarded him as a guest, since we had seen nothing of him since his arrival. Nelson Lee promised to be in the front row, next to Dorrie.

Considering that the whole thing was a spur-of-the-moment plan, the prelimi-



Nelson Lee and Dorrie succeeded in steering the Head to the privacy of his bedroom. (See page 20.)

nary details went off surprisingly well. The audience filed into their places, laughing, chatting, and joking. The bulk of the juniors expected to see an awful mix-up. They couldn't believe that the play would be presented properly, and they were rather surprised to find the big hall looking so well-prepared.

Everything was correct. The orchestra was curtained off close against the stage, and was providing soft, dreamy music, which did not interfere with conversation. Shaded lights illuminated the temporary auditorium, and the stage was concealed by big plush curtains.

"Think it'll go off all right, young 'un?" inquired Dorrie.

"It ought to be a huge success," I replied. "The play is not at all bad, considering that it was written by Pitt, and that it's his first effort at anything of the kind. And you've fixed up the

stage so jolly well, Dorrie, that the scenic effects are wonderful. How did you manage about the scenery?"

"Oh, we've had amateur theatricals here before!" laughed Lord Dorrimore. "The scenery doesn't exactly fit the sitting-room of a cottage, but that won't be noticed much. We did our best, anyhow. And now it's up to you fellows to provide the acting. Let's hope you get through all right."

"Well, I'll answer for myself and most of the others. Handforth knows his part all right, but he's liable to get excited."

I was called away just then by Pitt, who wanted to discuss a few stage details with me, and when I peeped round the curtain, ten minutes later, I found the audience all ready in their places, eagerly waiting for the curtain to rise.

"You chaps ready?" I asked, turning to the other performers.

"Rather!" said Pitt. "We can start the show within two minutes now. Look alive, Church. You'd better get to your place. Where's Christine? He's got to be ready before the curtain rises. Oh, there you are! Come on, Christy! Curtain's just going up!"

At last everything was prepared. The footlights were switched on, and we could hear a low murmur of expectancy from the audience. The orchestra was just finishing the overture.

According to the play, the curtain rose with the stage empty, and with a loud knocking upon one of the doors—the door at the back of the stage, which was supposed to lead out into the open air.

"All ready?" murmured Reginald Pitt. "Right!"

He gave the word to the stage-hands—some of Dorrie's menservants—and the curtain was raised. A comfortably-furnished cottage sitting-room was revealed to the audience, with a cheerful fire burning in the grate—it was really composed of electric-light bulbs, coloured red—and a lamp, standing upon a central table.

Rap-rap-rap! Rap-rap-rap!

A series of sharp knocks sounded upon the door. Then, after a short pause, the door opened. Three figures entered, muffled up in overcoats, with upturned collars. They were Tregellis-West, Handforth, and myself.

"By George! What a gale—I mean, my hat! What a gale!" exclaimed Handforth, without any attempt to dis-

guise his usual tones. "It's getting worse every minute. Good thing we found some shelter!"

We approached the centre of the stage, and looked round, Handforth peering about as though he were a farcical villain in a film comedy. All his actions were exaggerated. And, as we removed our mufflers, the audience tittered delightedly. Handforth, of course, was supposed to be me, and I was supposed to be him. This lent an added novelty to the entertainment.

Sir Montie coughed, and hesitated.

"Begad!" he murmured. "I really don't remember——"

"Dear old boys, we are intrudin'——" came a hoarse whisper from the wings.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience roared, and Sir Montie started.

"Really, Grey, dear boy, there's no need to yell!" he protested. "Now, let me see. Dear old boys, we are intrudin'. This is frightfully nervy of us—it is, really! We had no right to enter without being invited!"

"Rats!" I roared. "What else could we do?"

I was unable to proceed with my lines at the moment, for the audience was rocking. And this was supposed to be quite a serious opening. Watson afterwards told me that my voice was exactly like Handforth's—only more so—and that I struck an attitude which was absolutely characteristic of Edward Oswald. And the audience found it utterly impossible to remain quiet.

Handforth glared at me ferociously.

"You silly fathead!" he hissed, in a whisper that could be heard all over the auditorium. "Is that supposed to be like me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We hammered and hammered and nobody came, so we walked in!" I bellowed, proceeding with my lines. "Nice and cosy, anyhow. That fire looks ripping, doesn't it? By George! I can do with a warm-up!"

The audience howled, Handforth continued to glare, and we removed our overcoats, and then collected round the fire, pretending to warm our hands. The play had opened disastrously, considering that it was supposed to be serious, for the audience had been grinning and laughing all the time.

Handforth suddenly started, turned red, and looked anxiously into the wings.

"Well—well—well——" he mumbled confusedly.

"We're not doing any harm!" came the hoarse voice of the prompter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're doing the giddy play some harm!" grinned Bob Christine audibly. "Go ahead, you asses! Fancy drying up in the first minute!"

A number of fellows commenced clapping loudly, and Handforth stalked forward and instinctively pushed up his sleeves!

"You wait until we've finished!" he bellowed. "By George, I'll show you——"

"Oh, you hopeless duffer!" I hissed. "Stick to your lines!"

Handforth turned, and regarded me witheringly.

"Do you think I'm going to be laughed at?" he demanded tartly.

"They're jealous, that's what it is—jealous, just because they can see me in the giddy limelight! Er—er——"

Well, we're not doing any harm. Somebody's bound to come in in a minute, and then we can explain things. What an ass you were, Handy, to make us lose that train!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth spoke these lines aggressively, and he glared at me with more ferocity than ever. I looked indignant.

"Me!" I exclaimed. "Why, you babbling fathead, it wasn't my fault——"

"Who's a babbling fathead?" snorted Handforth, forgetting all about the play.

He simply could not realise that I was playing his part, and his cue didn't really come in until I had said a lot more. I groaned inwardly, realising that it would be almost hopeless to carry the play to any kind of conclusion if Handforth kept interrupting, and adding to the original script.

A yell from the audience seemed to bring him slightly to his senses, and he shrugged his shoulders and walked away, leaving me in the centre of the stage. This was awkward, since I was supposed to be addressing him. However, all I could do was to continue with my lines.

"Your watch was slow!" I said. "Walking home at any ordinary time

wouldn't be so bad, but this snowstorm swooped down—— Great Scott! What on earth——"

I broke off abruptly, startled.

"Help!" gasped Handforth. "The whole show's falling down! Great pip! I—I only just leaned—— Look out, you fatheads!"

Disaster came, swift and dramatic. No other human being on earth would have forgotten himself as Handforth did. After leaving me in the centre of the stage, he walked straight to one of the walls—which certainly looked solid—and unceremoniously leaned against it. And when Handforth leaned against anything he never did it gently. The flimsy scenery gave an ominous shake and a crack; then, before Handforth could realise it, the whole wall commenced falling inwards on the top of him. That chunk of scenery had become displaced, and the result was appalling.

Before Handforth could dodge or get out of the way, the wall of the cottage collapsed upon him. A great slab of canvas scenery sagged down, creaking in every joint. Sir Montie and I had just managed to get clear, but Handforth was buried amid the debris.

"Curtain!" I gasped. "Oh, my goodness! Curtain!"

The temporary stage hands rose to the occasion, and the curtain was hastily lowered. The audience by this time was utterly helpless. They simply lay back in their seats, gasping and rocking. Even Nelson Lee was so overcome that there were tears in his eyes.

"Rippin', by gad!" gasped Dorrie, when he could speak. "What do you think, Lee, old man? Did you ever see such a scream in your life? Handforth could make a fortune as a comedian!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove fellows simply howled themselves into hysterics. All the other members of the audience were panting for breath, and quite a number of them rose in their places, believing that the play would now be abandoned.

But Reginald Pitt suddenly appeared before the curtain.

"Ladies and gentlemen, kindly keep your seats!" he shouted. "Owing to an unfortunate accident, there has been a slight mishap, but the performance will be resumed almost at once. I wish to apologise for Handforth——"

"Don't!" chuckled Dorrie. "He's the best of the lot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

While the scenery was being reset, Handforth received several severe lectures from the author, the producer, the prompter, and all the other members of the cast. It was like pouring water on a duck's back—it had no effect.

"I'm going to play the giddy part as I like, and you can all go and eat eoke!" said Handforth politely. "The play was written wrong from the very beginning—that's what the trouble is. Now, if I'd written it——"

"It wouldn't have been produced at all!" I put in. "You'd have made about twenty-five scenes, two hundred characters, and all sorts of other impossibilities. Pitt wrote this playlet so that anybody could produce it with practically no expense. For goodness' sake don't mess it up again!"

Handforth wanted to argue, but Pitt announced that the curtain was ready to rise. It did so a minute later, and the play proceeded.

It seemed that our words had had some little effect, for Handforth was more careful now, and he stuck to his lines—at least, until that part in the play where we were supposed to hear something, and all remained in listening attitudes. I was beginning to see that our reversal of the two parts would probably lead to further trouble. Handforth would persist in thinking that I was addressing him personally.

After standing quite still for a few seconds, I looked round.

"Great Scott! What can it be?" I exclaimed, in Handy's tones.

"Don't get scared!" said Handforth, keeping to his lines.

"You ass! Who's scared?" I shouted hotly. "If you want your nose punched——"

Handforth was supposed to break in and tell me not to "start now!" Instead of that, he fired up on the instant.

"You can punch my nose if you like!" he bellowed. "By George, I'd like to see you do it!"

"Stick to your part, dummy!" I hissed.

"Who's a dummy?" snorted Handforth. "I'm fed up with this! I'll

jolly well show you whether you can punch my nose. Try this!"

He lunged forward, and I dodged just in the nick of time. Handforth was unable to pull himself up in time, and he gave a startled yell as he found himself careering towards the footlights. He tried to check himself, caught his foot in a ruck in the carpet, and then plunged headlong over the footlights into the orchestra.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Give a clap for the chief comedian!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The audience rocked afresh, and Handforth just managed to extricate himself from the startled musicians. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore went to his assistance; but, fortunately, he was quite unhurt. It took a great deal to injure the muscular Edward Oswald.

"It was all Nipper's fault!" he growled. "Dodging away like that, just as I was going for him!"

"Dear old boys, I think we'd better give it up!" observed Sir Montie.

"No, no!" roared the audience. "It's great! Carry on!"

"Go it, Handy!"

Handforth, thus encouraged, climbed back upon the stage, and after a few minutes we were able to resume. And it was here that the part came where I opened the big travelling-trunk and found Mrs. Willis inside. Mrs. Willis was acted by Church, and Church was not feeling extremely pleased, for he had been sardined into the trunk about double the length of time he had bargained for, and he was hot and perspiring.

But, in spite of this, he managed to speak his lines without a fault, and the play proceeded fairly well.

Then came the part where Mrs. Willis had to swoon off, and where she was caught by me—or, rather, by Handforth, since he was playing my character. Church did the faint well; he was, in fact, putting up a very creditable performance. But when he fell into Handforth's arms, the latter grabbed him as though they were about to commence a wrestling match.

"Not so tight, you fathead!" whispered Church, with a gasp.

"Shut up—you're supposed to be in

a faint!" said Handforth. "Don't mess the show up—"

"You're the one who's messing it up!" breathed Church indignantly.

Handforth dropped Mrs. Willis abruptly, and pushed up his sleeves. Church, being unprepared, fell to the stage with a thud. He picked himself up, probably forgetting that he was supposed to be in a faint, red and flustered.

"I'm messing the play up, am I?" roared Handforth. "All right, you rotter! Take that!"

Biff!

Handforth's fist shot out, and it went straight into Mrs. Willis's face. The poor old lady gave a howl, and went over backwards, her arms flying wide, her shawl whizzing into the air, and her skirts billowing. Up till this moment Church had looked the part to the life.

But under no circumstances could he now be taken for an elderly lady in a fainting fit. He sat on the floor, holding his nose and moaning. His white wig was all on one side, and he looked too funny for words.

If the audience had yelled with laughter before, they now fairly shook the old rafters. Handforth was to blame again. He couldn't seem to realise that it was not allowable for him to put extra "business" into his part.

Church managed to recover himself, and fainted away again. And then the play went on with a fair measure of success. But the audience had given up expecting to see anything dramatic now. They had laughed as they had never laughed before, and, as Bob Christine put it afterwards, Charlie Chaplin simply wasn't in it compared to the one and only Handforth.

But, if there was no hint of drama here, something of a dramatic nature was taking place not far off—where only peace and quietness could reasonably be expected. But this was real drama—not merely acting!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN IN THE CLOAK!



DR. MALCOLM STAFFORD sat reading before the big log fire in Lord Dorri-

more's well-appointed library. The Headmaster of St. Frank's was very comfortable, and well contented in mind. He was reading an interesting book, Dorrie's cigars were superb, and Dorrie's wine was perfection.

Under the circumstances, therefore, it was hardly surprising that Dr. Stafford was quietly enjoying himself. Ever since he had arrived he had been peaceful and at rest, and he had benefited greatly in health. Colour had come back to his cheeks, he was more robust, and the weight of worry had been lifted from his mind. He felt a different man.

Since he had left St. Frank's, to spend the Christmas vacation at Dorri-more Hall, he had been completely removed from the influence of Mr. Hugh Trenton. In other words, the scheming science-master had been unable to dope Dr. Stafford with his terrible drug.

And the Head was feeling quite himself again. He was brisk, alert, kindly and considerate. He was in every sense an honourable English gentleman; and he was more than thankful to Nelson Lee for having rescued him from those terrifying ordeals.

Even now the Head didn't know how they had been caused, for Nelson Lee had not let him into any of his secrets. Dr. Stafford merely knew that he had to thank Nelson Lee for his present comfort and peace. He was grateful to Dorrie, too—more grateful than he could say.

His one regret was that he should be compelled to remain here in a state almost bordering on seclusion. Yet it was the best. He did not want to act as a damper to the spirits of the party. Even under the best of circumstances the Headmaster's presence would not be calculated to set the junior guests at ease; but, after the recent happenings at St. Frank's, it was most essential that the Head should remain away from the boys, for the Head was exceedingly unpopular just now, and would cer-

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2:

tainly remain unpopular until Nelson Lee was in a position to make the whole truth public.

However, Dr. Stafford was quite content to be under Dorrie's roof, and to spend his Christmas quietly and unobtrusively. He enjoyed Nelson Lee's society at intervals during the day; and sometimes Dorrie would come and chat with him, and he had already got quite intimate with Lord Westbrooke.

Just at present the Head was supremely comfortable. Seated in front of the blazing log fire, in an easy-chair, reading was particularly delightful. The cigar he was smoking had a wonderful aroma, and the glass of wine at his elbow was delicious to sip—the Head was very moderate, and took but little.

Outside, the frost was as keen as ever. Snow had ceased falling, but the northerly wind was whistling round the angles of the old mansion, and it had brought thick clouds up with it. The evening was very dark.

The library was not brilliantly illuminated. The only light was that cast by a table electric standard, which was provided with a red shade. It cast down a circle of glowing light, and the Head was reading within this little patch. All other parts of the room were in a state of gloom.

Now and again the Head would hear a faint echo of the laughter in the great hall, and once or twice he smiled rather regretfully to himself. It would have pleased him to be there among all the young folks.

The Head was so comfortable, in fact, that after a while he found the book slipping from between his fingers. His cigar being finished, he tossed the stump into the fire, and lay back among the cushions. And he dozed—not soundly, but he certainly did sleep for short periods.

And during one of these periods a strange thing took place.

A shadow appeared from behind the thick plush curtains which were hung in front of the French windows. It moved so noiselessly and so stealthily that any watcher might have been excused in believing that his eyes were deceiving him.

But there was no deception about this. The shadow came out from behind the curtains, and resolved itself into the figure of a man. He crouched there,

attired in a heavy black cloak. His face was not distinguishable in the gloom. He wore a hat, the wide brim of which was pulled down over his eyes.

Inch by inch he edged his way towards Dr. Stafford's chair—towards the back of it. So, even if the Head had suddenly awakened, he would have seen nothing suspicious. He could certainly hear nothing, for this mysterious intruder made no sound.

At last the cloaked figure was just behind Dr. Stafford's chair. Here he paused while he silently uncorked a tiny phial. Only the soft crackling of the fire and the steady breathing of the Head, could be heard in the apartment.

Into the circle of light cast by the electric lamp, came a hand. It was the hand of the man in the cloak. The little phial was gripped firmly between the mysterious one's fingers. It hovered over the wine-glass.

Then, slowly, the phial was upturned.

Nothing happened during the first second or two. But then a drop of some dark liquid fell with a tiny splash into the wine. It was followed by a second drop and a third drop.

Then the phial was withdrawn.

The cloaked figure moved away—still with the stealthiness of a shadow. The plush curtains moved slightly, but that was all. And when the Head aroused himself five minutes later he was totally ignorant of the fact that his seclusion had been disturbed.

"Dear me! This won't do!" murmured the Head, sitting forward and throwing another log upon the fire. It's early yet, and I mustn't go off to sleep. Really, these cigars of Dorrimore's are a great temptation."

He helped himself to another from the open box on the table, carefully clipped the end off, lit it, and smoked in quiet enjoyment for a few minutes. Then he lifted the glass of wine, took a sip, and then almost drained the glass.

"Must drive this ridiculous sleep away somehow," he murmured.

He picked up his book, found his place, and resumed his reading. All was well for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then Dr. Stafford shifted uneasily once or twice. The fire crackled unusually loudly, and he gave a sudden kick at the log. A startled expression entered his eyes.

"Good gracious! What is this?" he muttered. "Is it possible that— No,

no! That cannot be! Here, under Lord Dorrimore's roof, such an event is out of the question!"

A startling suspicion had come into Dr. Stafford's mind. Although he hated to acknowledge it, even to himself, he could feel the same symptoms of old gripping him. He was irritable, and possessed an overpowering inclination to commit an act of violence. This was indicated in the way he had kicked at the log.

A moment later he flung his cigar into the fire with a savage snarl. The sound surprised him, and he rose to his feet with his eyes staring hard, and with his mouth firmly set.

"Yes, by Heaven, it is true!" he muttered thickly. "But I must keep myself under control—at all costs I must remain in this room!"

Only for a few minutes did the Head try to keep himself in. And then all desire to do so left him. The change which had come about in such a short space of time was appalling.

The kindly expression had left his face, and his mouth was drawn into a thin, cruel line, his eyes glittered evilly, and his whole attitude was different. He crouched, rather than stood, like some wild beast getting ready to strike.

And then, as he stood quite still, there came into the library the faint and far-away echo of laughter from the big central hall. The sound acted like a spur to this travesty of Dr. Stafford.

With a growling exclamation he went to the door, flung it open, and then he proceeded along the wide corridor. He progressed at a run which was almost a series of jumps—undignified, animal-like, and calculated to scare anybody who saw him. There was something uncanny about the Head's appearance.

The sound of laughter grew louder as he neared the hall. Then, a minute later, he burst in. The play was still proceeding, and the audience had already decided that it was better than any pantomime. The play itself was all right, but Handforth's treatment of it was so screamingly funny that the whole scheme of the piece was lost sight of.

Dr. Stafford stood there in the doorway for a moment, and a wild, all consuming rage surged up within him. The very sight of these people enjoying themselves was enough to set him going. But the fact that the majority of them were

juniors—members of the St. Frank's Remove—added evil fires to his rage.

"You infernal young hounds!" he shouted harshly. "Stop this at once! Do you hear me? Stop this nonsense on the instant!"

The effect of his entrance was like the explosion of a bomb.

The play was forgotten, and every member of the audience turned and stared at this wild-looking object that had just entered. On the stage, I beheld the Headmaster with a certain feeling of alarm. I knew, on the instant, that he was suffering from another dose of that mysterious drug.

Nelson and Dorrie, in the front row, jumped up. The gov'nor was frowning with mingled astonishment and annoyance. Lord Dorrimore was frankly amazed.

"By gad!" he exclaimed. "What on earth——"

"I want your help, Dorrie—at once!" interrupted Lee. "That demon has been at work again! Quick! We've got to get Dr. Stafford out of this!"

But the Head was running forward, and the juniors sitting on either side scattered like chaff before the wind. Confusion reigned. One or two of the guests happened to get into the Head's way. He threw them aside without ceremony, and with savage violence. Then he reached the stage, and glared fiercely up into our faces.

"You young brats!" he roared. "You shall pay for this! Upon my soul! Am I to be defied and ignored——"

"Here, steady on, sir! We're in the middle of a play!" said Handforth indignantly.

The Head reached forward, grasped a music stand belonging to the orchestra, and hurled it at Handforth. The latter only just dodged in time, and the metal stand clattered to the stage. By this time Pitt and a number of other fellows had crowded round the Head. They desired to calm him, but their very nearness only enraged him the more.

With a snarl like a maniac he seized Pitt, and flung him to the floor. He was a terrible sight by now—his face distorted and horrible, his eyes protruding and wild. The play was absolutely finished, for it could never proceed after this. It had been left for Dr. Stafford to provide the sensation of the evening.

Nelson-Lee and Lord Dorrimore seized the Head, and held him. But he

struggled fiercely—frantically. Every trace of reserve had long since left him.

"Come, Dr. Stafford, this won't do!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "Pull yourself together! Control yourself, sir!"

But even Lee's compelling voice had no effect during the first moments. The Head struggled like a madman—kicking, screaming, and almost foaming at the mouth. The guests stood watching in consternation and dismay. The juniors were silent with awe; Lord Westbrooke and Lady Helen Tregellis-West and two or three more grown-ups stood in a group, somewhat pale and shaken; the girls had already fled out of the hall.

The Head, in spite of his frenzy, was no match for Nelson Lee and Dorrie, and after his first access of rage was over, they succeeded in steering him out, and half-forcing him to his own bedroom.

Turmoil was left behind. As soon as the Head was gone, the juniors commenced shouting excitedly. I came down from the stage and joined the rest, and I noticed that Armstrong and Co. were flushed with excitement and triumph.

"What did I tell you!" Armstrong was shouting. "Even here, under his host's roof, the Head acts like a bully and a beast! We're not standing him any more at St. Frank's! He's got to be sacked, or we don't go back!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Down with the Head!"

The Rebels gloated openly. Most of the other fellows were rather disgusted with them, for, to say the least, it was an exhibition of very bad form to express their feelings so vehemently.

"Friends and comrades, you have just witnessed a scene which will be repeated time after time at St. Frank's—if we allow the Head to rule over us next term!" exclaimed Timothy Tucker excitedly. "Take warning, comrades, and rally round when the appointed time comes. Remember! The Brotherhood of the Free——"

"Dry up, you rotter!" shouted Bob Christine angrily.

"Really, my dear sir——"

"And all the rest of you had better go easy!" went on Christine. "You seem to forget you're guests under Lord Dorrimore's roof. When you get back to St. Frank's you can express your feelings as you like; but there's no need to reveal your low breeding here!"

Armstrong glared.

"Why, you insulting beast——" he began.

It seemed as though there would be an open quarrel, but Lady Helen Tregellis-West tactfully went among the juniors and with soft words poured oil over the troubled waters. For the time being peace was restored.

In the library, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were looking grave and serious. They had just entered, after leaving Dr. Stafford in his own bedroom. Lee was very grim, and Dorrie puzzled.

"He'll be all right now," the famous detective was saying. "The frenzy is over, Dorrie, and he'll go off into a sound sleep, and awaken quite himself, but rather weak and nervous."

Lord Dorrimore shook his head.

"The old boy gave me quite a turn, by gad!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think it possible that such a change could come about in a human being. It was frightful, Lee, old man!"

"You can now realise, in a small degree, what I have been fighting against," said Nelson Lee. "I have told you practically everything, Dorrie, and it is perfectly clear that Trenton must have got at Dr. Stafford in some way. I was unwise to attend that play. I should have remained here with the Head. You see, in the first unguarded moment the enemy has acted."

"But, my dear man, how could the enemy have acted?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "These kind of things are beyond my understandin'. My brain ain't like yours, you know, an' I can't grasp things. How do you reckon the old chap got the germ into him?"

"There is no germ, Dorrie—only a drug."

"Well, it's the same thing——"

"Have your own way!" smiled Lee.

"Now, we know that Dr. Stafford was left in this room. First of all we'll have a look at the window. It was locked earlier in the evening—I made sure of that."

Nelson Lee went across to the window, and flung the curtains aside. The library was now ablaze with light. The French windows were closed, and securely locked—but not bolted.

"Quite a simple lock, and Trenton no doubt gained admittance by means of a skeleton key," said Nelson Lee. "Being a latch lock, the keyhole was quite free. Let's have a look outside."

(Continued on page 21)

GRAND COMPLETE CHRISTMAS PLAY!

By **REGINALD PITT.**

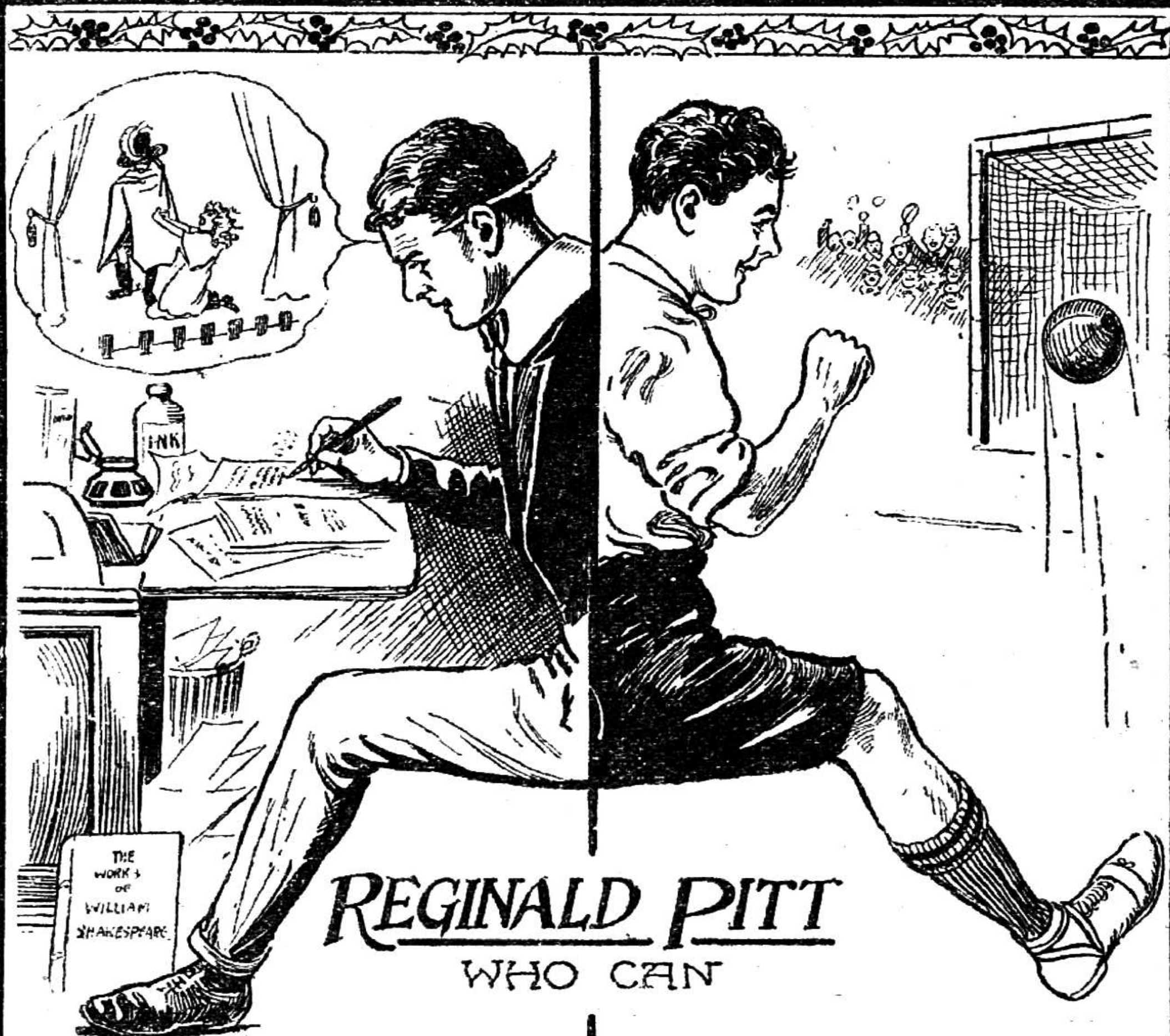
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NIPPER'S MAGAZINE

No. 5.

THE JOURNAL OF THE REMOVE OF ST. FRANK'S
Edited By Nipper.

Dec. 24.
1921.



REGINALD PITT

WHO CAN

PLAYWRIGHT
WITH THE
PEN

and

PLAY RIGHT
WITH THE
BALL.

He's written our Xmas Play

Inside.

NIPPER'S MAGAZINE

THE EDITOR'S DEN

ENTRANCE

EXIT

EDITOR

EDITORIAL OFFICE,

Study C, Ancient House,

St. Frank's College.

Dear Old Beans,—This, as you can see from our cover, is the Christmas Number. And, seeing that it is a special issue, so to speak, the whole character of the paper is altered—but only for this one occasion. You will miss our regular features such as "Topical Mixture," the serial, alleged poetry, and so forth. These items have been excluded for the sole and simple reason that we had no room for them. Needless to say, they will appear before you again, hale and hearty, in the next issue of this journal.

But I was in a rather peculiar position. You see, Reginald Pitt turned in a one-act play—which, under ordinary circumstances, would be miles too long for inclusion in the Magazine—since it occupies practically the whole issue, with no room left for anything else.

At first I decided flatly that the play couldn't be published. But it seemed a fairly decent effort—I will leave you to judge for yourselves what the play is actually like—and I realised that some of you fellows might get up Christmas parties at home, with amateur theatricals, and all that sort of thing. Such a play as this would come in very handy.

Accordingly, after thought and consideration, I came to the conclusion that I couldn't do better than publish "The Secret of Hill Cottage" in the Christmas Number. So here it is. If any of you want to produce the play, you are quite at liberty to do so—and this should be a simple matter.

It was written with the special object of making production extremely easy. There is only one scene, so there needn't be any complications about stage effects, etc. The cast is comparatively small, and any intelligent fellows can act the parts with ease. You'll notice that Handforth and Tregellis-West and I are three of the principal characters in the play. It ought to be interesting for some of you fellows to impersonate us! The play can be staged with practically no expense, since there are no costumes or effects of any kind to hamper you. So, if there are any budding actors knocking about, you can get busy and amuse yourselves.

This is a time of good cheer and happy hours, and I wish you all as happy a Christmas as you can possibly have. Some may not be so fortunate as others, but try your best to be content with your lot. Enjoyment doesn't come from envying others of us who are more happily situated. Contentment brings the finest happiness of all.

I hope that the New Year will bring you all brightness and good cheer, and I further hope that 1922 will be prosperous and peaceful—and that it will see our little magazine firmly and finally established as a successful journal.

And so, once again—a hearty, merry Christmas to you all!

NIPPER (Editor).

The Secret of Hill Cottage

By
REGINALD PITT.

CAST OF CHARACTERS :

NIPPER,	} Juniors of St. Frank's.
SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST,	
EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH,	
Mrs. WILLIS, who lives in Hill Cottage.	
JAMES WILLIS, her only son.	
THE STRANGER, who arrives unexpectedly.	

SCENE : *The comfortable sitting-room of Hill Cottage, on the extreme outskirts of the town of Bannington. Time, evening, shortly before Christmas.*

The curtain rises, and the stage is discovered empty. The room is cosy and warm-looking; with a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the central table there is an oil lamp, casting a warm glow. On the left side there is a side-table, with a heavy cloth covering it. At the rear of the stage, to the left, there is a door which leads out into the front garden. At the rear of the stage to the right there is a window, with curtains drawn across. On the right side there is another door, leading to another part of the cottage. IMMEDIATELY the curtain rises there comes the sound of brisk knocking on the door at rear of stage. It is repeated several times, and then the door opens. ENTER Nipper, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and Edward Oswald Handforth. They are attired in heavy overcoats, with the collars turned up, thick mufflers, and woollen gloves. They are smothered in snow. Nipper enters last, and he closes the door with difficulty.

NIPPER: My hat! What a gale! It's getting worse every minute. Good thing we found some shelter.

[They approach centre of stage and look round, removing their mufflers.]

MONTIE: Dear old boys, we are intrudin'. This is frightfully nervy of us—it is, really. Who had no right to enter without bein' invited.

HANDFORTH: Rats! What else could we do? We hammered and hammered, and nobody came, so we walked in. Nice and cosy, anyhow. That fire looks ripping, doesn't it? By George, I can do with a warm up!

[They remove their overcoats and collect round the fire, warming their hands.]

NIPPER: Well, we're not doing any harm. Somebody's bound to come in in a minute, and then we can explain things. What an ass you were, Handy, to make us lose that train!

HANDFORTH (*indignantly*): Me! Why, you babbling fathead, it wasn't my fault! Your watch was slow! Walking home at any ordinary time wouldn't be so bad, but this snowstorm swooped down like a tornado. We simply couldn't fight against it, and we had to find shelter.

NIPPER: Yes, and this is the last cottage in Bannington, and we should have missed it if we hadn't seen the light. We can shelter here until the storm dies down a bit. Pity nobody heard us knocking. I don't feel comfortable, butting in like this.

MONTIE: Begad! Same here, dear old fellow! It's shockin'ly bad form, you know. Hadn't we better go to that door an' call out?

NIPPER: You chaps stay here. I'll make somebody hear.

[He goes to side door on RIGHT, opens it, and calls. The others watch and listen. There is no reply.]

NIPPER: I don't quite like this. I think I'd better have a look round. *[Exit.]*

HANDFORTH: Jolly rummy, I must say! The blessed place seems to be deserted. Yet there's a fire blazing here and everything's as neat and tidy as a new pin. This coal couldn't have been piled on more than ten minutes ago.

MONTIE: I feel frightfully guilty, I do really. We are intrudin' upon the privacy of a perfect stranger. We not only walk in uninvited, but we take our coats off an' make ourselves thoroughly at home. It's a fearful piece of cheek, you know.

HANDFORTH (*holding his hands before the blaze and rubbing them vigorously together*): Any liberty's excusable on an evening like this, old son. It's the fault of these fat-headed people, anyhow, for not answering the door.

[Enter NIPPER, looking puzzled.]

NIPPER: This is about the limit, you fellows!

HANDFORTH: Can't you find anybody?

NIPPER: Not a soul! I've been over the whole place, and it's deserted.

MONTIE: Begad! You surely didn't go upstairs, dear boy?

NIPPER: Yes, I did. There's a kind of kitchen at the back, and a small scullery. I had to use my electric torch, and everything's tidy and clean. In the passage there's a staircase. I called up once or twice, but as I got no reply I hopped up. There are two bedrooms, both neatly furnished and comfortable, but we're the only people in the house.

HANDFORTH: Well, I'm jiggered!

[They stare at one another blankly.]

MONTIE: Dear old boys, there's only one explanation that I can see. Judgin' from various signs—this knittin', for example (*he points to some knitting on the side-table*), I imagine the tenant of the house to be a lady, probably elderly. She must have gone out just before we came along.

NIPPER: That's impossible!

HANDFORTH: How do you make that out?

NIPPER: Why, we came up the garden path from the gate through undisturbed snow. I noticed it particularly. No human being has left this cottage by the front door during the last hour.

HANDFORTH: That's easy! She must have gone out by the back door.

NIPPER: If she did she must be a marvel, because the back door is locked and bolted on the inside. I tell you, my sons, this is a bit of a mystery. An empty cottage, with every indication that it has been occupied within the last ten minutes! And yet there's not a soul to be seen!

HANDFORTH (*in a startled voice*): It's—it's uncanny!

MONTIE: I think we ought to get out, dear fellows. It was all very well to come in out of the storm, but as there's nobody here to give us permission to stay, we ought—

HANDFORTH (*interrupting*): Shssh! What was that?

MONTIE: Begad! You startled me, you frightful ass! I heard nothin'!

NIPPER: Yes, there was a sound. Hold still and listen.

[They are gathered round the fire, and they all remain still in listening attitudes. For a moment there is tense silence. Then comes a shuffling, scraping noise from the back of stage. The boys all look in this direction.]

HANDFORTH: Great scott! What can it be?

NIPPER: Don't get scared!

HANDFORTH (*hotly and loudly*): You ass! Who's scared? If you want your nose punched—

NIPPER: Oh, for goodness' sake don't start now! There's something queer about this place, and I mean to find out the truth. That sound we heard may have been a piece of creeper on the window. By Jove, wait a minute!

[He runs swiftly up the stage to rear, and flings open the lid of a big travelling trunk which stands in front of window. He stares into the trunk, and then turns excitedly.]

NIPPER: Good heavens! Quick, you chaps! There's somebody here—an old lady!

MONTIE: Begad!

[He and HANDFORTH dash to NIPPER. Between them they lift MRS. WILLIS out of the trunk and assist her to the easy chair. She is an elderly lady, neatly dressed. She appears dazed, and stares round in bewildered way.]

MRS. WILLIS: What—what has happened? Oh, dear, my head is going round so!

NIPPER: Some water, quick!

MRS. WILLIS: No, no! I—I am better now. (*Sits forward and stares round.*) Who—who are you? How did you get into my cottage? I seem to remember seeing something by the kitchen door—— (*She breaks off, shivering.*) Oh, who are you?

MONTIE: We crave your pardon, dear old boy—er—I should say dear lady. (*With some confusion.*) This fellow is Nipper, this one is Handforth, an' my name is Tregellis-West. We belong to St. Frank's, an' we were caught in this frightful snowstorm.

NIPPER: Seeing the light in your window, we came for shelter. And as we couldn't get any reply to our knocks, we walked in. If we have intruded, we apologise, but we thought——

MRS. WILLIS: How long have you been here?

NIPPER: Only a few minutes. And it seems we came in at a lucky moment. If you had remained in that trunk much longer you might have suffocated.

HANDFORTH (*bluntly*): Who shoved you in there?

MRS. WILLIS (*uncertain and in a scared way*): It—it was an accident! I was bending over the trunk when I became dizzy, and I suppose I must have fallen in. Will you please go? You must—you must! Oh, please—please go!

[*MRS. WILLIS half turns, and gazes fearfully at door leading to kitchen. Boys regard her wonderingly, and then glance at one another.*]

NIPPER: If we are intruding, we will leave at once.

MRS. WILLIS: Oh, you don't understand! It is impossible for you to stay here! You ought never to have come in! Go—go at once! Please leave me alone! I—I am feeling much better now.

[*The boys don their overcoats and mufflers. Then, with their caps in their hands, they move towards back exit. MRS. WILLIS watches them in a kind of daze.*]

MONTIE: I knew we were intrudin' dear old boys! (*In low voice.*)

NIPPER (*in low voice*): How were we to know, Montie? (*Loudly, turning to MRS. WILLIS.*) Good-night, ma'am! We're sorry fo' having disturbed you——

[*MRS. WILLIS suddenly gives a little cry, and gets out of her chair. Then, swaying dizzily, and with arms outstretched, she goes towards the boys.*]

MRS. WILLIS: Oh, don't go—don't go! I was wrong! I'm afraid to be left alone. I daren't face—— (*She falters, and clings to NIPPER.*) I saw something! A ghost—a ghost—— (*Her voice trails away, and NIPPER catches her.*)

NIPPER: Quick! Lend a hand, you chaps! She's swooned off again! I was half expecting it any minute! The poor old soul was nearly scared out of her wits.

[*They gently lay MRS. WILLIS on couch, and NIPPER covers her with rug. He feels her forehead and her pulse. MONTIE and HANDFORTH stand watching. NIPPER turns to them.*]

NIPPER: It's nothing very serious, so you needn't look alarmed. She'll probably come round within two or three minutes.

MONTIE: What had we better do, dear fellows?

HANDFORTH: Well, we've got to stay here for a bit—that's certain. We can't go away and leave this poor old girl alone. This cottage is miles from help, and the storm's as bad as ever. I wonder what scared her like that?

NIPPER: Nerves, probably. It seems that she lives here alone. And on a wild night like this anybody is liable to get jumpy. But that doesn't explain how she got in that trunk, does it?

MONTIE: Dear boy, she explained that she fell in.

NIPPER (*frowning*): That's only part of the truth, I believe. Even supposing she did fall in, how was the lid closed down afterwards? There seems to be a mystery here, my sons. Her mention of a ghost, for example. She must have seen something that alarmed her.

HANDFORTH: But you searched the house and found nothing unusual. I'm blessed if I can make it out! (*He scratches his head and looks puzzled.*) I think she's a little bit off her rocker, you know!

MONTIE (*protestingly*): Really, dear old fellow!

NIPPER: Well, don't argue about it. We'll see if we can find some tea. I spotted a kettle, and we'll soon have some strong tea on the go. When the old lady recovers we'll give her a cup. It'll do her good.

[The boys remove their overcoats and mufflers again. NIPPER goes to a small sideboard and opens the door. He feels about among an assortment of tins, etc. Then he turns his head towards the others.]

NIPPER: That lamp isn't giving a particularly bright light. See if you can turn it up higher, Handy.

HANDFORTH: Right you are!

[He moves to central table, bumps against it, nearly upsets lamp, and just grabs it in time.]

NIPPER: Clumsy fathead! Be careful!

HANDFORTH (loudly): Who's a clumsy fathead? Look here, if you're asking for a punch on the nose, I'll jolly soon oblige you! If you want the lamp turned up, why can't you do it yourself?

NIPPER (nudging up): Oh, all right!

HANDFORTH: Rot! I'll do it! Who told you to interfere? You're as bad as Church and McClure—always ready to argue. I don't believe in messing about over a thing—I do it at once!

[He bends over lamp, gives the burner a sudden twist, and the lamp immediately goes out. Stage becomes dark, except for the glow from the fireplace.]

HANDFORTH: Great pip! What the dickens—

NIPPER: I didn't tell you to turn it down. I told you to turn it up! Oh, you prize dummy! Just what I might have expected! You've turned it right out!

MONTIE: Begad! I thought I saw—Yes, look! Look, dear old boys! There's somethin' movin' against that side table!

[NIPPER and HANDFORTH gave startled shouts as they turn. In the dimness a form appears from under the side table, which has been covered with a large cloth. The form dashes towards the door at back of stage. But before he can reach it HANDFORTH and NIPPER are upon him. There is a fight—long and desperate. The stranger tries vainly to escape. Chairs are knocked over, etc. Big commotion. At last the figure is held down.]

NIPPER (breathlessly): Lights—quick! Light the lamp!

MONTIE: Begad! I haven't got a match—Yes I have!

[He lights lamp, and NIPPER and HANDFORTH drag their prisoner to his

feet and dump him in a chair. He is a young man in muddy, weather-stained clothes, collarless, shy, and scared looking.]

HANDFORTH: By George! You rotter—trying to escape! We knew there was something queer here, you chaps! It was this burglar who scared the old lady—

NIPPER (staring at prisoner): Why, I seem to recognise—Yes! This man's name is Willis—James Willis! Didn't you see his photograph in the Bannington Gazette yesterday?

WILLIS (huskily): You interfering young whippets! What right have you got in this cottage, anyhow?

NIPPER: More right than you have! I know you all right—you escaped from the big convict prison on the other side of the moor on Tuesday evening! I saw a whole article about you in the paper. You were in for forgery, and you eluded the warders during an outbreak of fire—

WILLIS: Oh, what's the good? You know all about it! Well, it's true—and what of it? I'm innocent—I never committed any forgery! (Fiercely.) Who are you to question me?

NIPPER: Well, my name's Nipper, and I'm the assistant of Nelson Lee, the famous detective. Now I come to remember it the gov'nor expressed the opinion that the case against you was very weak. But what are you doing in this cottage—seeking shelter, I suppose?

HANDFORTH: You rotter! You ought to be shot for scaring a helpless old lady—

WILLIS (passionately): Don't you understand? Scaring her? I came here because this—this is my home! My mother lives here—

NIPPER, MONTY, and HANDFORTH (in chorus): Your mother!

WILLIS: Yes! For a couple of days I've been wandering about the countryside—hungry, miserable, and wretched! I thought it might be safe to come home, and I knew my mother was terribly anxious. So I seized the opportunity of the snow-storm, and came. I arrived only a few minutes before you!

NIPPER: That's interesting! We didn't see any footprints on the garden path!

HANDFORTH: Tripped him up, by George!

WILLIS: No, you haven't! Do you think I'm telling you lies? I wasn't fool enough to come to the front door. I came to the back, but the door was locked, and so I slipped in the scullery window. I came straight in here, and found my mother bending over that trunk. She—she (*his voice breaks somewhat*) she was turning over some of my old things.

NIPPER (*quietly*): I suppose your sudden appearance gave her a fright?

WILLIS: A bigger one than I had expected. I just called "mother" softly, and she turned her head and then went all dizzy. She was bending right over the trunk, and she simply fell inside! I'd only just reached her when you started knocking at the door.

MONTIE: Begad! That was frightfully awkward—it was, really!

WILLIS: I didn't know what to do! I thought it was the police, and on the spur of the moment I closed the trunk lid down and dived under that side table. And there I was compelled to crouch all the time. I thought I might slip away when the lamp went out, but—but—

NIPPER: I'm sorry. We came just when we weren't needed, it seems. But we're in a queer position now. We ought to give information to the police—

MRS WILLIS (*weakly, from couch*): Oh, you mustn't do that! My boy is innocent—I will swear that he is innocent! Don't—don't give him up to the police! It is nearly Christmastime, and—

WILLIS (*bitterly*): It's no good, mother! I shall have to go back—

MRS. WILLIS: No, no! I sha'n't let them take you, Jim! I sha'n't!

[She gets up from couch, and, assisted by the boys, comes near to fireplace and sits down. WILLIS goes to her arms, and she clings tightly to him, sobbing.]

MRS. WILLIS: Oh, my boy! My boy! You mustn't leave me now! (*She turns fiercely to the others.*) Must you tell the police of what you have seen? Oh, why can't you go away and leave us in peace? I am happy now—my Jim has come back to me! When I asked you to stay, I was distracted—I thought I had only seen the ghost of my boy! You mustn't be hard! Jim is innocent—I'll swear that before all the world!

NIPPER (*uncomfortably*): You see, ma'am we hardly know what to do. But it's really

none of our business, and so we'll go away and try to forget that we've seen anything.

HANDFORTH: Hear, hear!

MONTIE: It's not our affair, begad!

[They don their overcoats and mufflers, watched by MRS. WILLIS and her son. Then there comes a heavy knock on the door. WILLIS starts up with a hoarse cry. MRS. WILLIS clutches him tightly. The boys stare at the door, startled.]

WILLIS (*huskily*): They've come! The warders!

[Acting on impulse, he dashes to window, and conceals himself behind curtain.]

NIPPER: I'll open the door, ma'am.

[He does so. Enter STRANGER. Tall man well wrapped up. He regards boys in surprise. Sees MRS. WILLIS, and bows.]

STRANGER: You are Mrs. Willis, madam?

MRS. WILLIS (*rising*): Yes, I—I—Who are you?

STRANGER: My call deals with a delicate subject, and I would prefer to speak to you alone, Mrs. Willis. It is in connection with your son.

MRS WILLIS: These young gentlemen know all. Please tell me—

STRANGER: Oh, in that case, I will speak out at once. My name is Robson—Detective-Inspector Robson of the Helmford Police.

MRS WILLIS: Oh! Why—why have you come to torture me?

ROBSON: On the contrary, madam, I have brought you good news!

MRS WILLIS (*starting up*): Good news! Oh! Do—do you mean—

ROBSON: About your son—yes. To-day there was a serious gas explosion at the Helmford Central Bank, and the chief clerk, a man named Sanders, was fatally injured. He confessed, before losing consciousness, that he is guilty of the forgery for which your son, James Willis, was convicted. Your son's name, therefore, is cleared—

MRS WILLIS (*fervently, and clasping her hands*): Oh, thank God! Thank God!

NIPPER: Cleared! I say, that's fine!

MONTIE: Simply toppin', dear old boys!

HANDFORTH: Rather!

ROBSON: Your son was employed by the Helmford Central Bank before the charge was brought against him, and they are most anxious to reinstate him. But the difficulty is that your son has escaped from prison and has not been recaptured. We thought it just possible, Mrs. Willis, that he might have come to you. If so, we strongly advise him to surrender himself to the police at once.

MRS. WILLIS: Oh, but why? You said

ROBSON: Merely a matter of formality, madam. Please do not be alarmed. I have brought you this news because your anxiety must have been great, and it has afforded me great pleasure to come in person. After your son has presented himself to the police, he will be immediately released—a free man, with his honour restored. I bid you good-evening, madam.

[Robson bows, turns, and makes his exit. The door closes, and JIM WILLIS comes from behind curtains, eager and

joyful. He goes straight to his mother's arms. The boys make signs to one another.]

NIPPER (*in a whisper*): Time we left, you chaps!

MONTIE: Begad! So it is, dear boy. I'm afraid we are frightfully in the way.

HANDFORTH: By George! It's going to be a happy Christmas, after all! Jolly good thing I spotted this cottage. I knew there was something queer about it from the very start. Directly I saw that chap I knew that he was innocent, and I half suspected he was under that table all the time!

NIPPER (*grinning*): Same old Handy! Come on! We're not wanted!

[They tip-toe to door, and exit.]

MRS WILLIS (*softly, and clinging to son*): Oh, my boy! My boy!

CURTAIN.

A Few Hints to Amateur Actors.

Below are a few hints which will be found useful by any readers who think of acting this play. The Editor of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY will be very pleased to send further advice and to hear about any performance which takes place.

Scenery.—The scenery for this play is such as can be found in any house. There is no need for elaborate furnishing. The simpler the furniture the better.

Footlights.—Very good footlights can be made from a row of bicycle lamps set on the floor at a distance of about two feet from each other. Failing these, ordinary candles can be used. They should be set in candlesticks having a large flat surface to stand upon. Small screens cut from cardboard fixed on the side nearest the audience help to throw the light more fully on to the stage and also keep the flame from flickering.

Costumes and Make-up.—No special costumes are wanted in this play. For false hair, beards, moustaches, etc., all you need is a packet of crepe hair—on sale at any big toyshop. It will cost you very little, and goes a long way.

It is sold in long plaited strips which can be fluffed out as needed. In a smallish room no paint is needed. For darkening eyebrows, etc., burnt cork is most effective.

Properties.—There are not many needed in this play. But an added reality can be given if on the the entry of characters a shower of snow blows in with them. Snow is easily made from white paper (old newspapers, etc.) cut into tiny bits. This should be put into a hat or other receptacle and thrown over the character entering the stage. If at the same time a large fan or a pair of bellows is used, it will cause the snow to whirl most realistically. A good fire can be made from black and red tissue paper behind which is a lamp.

Speaking Your Lines.—Always remember to face the audience when speaking. If you have to turn your back move your head round so that you speak over your shoulder. Speak slowly, and always pause when expecting a laugh or applause. Always wait till the applause is over before continuing. Always be careful to pick up your cue at once.

(Continued from page 20.)

They opened the French windows, but one glance was sufficient. Snow was falling heavily, and it had evidently been descending for some little time. Any footprints that the intruder might have made were completely obliterated.

Nelson Lee came back, and as he was walking towards the fireplace his gaze rested upon the wine-glass which stood upon the small table. It was empty, except for a tiny drop in the bottom.

"Ah, we shall probably find an explanation here!" he murmured, picking the glass up carefully, and sniffing at it. "I will guarantee that Trenton entered this room by the French windows, awaited his opportunity, and meddled with the wine."

"Without Dr. Stafford's knowledge?" asked Dorrie doubtfully.

"He was probably dozing at the time, and the room was in semi-darkness," replied Lee. "It could easily have been done, I assure you. I intend to analyse this drop of wine, and I am convinced what the result will be. That infernal rogue will have no further opportunity to approach Dr. Stafford."

"The fellow seems to be pretty determined, anyway," observed Dorrie.

"Yes. He has started on this scheme, and he means to continue to the bitter end," replied Nelson Lee. "It is a great pity this happened, for it has inflamed the discontented section of the boys once more."

It seemed probable, indeed, that the Christmas festivities at Dorrimore Hall would be somewhat marred by the Head's unexpected outbreak.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS SCRAPS OF PAPER!



DR. STAFFORD made a hopeless gesture.

"What can I do, Mr. Lee?" he asked miserably. "This is the most appalling affair of all. I am humbled—degraded! In my host's house, before all the guests, I make an exhibition of myself, and——"

"Pray set your mind at ease, Dr. Stafford," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Lord Dorrimore understands perfectly. As for the others, they will be

able to appreciate the true position when the whole truth comes out—as it certainly will come out before very long."

"But what is the truth, Mr. Lee? What does it all mean?" asked the Head helplessly. "I am in the dark; I am groping with so many mysteries that my mind is unable to grasp them all. I only know that I am hated by my schoolboys, and despised and scorned by all decent people!"

"That is hardly correct," disagreed Lee. "I am not telling you the true position now, Dr. Stafford, because I do not think it would be a wise policy on my part to do so; but rest content that I am aware of the truth, and will bring it to light. And the story which will be published broadcast will startle the world. You will be honoured by all."

Dr. Stafford shook his head, and looked more depressed than ever. He was not feeling quite himself, although the effects of the drug had long since passed. It was morning now, and the Head had been unable to give any explanation regarding his outbreak of the evening before. He had heard nobody in the library, and had no knowledge of his wine being tampered with. But Lee had discovered traces of the drug in the wine-glass, and he was satisfied that his theory was correct.

Among the other guests at Dorrimore Hall it appeared that the whole matter had been dismissed. Outwardly, there was no sign of any talk. The subject of Dr. Stafford's lapse was tabooed; and, to all appearances, the festivities went on as merrily and as heartily as ever.

But to anyone observant, a change had come about.

It was not long before I noticed it—for I rather pride myself that I am pretty observant. The juniors appeared to mix together as usual, laughing, joking, and enjoying the good things which Dorrie had provided; but, actually, Armstrong and his followers kept almost exclusively to themselves. Where groups of fellows gathered, I noticed that these groups would consist of Rebels solely, or Loyalists solely. There would be no groups of Rebels and Loyalists together.

And this made me somewhat uneasy. Why were Armstrong and Co. hanging together so closely? I couldn't help

having an idea that something was in the wind; although, when I came to consider the matter, what could be in the wind? What could the Rebels do here?

"My sons, we'd better keep our eyes open," I said to Tommy Watson and Sir Montie. "In my opinion, there's going to be some dirty work!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Begad!" he said mildly. "Some what, dear old boy?"

"Some dark and sinister doings!" I replied. "And it behoves us to keep on the watch, and to frustrate any——"

"Hark at him!" interrupted Tommy Watson. "Talking like a giddy book! What's the matter with you, you ass! Are you making up something for the next issue of the magazine?"

"No, I'm not," I replied. "And I'm not talking like a book, either. I repeat, there is going to be some dirty work——"

"At the cross roads?" asked Watson irrelevantly.

"No, right here in Dorrimore Hall," I said. "Armstrong is a rotten leader. He gives himself away by his expression, and by the way he whispers and hobnobs with his followers. Now, if I was planning something, I should do it in secret, and I wouldn't let anybody know that we were about to get busy on something."

My chums looked surprised.

"I haven't noticed anything," said Watson.

"Neither have I, dear old boy."

"Which only shows that you see, but don't observe," I replied. "Seeing is one thing, and observing is another. I've tried to drive that into your nappers many a time. Just take notice after this, and I'll guarantee that you'll observe all sorts of queer little things. The Rebels are hanging together."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if they all were hung together!" grinned Watson.

"Begad! What a shockin' joke!" said Tregellis-West. "I generally notice, Tommy, that you go for weeks an' weeks without makin' a joke; but when you do make one, it either lacks point, or is distinctly in bad taste. I am afraid you were not cut out to be a humourist."

"The Rebels are preparing for something, I am certain," I went on.

"What it is, I don't know; but it's bound to be something unpleasant. That outbreak of the Head's last night is probably the reason for the outbreak which Armstrong and Co. will shortly spring upon us. I've got a feeling down my spine that there's something huge brewing—something that'll make our hair stand up."

"Oh, you're talking out of your hat!" said Watson bluntly. "What can happen—that's what I'd like to know?"

"We'd all like to know," I said. "On the quiet, and between you and me and the door-knob, I think we've underestimated the quality of the brains which are concealed by T. T.'s shock-head. In other words, he's deeper than we thought."

"Oh, rot!" put in Reginald Pitt, who had joined our group. "Tucker's as harmless as a tame lunatic."

"We've always found him to be fairly harmless, and we've treated him as a joke," I said. "But even a tame lunatic is cunning; and we've got to admit that Tucker has had some startling ideas."

"Ideas that couldn't be worked," said Watson.

"Yes, so we've always imagined," I went on. "The fact is, we've accepted T. T. as a joke, and we shall probably get a bit of a shock. Mind you, I still think he's as mad as a March hare, and I still think that his ideas are a trifle madder. But if these Rebels decide to put those ideas into practice—well, we can reckon upon seeing something rather sensational."

"But they won't listen to Tucker!" protested Pitt.

"Won't they?" I asked keenly. "Haven't they been listening to him for a long time past? Why, even before we left St. Frank's, Tucker organised secret meetings, and the Rebels attended these meetings in force. They all joined the Brotherhood of the Free, and——"

"Yes, by Jingo!" interrupted Pitt. "And the Schoolboys' Union! Tucker was trotting out that stuff to Grey and I, and we kicked him out of Study E for it! But surely Armstrong and his set haven't been swallowing that dope?"

"They're just in the kind of spirit to swallow anything," I said. "They're

reckless—and they think they're awfully big and important. And once you get a set of fellows like that really going—well, they're capable of travelling a long way. It's up to us to nip this thing in the bud before it starts. It's my firm belief that Tucker has been trotting out his wild ideas, and that Armstrong has been making plans to put them into practice."

"It's all frightfully confusing, an' shockin'ly worryin'!" said Sir Montie. "This is a time of good cheer an' good-fellowship, dear boys. It's Christmas week, an' there oughtn't to be any thoughts of trouble an' strife, begad!"

"Agreed," I said. "But if these fatheads are out to cause trouble and strife, we're out to put a stop to it."

"Hear, hear!"

"So we mustn't allow ourselves to be caught napping," I said. "I think Dorrie's got a pretty lively programme on for to-day—skating and walking round the park, and there's some idea about getting up a big snow fight, I believe. And, later in the evening, there's a big dance on the bill. So we're pretty full up, one way and another, and quite liable to miss any danger signals, unless we keep our eyes wide open."

"I'll give some of the other chaps the tip," said Pitt. "The more of us on the alert the better——"

"No, you'd better not," I interrupted.

"Why not?"

"Because too many cooks spoil the broth," I replied. "If the whole crowd of us get watching the Rebels, they'll smell a rat, and then they'll tone down. Four of us on the watch will be quite enough."

"Yes, I think you're right," said Pitt. "You always think of these little things, Nipper—that's why you're such a good skipper."

I bowed, and the others grinned. During the rest of the morning we kept our eyes well open, and we did not fail to see certain signs. The Rebels would sometimes collect together in little groups. A few whispered words would be exchanged, accompanied by significant nods. All this indicated to me that the hour was soon approaching when the Rebels would strike some kind of a blow.

Still, the Christmas festivities were

not marred so far. The morning being fine, we had some splendid sport on the lake. The skating was first-class, and the only incident of note was when Fatty Little slipped over and nearly cracked the whole sheet of ice.

Dinner was a merry meal. We were hungry and in the best of spirits, and there was no apparent sign that anything was wrong. And in the afternoon we had a regular set-to snow battle. Without designing to do so, the Rebels pitted themselves against the Loyalists. We were in about equal numbers, and everything was well-prepared in advance.

We had battlements, trenches, ammunition in plenty, and a proper field of battle. Dorrie was the commander-in-chief of one side, and Nelson Lee in charge of the other side. They enjoyed themselves as much as the fellows.

In the end the Rebels were routed. By a piece of keen strategy, the Loyalist forces sprang a surprise upon the Rebels, took them in the flank, and finally cut off all retreat. The Rebels, after a desperate fight, were compelled to surrender.

It was a laughable, joyous affair enough, but some of the beaten Rebels did not quite take it in the right spirit. They took their defeat badly, which merely showed that they were not true sportsmen. But what could one expect with such fellows as Fullwood and Co., and Merrell, and Teddy Long in their ranks?

The day was passing wonderfully well, and we were enjoying ourselves immensely. In the evening the Hall was ablaze, and there was music, dancing, and gaiety of every description.

It wasn't until rather late—getting on towards nine o'clock—that I noticed the first sign of action on the conspirators' part. It was during an interval, when all the fellows were refreshing themselves, or standing in groups, chatting.

I saw Griffith going about amongst the Rebels in a mysterious kind of way. At first I could not understand what he was doing; then, as I casually strolled nearer, I saw a slip of paper pass from Griffith's hand to one of the others.

Five minutes later I was certain

Careful as they were, the Rebels could not conceal their movements. These slips of paper were being passed round, and I felt an intense longing to see what was written on them.

It wasn't long before an opportunity occurred.

Watching closely, I saw Doyle screw up a scrap of paper, and toss it in the fire—at least, he thought he had placed it in the fire, but it bounced off a log, and rolled into the ashes. When I rescued it a few moments later it was only just scorched. Spreading it out, I beheld these four words:

"TEN O'CLOCK—ALL FIXED."

I frowned for a moment, and then glanced at my watch. The time was just ten minutes to nine. I wasted no time in collecting a few of my chums together. They examined the scrap of paper with interest and curiosity.

"What does it mean?" asked Bob Christine wonderingly.

"I should think it's pretty obvious what it means," I replied. "'Ten o'clock—all fixed.' The Rebels are preparing to take some kind of action at that appointed hour. It's up to us to watch them more carefully than ever."

"Rather!" said Pitt. "What eyes you've got, Nipper! I'm blessed if I saw anything out of the ordinary going on! We're warned now, and we can do these bounders in the eye beautifully!"

Tregellis-West looked distressed.

"Really, dear boys, it is hardly proper to have a scrap at such a time as this," he said painfully. "Our clothin'—evenin'-dress, begad! We shall get frightfully rumpled—we shall, really!"

"Can't help it," I replied. "If these blighters start some trouble—well, they'll find more than they bargained for. Be on the alert at ten!"

In the meantime we appeared quite unconcerned. Nobody would have suspected that the two rival parties of juniors were preparing for grim and determined battle; and right in this tense period an incident occurred which evoked roars of laughter.

Fatty Little, in fact, was missing. Such a thing was extraordinary, because a fresh supply of sandwiches and cakes and pastries, and other good things, had made their appearance at

the buffet. For Fatty to be absent on such an occasion was not only remarkable, but beyond human understanding.

In consequence, search parties were immediately organised by the grinning juniors, and Fatty Little's whereabouts were sought for. All sorts of theories were evolved. De Valerie had an idea that Fatty had eaten so much that he had crawled away to a dark corner to expire in solitude. Dorrie suggested that Fatty had discovered the store-room, and was probably raiding it.

In the end, the fat junior was found quite near at hand. In a little corner alcove he lay at peace. One of the juniors happened to pull the curtains aside; then he yelled for the others to come and have a look.

There was Fatty, lolling back on the deep cushions of the lounge which fitted into the alcove. He was fast asleep, his mouth was wide open, and there was an expression of fat and happy contentment on his somewhat shiny face. A few crumbs lingered on his chin.

And, all round him—on the cushions, in his lap, even on the floor—food lay in profusion—sandwiches, cakes, mince-pies, jam puffs, oranges, bananas, and a dozen other varieties of edible articles. It was obvious that Fatty had retreated to this alcove in order to indulge in a good old orgy; and he had, in fact, eaten himself to sleep.

The fellows yelled with laughter, but none of these sounds awoke the sleeping beauty, as Pitt termed him. However, twenty minutes later I happened to glance into the alcove. Fatty was still there, and he was asleep; but all the food and all the fruit had vanished, and Fatty was looking more contented than ever. Obviously, he had had a waking spell.

And then ten o'clock drew round. Acting upon instructions from me, all the fellows I could trust were on the alert. When the clock boomed out the hour, a lively fox-trot was in progress in the ball-room. And a good many of the dancers were Rebels, Armstrong and his immediate supporters among them.

The instant the dance was over we kept a strict and unfailing eye upon the movements of the enemy.

We were disappointed.

Nothing happened. The Rebels made no movement of any sort. Ten o'clock

had come, and ten o'clock had gone. And the Rebels had done nothing. Most of the Loyalists were disappointed, and inclined to rail at me. The whole thing was evidently a spoof. Armstrong and Co. had never intended doing anything.

But I took no notice of the grumbles. I knew perfectly well that those warning notices were genuine. Possibly there had been word passed round at the last minute. Anyhow, the Rebels were preparing for action.

When would the zero hour arrive?

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHRISTMAS PLOTTERS!



"ANYBODY seen Armstrong?" asked Teddy Long in a scared kind of voice.

The sneak of the Remove was looking somewhat pale, and there was an anxious look in his eyes.

I was standing in the lounge-hall with two or three other fellows. It was morning, bright and sunny, and we were just arranging to go out on to the lake, for some more skating. A crowd of fellows had already departed, laughing and chatting, and this day promised to be as enjoyable as all the others.

Nobody took much notice of Teddy Long. He was generally ignored at St. Frank's, and the fact that he was a guest at Dorrimore Hall made no difference. He had been swanking and boasting ever since his arrival, and all the others felt more contempt for him than ever.

"I say, you chaps, have you seen Armstrong?" asked Teddy.

"Yes, we have!" said Grey shortly. "Armstrong's gone out."

"Oh, my goodness!"

Teddy Long looked more startled than ever. He had only just come down, for the lazy young beggar had laid in bed right over breakfast. A number of the other fellows had promised to make him smart for it later on.

Without asking any more questions, he hustled into his overcoat and muffler, and vanished. We went down almost

immediately afterwards, and made our way to the lake, swinging our skates and discussing the prospects. The frost was not quite so sharp this morning, but there was no sign of any break in the cold spell.

A surprise awaited us at the lake.

Instead of finding a large number of juniors there, we only found two or three—Bob Christine, Yorke, Talmadge, Farman, and the Trotwood twins. In an instant I detected the fact that not a single Rebel was to be seen.

"Where's Armstrong?" I asked sharply, as I ran up. "Armstrong, and Griffith, and Simmons, and Tucker, and Fullwood——"

"How should we know? We don't keep 'em!" said Nicodemus Trotwood. "Aren't they up at the Hall?"

"No; they came out before we did," I replied. "A whole crowd of chaps left about ten minutes after you."

"Well, they didn't come down here," said Bob Christine. "We haven't seen 'em!"

I glanced at my watch.

"Twenty minutes past ten!" I exclaimed. "By Jove! Now I understand! What a dunderhead I was not to think of it before!"

"Think of what?"

"Ten o'clock!"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Those scraps of paper!" I said tensely. "Don't you remember? 'Ten o'clock—all fixed.' We thought it referred to last night, but it was really preparing the chaps for this morning. They've cleared off somewhere, and they're probably going to get up to some mischief!"

"Begad!"

"We shall have to get on their track without any loss of time," I went on. "Teddy Long is a Rebel and he was probably going with the others; but the lazy young beggar overslept himself, and he got left behind. Still, we won't worry about him now; I think we can get on the trail of Armstrong and his crowd!"

"How?"

"Didn't you notice some tracks leading off through the park?" I asked keenly.

"Can't say that I did," said Pitt.

"Another example—seeing without observing!" I exclaimed. "You fellows

need a few lessons in using your eyes in the right way. I noticed those tracks, but I didn't think anything of them at the time. But they take on a special significance now. The Rebels went off somewhere into the park. It's a good thing the snow's on the ground—they were compelled to leave tell-tale tracks behind them."

An air of excitement was abroad now, and all the Loyalists were keenly anxious to get on the trail of the missing juniors. We were quite by ourselves—that is to say, there were none of the young ladies or older folk present. The girls were coming down a bit later on.

We retraced our steps to the place where I had noticed the tracks in the snow, and then, like a pack of hounds hard on the scent, we hurried off at the double over the park, following those footprints. We hardly knew what to expect, but we certainly had an idea that we should come upon Armstrong and Co. in a secluded spot.

Instead, we found ourselves out in a small lane, which was snow-covered and deserted. Traffic upon it was evidently infrequent, since there were no marks of any vehicles; but along the lane ran the footprints of many feet. The party which we had been following had obviously been joined in the lane by other parties. The Rebels, in fact, had lumped together into one big crowd.

We followed the tracks up the lane, and just round the bend, and there I came to a halt, a startled exclamation forcing itself from between my lips. For a whole story was written there in the snow—a story which could not be mistaken.

At this bend were the thick, heavy marks of a heavy motor vehicle. There were two sets of tracks which proceeded just up the bend. This clearly proved that the vehicle had come to this spot, had reversed, and gone back on its own tracks.

Without saying anything, I walked forward and had a closer look. There were the clear marks where the driver had reversed his vehicle, backing right into a gateway in order to get round. And there, a few yards away, the marks were deeper, showing that the motor had remained upon that spot for some little time; and all round the

tracks were masses of trampled snow. Up the lane there were no footprints whatever—only the marks of those heavy wheels.

"My only hat!" I exclaimed. "Don't you see, you chaps?"

"They've gone off!" exclaimed Pitt.

"Exactly," I said. "It's as clear as daylight. All the Rebels came to this spot, where this motor was waiting for them. They got into it and drove away. What do you make of it? Pretty startling, eh?"

"Startlin' ain't the word for it, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "It's staggerin'!"

"But what does it mean?" asked Watson blankly. "We didn't hear anything about the Rebels going off for a motor ride."

"Of course we didn't!" I said. "This was planned in secret. If Armstrong and Co. had merely wanted a morning motor run they would have been welcome to some of Dorrie's cars, and they would have been taken off from the terrace in front of the Hall. This thing was all arranged on the Q. T."

"But why?" asked Bob Christine. "And what kind of a car was it, anyhow? And look at these big tracks! The thing was a lorry, I should say—it had double tyres on the back wheels, just like a motor-bus!"

"All sorts of heavy motor vehicles have double tyres on the back," I said. "And it strikes me that the most reasonable explanation here is that the thing was a char-a-banc."

"By Jingo, yes!" said Pitt. "You've hit it!"

The others stared at me.

"But why in the world should these Rebels want to clear off in a char-a-banc?" asked Christine. "I say, this is jolly rummy! And I must say that Armstrong and Co. kept their plans pretty quiet. We didn't know anything about this."

"But we shall soon know everything," I said grimly. "Teddy Long was left behind, and, if I know anything of his character, he'll blurt everything out in next to no time. He won't need any pressing, either, because he'll feel slighted by being out of it all."

We hurried back to the Hall, forgetting all about our skating. And we came across Teddy Long, wandering aimlessly about, with his hands thrust

into his pockets, and with a miserable expression on his face. He was captured at once, and, in spite of his protests, he was carried away to a quiet spot.

"Look here, Teddy, my son, you're the only Rebel left here," I said. "All the others have cleared off, and left you behind——"

"The rotters!" said Long indignantly. "That's all the thanks I get for supporting them! After I'd agreed to help, and back them up! I believe they let me lay in bed on purpose!"

"Most probably," said Pitt. "They gave you the go-by, my lad."

"The mean rotters!" said Teddy hotly. "If they think I'm going to keep their giddy secrets, they've made a bloomer. I've decided to become a Loyalist, and I'm going to tell you chaps all about the whole scheme!"

Teddy knew a thing or two. His brains were not of the highest order, but he had plenty of cunning. He knew jolly well that we should force the truth out of him, and so he preferred to do the grand thing and become a Loyalist. Needless to say, he would not be accepted into our ranks; but we didn't trouble to tell him at the time.

"Where have Armstrong and the others gone to?" I asked briefly.

"To St. Frank's!"

"What?"

"Where?"

"To St. Frank's!" repeated Teddy, pleased at the impression he had made.

"What rot!" exclaimed Handforth bluntly. "You silly young ass! Gone to St. Frank's! Huh! Do you expect us to believe that spoo?"

"'Tain't spoo!" said Teddy obstinately. "It's the truth!"

"Rot!"

"Look here, Handy, let Long tell us all about it in his own way," I said. "Personally, I believe it's the perfect truth."

"What, that the Rebels have gone to St. Frank's?"

"Yes!"

"But why the dickens should they go there?" asked Christine. "The place is deserted—empty!"

"That's just it!" exclaimed Long eagerly. "That's the whole giddy idea! St. Frank's is empty and deserted, and Armstrong and his set mean to pinch the school!"

"To do what?" asked Pitt weakly.

"Pinch the school—seize it, you know!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Begad!"

"You—you fatheads!" roared Handforth. "You're swallowing this yarn whole, and it's all tommy-rot! Just as if the Rebels could go and seize St. Frank's! And, even supposing they did, what would be the good of it?"

I was feeling rather startled.

"Don't be so hasty—keep calm!" I exclaimed. "Teddy's right; all this fits in exactly with what I've been suspecting. There could be nothing easier than pinching St. Frank's during the holidays. The Rebels could get in as easy as winking. There's nobody there except old Cuttle in the lodge, and Mrs. Poulter in the Ancient House, and Mrs. Hake, and the Head's gardener, and one or two other servants. St. Frank's could be taken by storm in no time!"

"But—but what for?" gasped Grey faintly.

"Oh, they're going to do all sorts of big things," said Long. "I was in it, of course; but I think I'd rather be with you chaps, after all. Some of those fatheads might get sacked if things go wrong."

"What are these big things?" I asked grimly.

"Why, all the Rebels are members of the Brotherhood of the Free," said Long. "They don't believe in the existing state of things; they've got high ideals about schools, and all that. They're starting the Schoolboys' Union——"

"Tucker!" I cut in curtly.

"Yes, of course; they're all Tucker's wheezes," said Teddy. "I've never known such a chap—he's full of 'em! Armstrong reckons they're jolly good ideas, and he's going to put them into practice. He's going to start the first branch of the Schoolboys' Union at St. Frank's, and he reckons that within a year there'll be branches all over the country!"

"The dotty fathead!" said Pitt scornfully.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Rather!" replied Long. "Tucker's planned the whole thing out, you know; but he's an awful duffer when it comes to organising anything. He's got the

ideas, but can't carry them out. That's where Armstrong comes in."

"Oh, I see!" I said grimly. "That's where Armstrong comes in?"

"You bet," said Long, nodding. "I don't exactly know what the Rebels are going to do afterwards, but the first plan is to get hold of the school and fortify it before they can be chucked out. They're going to build barricades, and get ammunition ready, and all that kind of thing. And they mean to defy all comers."

"Well I'm blessed!"

"Great pip!"

I was silent for a few moments—my mind was busy. I was rather staggered by this revelation, but I couldn't help admiring the cunning and the clever strategy of the plan. Obviously, we had all misjudged Timothy Tucker! Given somebody to put the practical touch to his schemes, there was something in them.

To capture St. Frank's at any ordinary time was hopeless—impossible. But how easy during the Christmas holidays! With all the boys and masters away, with nearly all the servants away, too—why, the Rebels would simply walk in and do as they liked! And they could strengthen their position before any attack could be made. They had everything they needed on the spot—sleeping accommodation, water, fires, fuel, food enough for weeks; in fact, everything necessary for a prolonged siege! Yes, it was clever!

"So the Rebels have decided on a barring-out!" I said, taking a deep breath. "My sons, it looks as though this trouble is going to be bigger than we expected. When we had a barring-out at St. Frank's, we had to get up to all sorts of dodges to obtain enough food, and to get blankets, and all that kind of thing. But Armstrong and Co. won't have any of those difficulties. They mean to get hold of the school, and bar everybody else out of it."

"But what's the idea of it all?"

"Well, it's evidently up against the Head," I replied. "They'll probably say that they won't give in unless the Head is sacked. We're Loyalists, and it's up to us to support Dr. Stafford and the school. That being the case, it's also up to us to buzz to St. Frank's and dislodge these Rebels before they

strengthen their position. Who's with me?"

"All of us!" replied Handforth promptly.

"Hear, hear!"

The fellows were flushed and excited at the prospect.

"It's past eleven now," I said, "and we can't very well be off before twelve; in fact, I think we ought to take it rather easily, and get to St. Frank's just after dark. The Rebels are bound to be keeping a watch, and we shall stand more chance of surprising them in the darkness."

"That's right," said Pitt. "Anyhow, we're going!"

"And we'll show Armstrong and his set what we're made of!" said Handforth grimly. "We'll show them whether they can go and pinch the giddy school!"

And, half an hour later, active preparations were being made for a swift departure. The Rebels had gained a good start, but we were off on their track!

Excitement of a very special order was brewing!

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTURING THE SCHOOL!



TIMOTHY ARMSTRONG and Timothy Tucker were the joint

leaders of the Rebel forces. It was rather appropriate that they should both bear the same Christian name. Armstrong would have been helpless without Tucker's ideas; and Tucker's ideas would have been useless without Armstrong to organise them.

But, after all, it was Armstrong who held the reins.

He had come to the fore in a meteoric fashion. Until the Rebels had been formed, Armstrong had been quite an ordinary sort of junior—rather aggressive at times, perhaps, but never showing any special ability as a leader. But there was no doubt at all that he had the right personality for such a job.

Force of circumstances had pushed him to the surface, so to speak, and he was leading his followers ably and strongly. He was conscious of this fact

himself, and it made him all the more determined to lead his men to victory.

The truth was, Armstrong had become infatuated and fascinated by T. T.'s idealistic schemes. Previously, he had always regarded Tucker as a crank, and had regarded his ideas as ravings. But Tucker had converted him, with the result that Armstrong was full of determination to put T. T.'s ideas into practice.

And now the great moment had arrived—the zero hour had come. Armstrong and Co. were making a bold bid for victory, and were casting everything into one throw of the dice, so to speak.

The Rebels numbered twenty-four, all

serious and thoughtful; and the nearer they got to St. Frank's, the more they realised the grave nature of the step they were about to take.

"It's no good you chaps looking glum—we've started, and we've got to finish!" said Armstrong firmly. "We're not going to give in; we're going straight through with the whole plan. If we only stick together, victory is certain!"

"That's all very well; but supposing we fail?" asked Doyle. "What's going to happen? The leading chaps will be sacked——"

"Well, you needn't be afraid," cut in Armstrong. "You won't be mistaken



One of the juniors pulled the curtains aside; then he yelled for the others to look at Fatty. (See page 24)



told—a strong band. Fifteen of them belonged to the Ancient House, and the other eight were from the College House. And twenty of this total number were in the char-a-banc, which was now approaching the end of its journey.

The other four members of the Brotherhood of the Free were coming to St. Frank's from their various homes, obeying the call of their leader. For it had all been secretly arranged before the holidays that every Rebel should rally round their leader at the appointed hour.

And the appointed hour had arrived. Armstrong and Co. did not look upon this affair lightly.

During the journey from Dorrimore Hall—quite a long trip—they were

for a leader! And there mustn't be any supposing this, or supposing the other! We're going to carry the flag through in triumph!"

"Comrades and fellow brothers!" said Tucker. "We must all rally round, and stick together. Do you realise what this means? Dear, dear, dear! I am afraid that you are not quite conversant with the full position. Do you realise that it is in your hands to create a great precedent?"

"We don't want to talk about creating presidents!" said Griffith. "I suppose you'll be the president of the union?"

"Tut—tut! You mistake my meaning, my dear sir!" said Tucker. "I said 'precedent'—not president. There

is a great difference between the two words. It is in our power to create a new order of things. We shall be the starting-point of great and wonderful days for the British schoolboy! For we are forming this great union, which will bring liberty and equality in all our great public schools. Quite so—quite so! In every great movement there are always martyrs—”

“We don’t want to be martyrs!” said Clifton gruffly.

“My dear sir, if we are sacrificed at the altar of liberty, we will suffer nobly!” exclaimed T. T., blinking at the Rebels. “As I have already said, every great movement in history has been ridiculed at the outset. Its leaders have been deemed to be madmen, and the majority of these great pioneers have suffered. We are pioneers, and it is quite possible that we shall suffer, too. But, on the other hand, I consider it quite likely that we shall make history—make it in the fact that we shall start a new era with absolute, unqualified success. There will be no martyrs—there will be no sacrifices at the altar of liberty! For we shall succeed. We shall strike such a blow that the whole foundation of Great Britain will shake! My friends, it will be the beginning of greater things!”

This little burst of oratory was nothing compared to what Tucker was capable of. And he dosed his followers with this kind of medicine regularly. They were beginning to like it.

The Rebels, in fact, were all following Armstrong’s example. They were beginning to believe in T. T. and his wild ideas. And with Armstrong to provide the practical side, it really seemed as though the Brotherhood of the Free would cause a tremendous amount of trouble before it was subdued.

Armstrong was undoubtedly a skilful organiser. His worst enemy would be compelled to admit that. For he had schemed things so cunningly that the Rebels were able to strike this blow without giving any previous warning.

Indeed, certain preparations had been made even before the holidays, so that the path would be easier when the great hour arrived. And the Rebels were so enthusiastic for their cause that they spent pocket-money freely.

There had been a whip-round in order

to obtain enough money to pay the expenses of the char-a-banc trip. At this period of the year all the fellows were flush; and as most of them were spending Christmas at Dorrimore Hall, they had no occasion to spend any of their Christmas tips, for Dorrie provided everything. It thus came about that money was plentiful.

The winter’s afternoon was somewhat dull, and there was a promise of some more snow in the air. The cold spell was by no means over, and it seemed quite likely that weeks would pass before the weather broke. One of those hard, bitterly cold periods had set in, getting the whole country into its icy grip.

Josh Cuttle, the bow-legged porter of St. Frank’s, was standing in the Triangle, sombrely surveying the limited scenery. He was gazing, in fact, at the Ancient House.

Everything was strangely quiet. During term there was never a quiet moment throughout the day at St. Frank’s. With so many hundreds of boys always there, any kind of silence was out of the question.

But now it was different.

There were only a few people on the whole school premises, and on this particular afternoon there was no wind, and a dead silence hung over all. Mr. Cuttle distinctly heard the cackling of some chickens right away down in Bellton village, followed by a sharp barking of a dog.

“These days was depressing!” said Mr. Cuttle gloomily. “Why was they depressing? Ask me! Because there was nothing but church bells and happiness. Happiness was bad. There was lots of money spent on things what folks wasn’t needing. And there was trouble arterwards!”

Mr. Cuttle soliloquised in this fashion, smoking peacefully, and comfortably telling himself that he would have well over a week longer before it would be necessary for him to get back to normal duties.

On the still air he could hear the throbbing hum of a powerful motor-engine, and it seemed to be coming nearer and nearer. Mr. Cuttle removed his pipe, and jerked his head on one side.

“That was a lorry!” he observed, solemnly addressing a cock-robin which

had alighted on a near-by bush. "What was a lorry doing in these here parts to-day? Ask me! Lorries wasn't supposed to do work at holiday times! Mebbe it wasn't a lorry, arter all, but a mail-van. Or, mebbe, it was neither one nor the other!"

Mr. Cuttle moved laboriously towards the gateway, curiosity directing his footsteps. For the approaching sound told him that the motor vehicle was coming in his direction. The porter had not the slightest idea that his peace was soon to be rudely disturbed.

Arriving at the gate, he peered out through the bars. Bellton Lane was snowy white, and only a few tracks of recent vehicles were upon the road. Snow lay everywhere, and the frost was keen.

To Mr. Cuttle's surprise, he could see a big, dark-brown char-a-banc coming along from the direction of the village. And he was even more astounded when he saw that it contained a number of juniors, all of them rather blue with the cold, and with numbed hands and feet.

"My heye!" exclaimed Mr. Cuttle blankly. "Was I dreaming, or was I seeing things? Ask me! That was a charybang, and them was boys. Them was boys belonging to this here school. What was they doing here days and days before the holidays was over? Ask me! I was puzzled!"

Mr. Cuttle showed it, and he stared out rather blankly when the char-a-banc came to a halt in front of the closed gates. Armstrong and Co. climbed down stiffly into the road, and commenced stamping about in order to restore their numbed circulation. They did not feel very much like a conquering force at that moment. They needed something hot and cheering.

If they had had a stiff fight in front of them they would have been helpless; they could never have faced a determined opposition. But they knew well enough that they only had to walk in.

"Here we are!" said Armstrong, banging his gloved hands together. "Seems funny, finding St. Frank's so jolly quiet, doesn't it? But it won't be quiet for long, and we shall soon be having a rare old beano."

"Rather!"

"Let's get inside as soon as possible!"

"I'm starving!"

"Same here!"

The juniors stamped about, and Armstrong tipped the driver of the char-a-banc, who was a cheerful individual with a large grin. He had been wondering why these juniors were zoming back to the school at such a time; but he had obtained more than an inkling on the way—mainly from T. T.'s frequent speeches. And the driver was keenly amused.

Armstrong gave him rather a big tip, and requested him to keep his mouth quiet in the village. The man said that he would get to Bannington before halting for a meal, and he promised not to speak. And the char-a-banc drove off, leaving the Rebels standing in the lane.

"There was something queer going hon!" came the gloomy voice of Mr. Cuttle. "There was boys come back to school before there was any school. That was rummy! Why was it rummy? Ask me! Because boys was not fond of school. Boys was fonder of holidays. That was true!"

"Hallo, Cuttle!" exclaimed Armstrong, moving towards the gates. "Got your keys on you? Open these gates, old son!"

"There was orders not to open no gates during holidays," exclaimed Mr. Cuttle abstractedly, as though Armstrong didn't exist. "There was a young gent asking for the gates to be opened. What was a man to do? Ask me? There was no gates going to be opened!"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Cuttle, old son," said Armstrong. "If you don't open these gates we'll half skin you when we get inside!"

The porter removed his pipe.

"I was going to be half skinned!" he exclaimed. "When the young gents was inside, they was going to make trouble. But how was they going to get inside with the gates closed? Ask me —"

"We don't want to ask you, you silly old fathead!" shouted Griffith. "It won't take us two minutes to get over the wall. Come on, you chaps!"

The Rebels needed something to warm them up, and they rushed at the wall with alacrity. They succeeded in climbing over after one or two unsuccessful attempts, and then they piled down into the Triangle.

"We'll jolly well show that old rotter!" said Armstrong warmly.

He bent down, and made a big snow-ball. The others following suit, and Mr. Cuttle, scenting danger, made a bee line for his lodge.

Whizz—whizz—whizz!

About a dozen snowballs shot through the air, and over half-a-dozen of them struck Mr. Cuttle forcibly. He staggered forward, roaring, and another fusillade smote him before he managed to get into his lodge and slam the door.

"Ha, ha ha!"

"Victory No. 1!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, Rebels!"

"On the ball!"

And the yelling juniors swooped down upon the Ancient House, and took it by storm. This was not a very creditable performance, considering there was no opposition.

The main door, of course, was locked, but the juniors knew well enough that the door leading into the servants' quarters would be open. It was. Mrs. Poulter appeared, full of amazement and indignation. She was swept aside like a blade of grass before a reaper. And the Rebels entered into possession of the Ancient House.

"Hurrah!"

"We've taken St. Frank's!"

This was not strictly true, for the College House and the Head's quarters were quite isolated from the Ancient House. However, Armstrong knew better than to divide his forces. They were not exceptionally strong, and the only way they could hope for victory was to remain in one body. They didn't need the College House, anyhow. To have full possession of the Ancient House was quite sufficient.

Mrs. Poulter and the other few servants were given one hour to quit. At first they indigantly refused to move. But, at last, seeing that the juniors were determined, they gave way. And the Rebels feverishly proceeded to fortify their stronghold and barricade themselves in.

Food and hot drink was one of the first considerations. They were delighted with the amount of stuff they found in the store rooms. There was flour enough to make bread for a month—potatoes, biscuits, tinned fish and meat, and everything needed to provide full and ample meals. The only article they would lack

would be fresh meat—and the juniors were quite indifferent about that.

Consternation reigned among the servants. They had been unable to put up any fight. Taken by surprise, and in a hopeless minority, they had not an earthly chance of offering any resistance.

The Rebels had carried out the first part of their project. They were in possession of the Ancient House. Reckless, foolish, they had embarked upon this mad enterprise hardly realising what it was to lead to. But they certainly had all the advantages of the situation.

CHAPTER VIII.

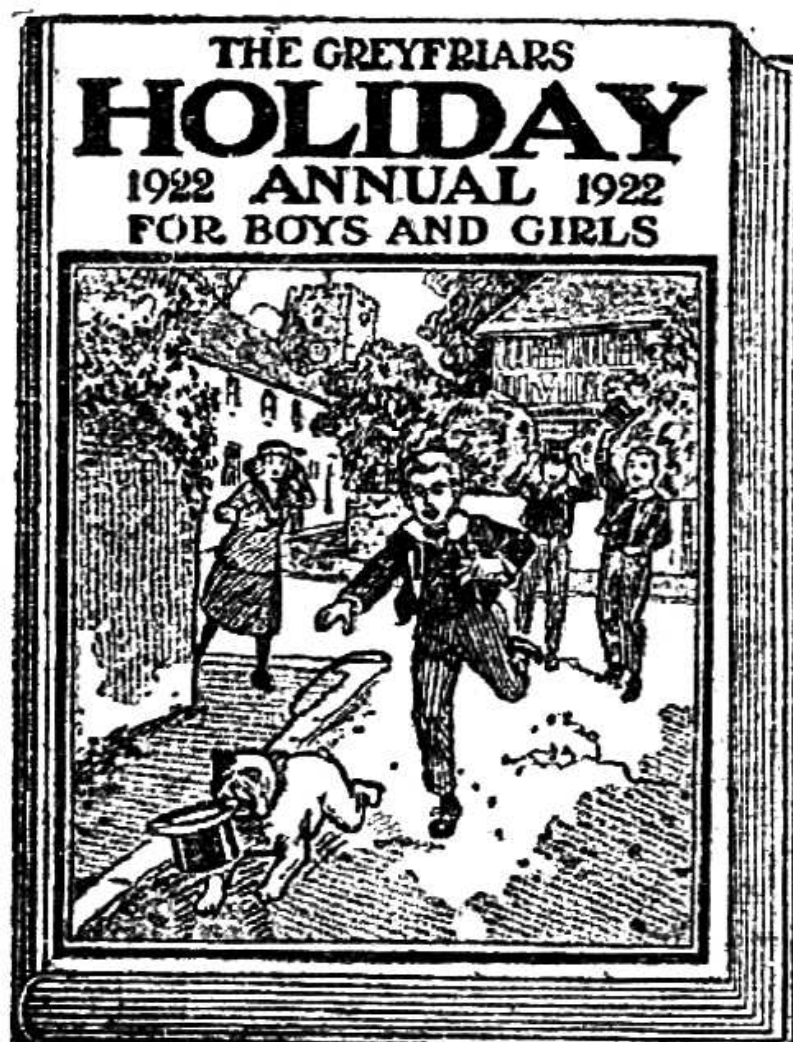
OVER THE TOP.



"HERE we are!"
"Yes, and here they are, too! My hat! And they're kicking up enough noise about it, my sons!"

"Begad! Rather, dear old boys!"
Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy
(Continued on page 33.)

The Best Xmas Gift Book!



CRAMMED WITH SCHOOL STORIES & BRIGHT PICTURES! GET IT TO-DAY!

Watson and I sat on the top of the wall which bordered the Triangle at St. Frank's. From this point of vantage we could see the Ancient House quite distinctly. It was comparatively early in the evening, but pitchy dark, and we had just arrived at the end of our journey, well in accordance with schedule.

And all the other Loyalists were with us—thirty strong, all told.

We had made the journey in three of Lord Dorrimore's motor-cars. Nelson Lee had not come with us, but he had promised to be along later with the Head. The gov'nor meant to quell this mutiny as soon as possible—but he did not object to our going on in advance to see what we could do. In fact, he thought it was possibly the best thing that could be done.

The evening had turned out still and inky. Clouds obscured the sky, but the frost was as keen as ever. The College House lay in complete darkness. But the Ancient House was ablaze—every window glittering and gleaming with light.

The Rebels could not possibly be using every room, but they evidently believed in being cheerful. And so they had gone round, switching on the electric lights everywhere. And the effect was very striking, outside.

"Listen!" said Watson. "They seem to be pretty merry about it."

We remained quiet, and from the Ancient House came the sounds of singing and shouting and much laughter. The Rebels, apparently, were holding high revel to celebrate their somewhat hollow victory.

For, so far, they had not been tested.

They had simply walked into their position without being challenged. And they had most of the trump cards. If they utilised their advantages to the full effect, they would take a great deal of dislodging.

The other Loyalists climbed to the top of the wall, and stared over. They were cold and chilled—and quite ready for a brisk battle. And they were all prepared to obey my instructions to the letter.

"Well, Chief, what's the programme?" asked Pitt briskly.

"First of all, we've got to have a look at the position," I said. "You chaps must stay here while I go out scouting. I'm going to take a prowling round, and have a look at the back.

There might be one or two weak spots there, in the defence. Once we can get in we shall be O. K."

"Rather!" said Handforth. "We've only got to get inside, and these blighters will be whacked. And it'll be easy enough to get inside."

"Will it?" said De Valerie. "I'm not so sure!"

"Neither am I," I agreed. "That's the most difficult job of all, Handy—getting inside. If we can make a surprise attack, and enter before the Rebels can resist—why, we shall be on velvet. But I can hardly imagine that they have neglected to set two or three fellows on the watch."

"Hadn't I better come scouting with you?" asked Handforth. "I'm just the fellow to go on a job of that sort."

I grinned in the darkness.

"Thanks all the same, Handy, but I think I can manage alone," I said.

"You remain here with the others, and hold yourself ready to act when the word comes. I don't suppose it'll be long before we get busy."

"Begad, it'll be a stiff fight, dear boys," murmured Sir Montie.

"Rats!" said Handforth loftily. "Do you think these Rebels will keep us out? Not likely! We'll show them what we're made of!"

I left the others almost at once, and set off softly through the snow towards the Ancient House. I did not go direct, but made a detour, keeping well in cover all the time—for I was still quite certain that some of the Rebels were on the watch.

A light was gleaming from Josh Cuttle's lodge, and I caught the sound of conversation going on within. Evidently the scandalised Mr. Cuttle was discussing the advent of the afternoon with the head gardener, and possibly Mrs. Poulter and one or two of the others.

Arriving at the rear of the Ancient House, I soon found that my expectations were realised. Every window here was closely shuttered—every lower window, that is. The upper windows were tightly closed, and I was pretty certain that improvised barricades had been thrown up.

I came to the conclusion, at the end of my trip, that our only chance was to make a bold bid for it, and to storm the Ancient House in a frontal attack.

There was no prospect of getting in by surprise.

And while I was engaged scouting thus, Armstrong and Co. were thoroughly enjoying themselves within. After the first awe of the position was over, they regarded themselves as heroes and victors. They were in possession of the Ancient House! They had defied all law and authority, and had seized the school! And now that everything was comfortable, they were feeling more and more secure, and they were telling themselves they could defy a whole army, if necessary.

"We've got to keep our heads," Armstrong said, again and again. "If an attack comes, and we get into a panic—well, that'll be the finish. At all costs, we've got to remain cool."

"You can trust us!"

"Rather!"

"We don't care who comes—we'll be ready!"

"Three cheers for the Rebels!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for liberty!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with tyranny and slavery!"

"Hear, hear!"

The Rebels were getting themselves excited. They had partaken of food and hot tea, and were feeling ready for anything. Fires were burning brightly in the domestic quarters, and the atmosphere was warm and cheerful. And the Rebels had not been idle. Every window was guarded, and the lower ones were ready to be shuttered at an instant's notice. Barricades were being prepared even now, and the Rebels were convinced that any attack would find them prepared.

"We've got the upper hand, my sons, and we're going to keep it," said Armstrong. "But it's quite likely that we shall have somebody down here before the evening's over—Mr. Lee, for certain."

"What if Mr. Lee comes?"

"We shall defy him, of course," said Armstrong. "Do you think we care a jot about the rotter! He supports the Head, and agrees with all his bullying and tyranny. If Lee comes here, we'll jolly well tell him what we think about him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll tell him a few home truths —"

Armstrong paused, as one of the Rebels came hurrying towards him at full speed. It was Clifton, and Clifton was looking excited.

"I say, they're coming!" he panted breathlessly.

"Eh?"

"They're coming!"

The juniors crowded round their leader, some excited, some dismayed, some looking almost scared.

"What do you mean—they're coming?" demanded Armstrong sharply.

"Who? What have you seen——"

"Nipper and Co., I think!" said Clifton.

"Nipper and Co.!" shouted Armstrong, startled. "But—but that's impossible! I thought Mr. Lee might come down, or the Head—but Nipper and his crowd! Surely they haven't left Lord Dorrimore's place, and followed us——"

"Well, there are a lot of chaps out in the Triangle," said Clifton quickly.

"I was on the watch upstairs, and I saw them distinctly—dozens and dozens! They're creeping up as quiet as mice, and some of them are carrying planks!"

Armstrong set his teeth.

"Well, it's come sooner than I expected," he exclaimed. "It's an attack—and it's going to be a severe one, by the look of it. But there's nothing to be afraid of—we can hold the whole crowd at bay. Don't forget my instructions!"

The Rebels had been trained in advance, and they rushed away to their various posts. In a second the shutters of the lower windows were slammed to. They were not ordinary shutters, but heavy metal bars which clamped automatically into position and made it impossible for anybody to get through the big windows.

Outside, we knew at once that Armstrong and Co. had spotted us. The sudden cessation of shouts from within, the scuffling of feet, and, finally, the active preparations told us that the enemy knew of our presence.

Further secrecy was unnecessary.

"Now, then, you chaps!" I shouted. "Charge! We've got to get inside!"

"Hurrah!"

"Loyalists for ever!"

The silence was broken in a second. We rushed to the attack with vigour and vim. The door of Mr. Cuttle's lodge opened, and two or three figures came out, staring in astonishment.

And we must have made a curious spectacle. The darkness was intense, but the lights from all the Ancient House windows cast a glare upon the snow, revealing our figures distinctly and clearly.

Handforth and Co. had rushed away to the woodshed. Here, according to all their knowledge, a couple of ladders were to be had—they were generally lying alongside the high wall.

Sure enough, they were there, and the heroes of Study D grasped one of them, and yelled for some of the other fellows to fetch the second ladder. It was a good plan. If some of the attackers could get in at an upper window while we were storming the ground floor, all the better.

In a moment, the Triangle was a scene of bustling activity.

Fellows carrying planks, ladders reared against the walls, and juniors swarming everywhere. As an opening I led my men towards two of the biggest windows. But we had hardly commenced operations before the defenders replied.

Whizz! Whizz!

A perfect hail of snowballs came whistling down from above.

Staring up, I saw a number of Rebels leaning over the parapet of the roof. They had evidently got up through the attic staircase, and there, on the flat leads, they had an ample supply of snow to make munitions. It was a good scheme—one that I should have adopted for myself. Armstrong was not lacking in ingenuity. To storm the windows with a hail of snowballs hissing down from above was no pleasant task.

Handforth and Co. were climbing up one of the ladders, and Pitt, Grey, and De Valerie were swarming up the other. Their objective was the dormitory—which had two windows. If once they could get inside they might be able to hold the enemy at bay while the rest of us came up the ladders.

But victory was not so easy to obtain.

Handforth was leading the way up his ladder, and before he had proceeded half the distance, the dormitory window was flung open, and three or four Rebels appeared. They were defiant and noisy.

"Yah!"

"Rotten Loyalists!" they yelled. "We'll show you whose master!"

Swish—swish—hisssss!

It came by surprise. A pail of icy-cold

water was upturned, and the full contents splashed down upon Handforth and Church and McClure. The effect was electrical, as may well be imagined.

"Yow!" gasped Handforth. "Gug—gug—grooooooh!"

"Ooooooh!" shivered Church. "Hi, look out—Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Rebels howled with laughter. Handforth lost his hold on the ladder, and slithered down wildly. The next second, he and his two chums, dropped to the ground, and it was fortunate for them they were not hurt. Handforth was soaked, and roaring with rage.

"You—you rotters!" he bellowed. "Just wait—"

"Look out!" panted McClure. "Dodge, you ass!"

Swish!

Another bucket of water came hissing down. It outspread as it descended, and the icy water splashed upon several of us. And this, combined with the snowballs, fairly took the heart out of the attackers.

They broke ranks, hesitated, and retreated in disorder. I wasn't surprised. It was rather too much of a good thing to face downfalls of freezing water and hard snowballs. The water was by far the worse.

"Hurrah!"

"They're beaten—they're whacked!"

The Rebels roared with triumph.

"What's the idea of this, Armstrong?" I shouted, as I approached a little nearer. "Have you gone off your rocker? You must be mad to seize the school like this, and defy all comers!"

"You'll be mad if you try any more attempts to get in!" yelled Armstrong. "You don't stand an earthly, and the best thing you can do is to give it up. We're in possession, and we're going to hold the Ancient House until our demands are granted."

"Oh, and what are your demands?" I asked.

"Mind your own business!"

"I think it is my business—"

"We're not going to parley with anybody except the Head, or the Governors!" shouted Armstrong. "We hold all the trump cards, and we're going to use them as we like. You couldn't drive us out of here if you tried for a week. Go back to your bullying tyrant and his supporter, Mr. Lee! We're fed-up with both of them!"

"We're not standing 'em any more!" roared the Rebels.

I compressed my lips.

"What's Mr. Lee done?" I asked.

"He's supported the Head, and we've finished with him," replied Armstrong.

"And we're not surrendering until we get complete satisfaction. The best thing you can do is to crawl away!"

"You ought to be feeling pretty satisfied with yourselves!" I said bitterly. "You've outraged Lord Dorrimore's hospitality, and ruined his Christmas party. You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourselves!"

"We're sorry about the party, but that could't be helped," said Armstrong.

"Our only chance to seize the school was to do it now—and so we got busy. If you like to make another attack you're welcome to start on the job. We're quite ready to entertain you!"

"Come on, you blessed Loyalist!"

"Would you like some more?"

Handforth foamed at the mouth.

"Wait till I get at you!" he stormed.

"By George! I'll smash the whole lot of you to pulp! You—you rotters! We'll get the upper hand soon, and then you'll be sorry you were ever born!"

Armstrong laughed.

"It's easy enough to talk like that," he sneered. "Come and drive us out—don't keep talking about it! We'll give you a lively time!"

Handforth glared at me.

"Ain't you going to do something?" he demanded excitedly.

"No, not now," I replied.

"Why not?" bellowed Handforth.

"Do you call yourself a leader——"

"If you think you're a better one, you can start an attack," I cut in. "We've

failed at the first attempt, and it's a moral certainty we should fail at the second. It's not worth the risk, Handy. Getting soaked to the skin in this weather is simply asking for influenza and pneumonia. The best thing we can do is to get into the College House, make some fires, and have something to eat. We can discuss ways and means then, and plan out a proper campaign."

"Hear, hear!" said Pitt. "I second the proposal."

All the others agreed, and Handforth was forced to accept the will of the majority. And as we departed across the Triangle to the College House a series of derisive catcalls and yells followed us from the victorious Rebels.

Within half-an-hour we were in the College House, and fires were burning.

The position was a curious one, and full of dramatic possibilities. St. Frank's was supposed to be deserted, for the Christmas holidays were by no means over. But here were two rival factions of juniors, bitterly opposed to one another. One party held the Ancient House, and one party held the College House.

But while we were all in favour of supporting the Headmaster and the school authorities, Armstrong and Co. had frankly declared war against every kind of rule and regulation. If it was humanly possible, we were intent upon driving them out of their position.

But they had barred themselves in—and had barred us out!

That some extra special brand of excitement was brewing was very apparent. Some strenuous times were coming for St. Frank's!

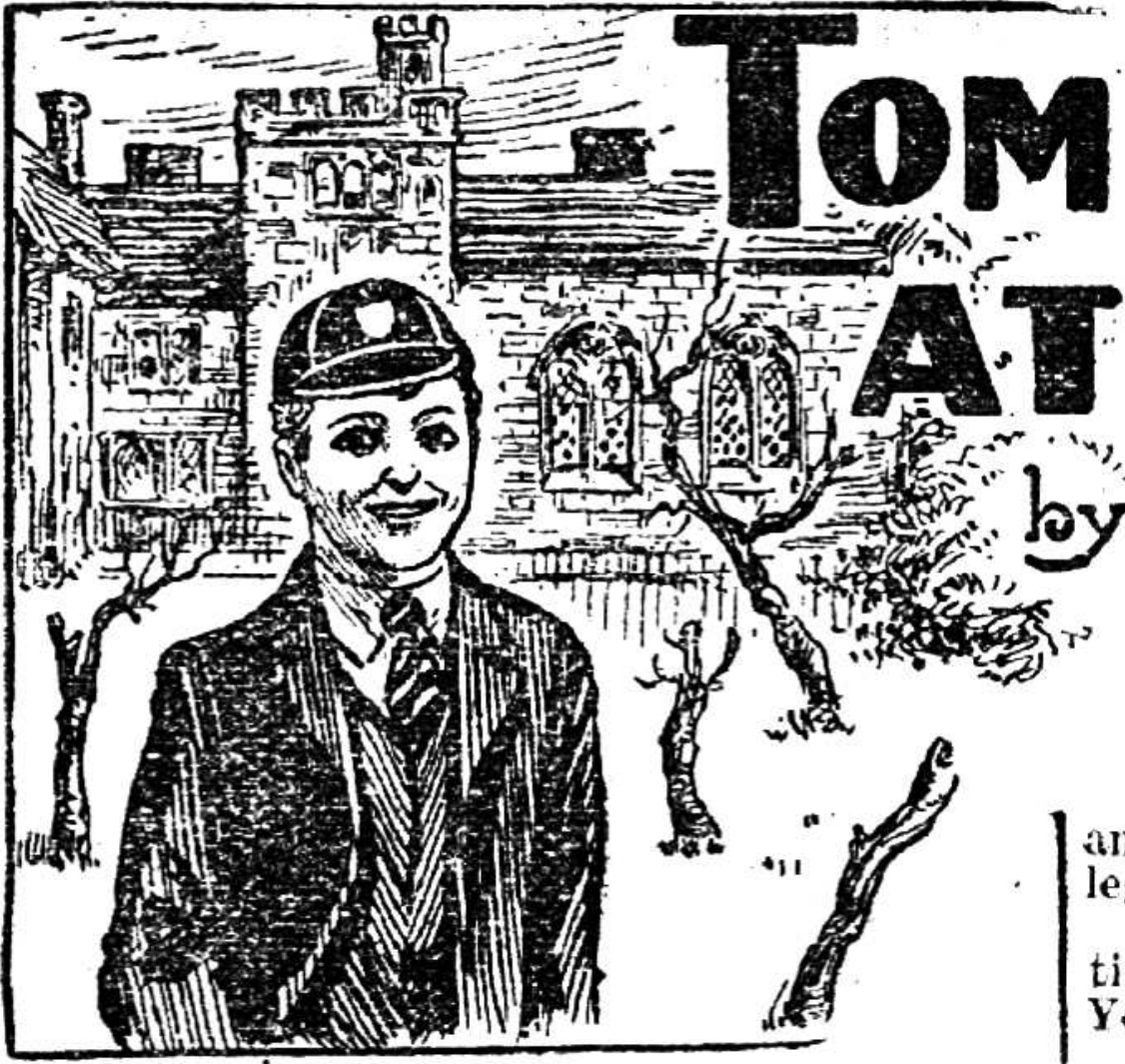
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TOM TARTAR AT SCHOOL

by HARCOURT BURRAGE

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School Story).

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Tom Tartar arrives at Mr. Wrasper's school, an institute for the culture of the young by moral force only. The school consists of thirty boys and Foster Moore, a tutor, who is much feared by the boys. Tom chums up with Sam Smith and Willie Gray, who acquaint him with Mr. Wrasper's original methods and initiate him into the band of the "Eagles," a party opposed to the "Cuckoos," of whom Jonah Worrey, a bully, is the leader. Tom is sent on an errand by Mr. Wrasper, and witnesses a lad thrown into a lock by a burly ruffian. Our hero goes to the rescue.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER VI. (Continued.)

A Dastardly Attack—Rescued.

ONE thing was to be marked in him, and Tom saw it during the moment he occupied in pulling off his coat.

He was not in deadly fear, although his peril was great. In that time of danger he kept cool.

Apparently he did not see Tom, who having whipped off his coat, plunged down fearlessly to the rescue. His sudden descent startled the boy, and throwing up his arms, he was sinking down, when Tom came to the surface, and grasped him by the arm.

"Don't struggle or cry out," he said. "I can hold you up for a long time. Somebody may come along directly and help us."

"Why have you risked your life?" asked the boy faintly. "You can't get out of here any more than I can."

It seemed so, for there was no hand-hold on the smooth, slimy walls.

"Possibly a grip might be got on the gates," said Tom. "Quiet now, come with me—that's right, keep your arms under water

and your head up. You may kick out your legs—that will help us."

"I can't," said the boy; "they are getting cramped—I am not used to the water. You'll be drowned, too!"

"Never mind me," said Tom, striking out with one arm for the lock gates; "mind nothing, but do as I tell you. That's it—here we are!"

They had reached the gates, and Tom clutched the wood-work, but alas! there was no hand-hold there either.

The wood-work was slimy like the walls, although some parts of it projected from the rest, it was as difficult to grasp as a bar of soap would have been.

Tom felt that the end was not far off.

Alone, he might have swum about the lock for some time, but burdened as he was he could not keep afloat more than a minute or so.

The lad he sought to rescue was succumbing to the unaccustomed chill of the water, his cheeks were white and his eyes dimming fast.

"Leave me, and save yourself," he gasped.

"I can't do that," replied Tom. "Help! Help! In the lock here—we are drowning!"

He uttered the cry on the poor chance of being heard, but he had no real hope of anyone being near to rescue him.

Judge then his joy, when he heard somebody bound upon the foot-bridge, and the next moment a voice was heard asking:

"What be ye two doing down there?"

Tom knew the voice although he had only heard it for the first time that morning. It was Rosy Ralph, who had come thus opportunely upon the scene.

"Can you help us?" said Tom, as he looked up and saw the shock head thrust over the edge of the lock footway.

Rosy Ralph, who had been lying down upon his stomach, leaped up, and, after a quick glance round, darted off to the bank.

In a few moments he reappeared, dragging a stout plank with him, which he lowered into the water close to Tom.

"Stick to that," he said until I get some chaps to 'elp 'ee out."

"I can do that much," said Tom cheerily.

The plank was something he could cling to,

if need be, for half an hour or more, and the lad he held recovered a little and put an arm over it.

"I can hold on now," he said, "look to yourself."

"I'm all right," said Tom. "How's the cramp? Can you move your legs?"

The boy made a wry face and tried to smile, but it was evident he was suffering, and required help, so Tom continued to hold him, and talked to him cheerfully.

It seemed a long time before help came, but it arrived at last. There was a rushing of feet and a confusion of voices, then half a dozen men appeared on the bridge; foremost Tom saw the aristocratic-looking gentleman he had observed by the lodge-gates.

No time was wasted in talking.

Ropes and poles had been brought, and one of the former was lowered to Tom.

He deftly tied it under the arms of his companion in trouble, and he was drawn up out of danger.

Tom grasped a pole lowered to him, and with its aid climbed up the lock gate.

The elderly man grasped him by the hand.

"I can't say much to you now," he said. "Please come up to the Hall at once."

"Thank you," replied Tom, "but I think I ought to be getting back to school."

"Oh, bother school to-day," was the rejoinder.

"But with the exception of being a little wet," said Tom, "there is nothing the matter with me."

"Give me your name."

"Tom Tartar."

"I shall not forget it."

"I ought to tell you," said Tom, "that this is a very serious business. Your son was thrown into the lock."

"Cecil," cried the old gentleman, turning to his son, who was stamping about and rubbing his legs, "who has dared to make this attempt upon your life?"

"I don't know," the boy replied. "He came up behind me."

"Perhaps you can tell me what he was like," asked the gentleman, turning to Tom.

But Tom could only say that he was a roughish, common-looking fellow. He did not get a good view of his face.

Rosy Ralph stood near them, glancing quickly from one to the other with an expression of keen intelligence.

But the look faded away as the gentleman turned to him and asked:

"Perhaps you saw who it was, my boy?"

"No, I didn't see nothing, Sir Claude," replied Rosy Ralph stolidly.

"Where is your father?" inquired Sir Claude Freshly—for the gentleman was none other.

"Feyther baint at home," said the boy. "He went down to the withy beds early this mornin'."

The baronet looked at him curiously.

"Well, well," he said. "I won't press you

further on the point just now. You did the right thing in rushing off and fetching help, and I'm very much obliged to you. Whatever I may think of your father, Ralph, I believe you to be a good boy. Now, suppose I give you some money, what will you do with it, eh?"

"Buy somethin' to eat, Sir Claude."

"You won't give it to your father?"

"No fear I won't!"

"Very well, then. Take this."

And Rosy Ralph found four half-crowns placed in his palm.

Wide open went the youngster's eyes, while his face suddenly burned with excitement.

"All this for I?" he gasped. "Oh, dear! I be a rich 'un now an' no mistake!"

"And now, young, sir," said Sir Claude Freshly, turning to Tom Tartar, "is there anything I can do for you to show my gratitude?"

Tom shook his head and smiled.

"All I want, sir," he replied, "is some dry clothes; so, if you'll please excuse me, I'll be getting back to the school."

"Just a moment!" exclaimed Cecil Freshly, stepping forward. "I wish you'd shake hands with me."

Tom gripped the small, delicate hand which the baronet's son extended.

"It was jolly plucky of you to do what you did," said the youngster. "If ever I can do you a good turn I'll be only too glad."

"All right!" laughed Tom. "Perhaps one of these days I may come on you for help. Anyway, I hope we'll see each other again, and that we shall be friends. Good-bye!"

Tom shook hands with him again, and also with Sir Claude. Then he set off for the school, followed by a cheer from the men who had come with the baronet to the rescue.

But ere he had gone very far he heard somebody running behind him, and, looking back over his shoulder, he saw it was Rosy Ralph.

Tom at once halted and greeted the ragged youngster cheerily.

"I wants to say somethin' to you!" panted Ralph.

"All right! Go ahead! Wait a bit, though! I want to say something to you, first. I forgot to thank you just now, Ralph; but I hope it isn't too late. If you hadn't fetched help, I should have been a goner—and so would the other chap."

"'Twas you I fetched help for," answered Rosy Ralph. "I wouldn't ha' done it for t'other chap! That's what I wanted to tell 'ee."

"I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, Ralph," said the astonished Tom. "Has Cecil Freshly ever done you any harm?"

"No!"

"Well, then, why do you—"

"His feyther sent my feyther to prison!" interrupted Rosy Ralph, with a sudden display of ferocity.

"What for?" asked Tom.

"Just for takin' one or two rabbits."

"Poaching, eh?"

"Feyther says rabbits an' sich-like creeturs belongs to anybody as can ketch 'em."

"Is your father kind to you?"

"No, he be main cruel! He beats and kicks I, he do, an' if he knowed I'd got all this money, he'd take it away from I."

"And yet you stick up for him!" exclaimed Tom.

"He be my feyther," said the boy simply.

"Well, I suppose blood is thicker than water. But remember, Ralph, he isn't my father, and if ever I find out that he had anything to do with that affair at the lock, I shall do my best to get him punished for it."

Rosy Ralph's eyes fell to the ground. Then he said stubbornly:

"Feyther was over at the withy beds—four mile away—so it couldn't be him as done it."

"We shall see," replied Tom. "Well, ta-ta for the present, Rosy Ralph! I must be off. I'm feeling chilly."

And Tom started off at a trot, and did not halt again until he reached the school.

CHAPTER VII.

The Secret of the Solitary Chamber.

AFTERNOON classes were just over, and Tom was still sufficiently wet to excite attention, among the boys. But declining to answer any questions at present, he went upstairs to change his clothes.

He was engaged in this task when McLara entered the room.

"You were a long while gone to the quarry, old chap," he said. "What's happened?"

Tom told him, and McLara listened with close attention.

"They're big people at the Hall," he said, "and if you've made friends in that quarter you're lucky. By the way, if you'd like to see Gray and Sam Smith, you can."

"Oh, rather! Are they out of solitary?"

"No, but Wrasper and Moore are out of the house—which is just as good."

"Right you are! Let's go and see them now."

Tom followed McLara downstairs. There was nobody in sight, although they could hear Wooden Jerry growling to himself in the pantry as they passed it.

Walking cautiously, and occasionally pausing to listen, McLara led the way to a room at the back of the house. It was a wainscotted apartment, and was used as a receptacle for empty boxes and old lumber. There were two windows in it, both so overgrown with creeper that the room was in twilight even on the brightest day.

On one side of the room was a large fireplace on either side of which was a door.

"The two doors of the solitaires," explained McLara. "On each side of the fireplace, and built in the thick wall, is a small,

narrow, secret room, once used as a hiding-place—perhaps in the time of Cromwell."

"Precious poor hiding-places, with doors!" commented Tom.

"Wait a bit," replied McLara. "About twenty years ago, somebody found out that the walls were hollow, and, hoping to find some treasure, they had the wall cut in two places. Then they discovered the secret rooms."

"But no treasure—eh?" asked Tom.

"They found three skeletons," answered McLara gravely, "and bits of clothing, swords, pistols, and some mouldy books. But there was one thing they didn't find."

"And what was that?"

"The original way in! Perhaps they didn't look for it. Anyway, they had those doors put in, and used the hiding-place as store-rooms. The secret entrance wasn't found until about six months ago."

"Who found it?"

"Sam Smith!"

"How did he manage it?"

"Well, you see, one afternoon Warby—he's a chap who left last term—was in solitary, and Sam came in here to talk to him by knocking—"

"Knocking? What on earth d'you mean?"

"Oh, we've got an alphabet of knocks out of a book about prisoners, and we—but never mind about that now. Sam was knocking on the wall when he felt something hard and round under the panel, and—"

"And then he discovered the secret spring!" broke in a deep voice.

Tom Tartar and McLara swung round, to find, however, that there was no cause for alarm. For it was only Larry Turrell who had come in unperceived, and who had assumed the deep bass of a man in order to startle them.

"Crumbs!" gasped McLara. "What a turn you gave me! I thought it was old Wrasper!"

Turrell grinned, and then addressed Tom.

"Tartar," he said, "as you are now one of us, we've decided to keep nothing from you in the way of secrets."

"McLara," he went on, turning to cautious Johnny, "just pop outside and see that there's nobody hanging about. If there isn't, we'll introduce our new eagle to the school cage!"

CHAPTER VIII.

In the Solitary Chamber.

MCLARA reported all quiet outside, and Turrell, stepping up to the panelling, stooped down and pressed his thumb upon the bottom.

It was one of the smaller panels, and when it quietly slid on one side showed an opening about eighteen inches square—just big enough to squeeze through.

There was an interior space between that and the wooden wall of the secret chamber,

and another panel to open by similar means.

When this was done Turrell bade Tom go forward.

"Sam is in there," he said. "You go in. McLara and I will give Gray a look just to cheer him up."

Tom crept through and the panels were closed behind him by Turrell.

At first the place seemed to be quite dark, but the moment the panels closed a match was struck, and Tom saw the laughing face of Sam Smith.

Sam lit a piece of candle and disclosed a small room about four feet wide and eight long. The only furniture it contained was a low stool.

"Behold the chamber devoted to reflection!" said Sam, waving his hand in the manner of a showman.

"What a beastly hole!" commented Tom.

"Yes, it isn't particularly luxurious, is it? Twenty-four hours in the place are quite long enough for one dose!"

"Why, there isn't even a bed!"

"One is brought in at night and taken away in the morning," replied Sam. "It isn't quite dark when you are used to it, for there are air holes into the chimney, and a little light comes down that way."

"But what do you do to amuse yourself?"

"Read," said Sam. "I have half a dozen books behind the panels, and bits of candles. So, after all, it isn't so bad, especially when a chum can drop in now and then."

"Wrasper ought to have a week here!" said Tom.

"It would do him good," Sam agreed.

Tom did not stay very long in the dismal den. Sam said he could only permit flying visits for fear of the secret of the panel being discovered.

"I couldn't stand solitary without books and candles," he said. "I had one dose of it before I found the secret way in and out, and I don't wonder at the terror the Cuckoos feel when they even think of this place!"

"It is a pity you can't trust them," Tom said.

Sam shook his head.

"Wouldn't do," he replied. "It would be sure to be blown upon. Now, go along, I dare say I shall be out to-night. Twenty-four hours is the usual dose."

Turrell and McLara were waiting for Tom outside.

Gray was all right, they said, amusing himself with working out problems on a draughtboard.

The boys sauntered away, and were going quietly down by the side door, when they met Pubsey Wrasper.

"Here! What are you lot doing, prowling about the house?" he asked suspiciously.

"What's that to you?" replied Tom. "And what do you mean by speaking in that way to us? Do you want your head punched?"

"You daren't punch it!" said Pubsey.

Tom did not argue the matter with him.

The sight of the "solitary" had made him rather irritable, and he was in no mood for any of Pubsey's cheek. So he promptly dealt that saturnine youth a blow that sent him staggering against the wall.

Pubsey, with a howl of rage, flew at him and began to bite and tear like a cat.

Tom pinioned him by the arms, and turning him over, laid him on the floor upon his back.

"Give in," he said, "or I will rub your nose on the door-mat!"

"You are too strong for me!" whined Pubsey.

"Do you own yourself licked!" asked Tom.

"Yes," was the answer.

"Then get up!" said Tom.

Pubsey got up, and, with a malignant scowl on his face, slouched away.

"You have made an enemy there, and a dangerous one," said McLara.

"I'm not afraid of anything he can do," said Tom.

That evening, as anticipated, Sam Smith and Gray were set free. The latter looked pale, as if he had not quite escaped the influence of solitary confinement, but Sam Smith was as cheerful as ever.

Pubsey Wrasper, of course, reported the affair with Tom to his father, but he was surprised to find it rather coldly received, not only by Mr. Wrasper, but by Foster Moore also.

"Did you do nothing to irritate him?" asked the latter.

"Nothing! I never irritate anyone," Pubsey answered.

"You must have done something," said his father.

This was a very unusual way for Pubsey's reports to be received, and the youth retired in a sulky mood. He simply hated Tom Tartar, and had hoped to get him into trouble.

The real cause of Mr. Wrasper's leniency may be gathered from the short conversation which took place between him and his assistant when Pubsey had departed.

"This saving of young Freshley's life is most unfortunate!" said Mr. Wrasper. "Sir Claude is certain to take a close and friendly interest in Tartar now."

"But Sir Claude won't always be in the neighbourhood," said Foster Moore.

"No, that's true. When he is away in London we can take young Tartar in hand!"

"The insolent young lout wants breaking in badly!" growled Moore. "I would like to begin the breaking-in process at once!"

"No, no! We must be patient! We must bide our time!"

"I suppose we must," was the sullen reply.

And there, for the present, the matter rested.

Tom fully expected to get into trouble for hitting Pubsey; but, much to his surprise, he heard nothing more of the incident.

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

(Continued from page 40.)

Mr. Wrasper's manner towards him also made him marvel greatly. For the headmaster was smiling and polite, and he praised Tom openly next day in the school for his display of bravery, and expressed much satisfaction at having such a pupil as Tom under his charge.

Whereat Tom simply stood up and bowed modestly. He could not believe in the sincerity of Mr. Wrasper's laudatory words, and he wondered what game the master was up to.

CHAPTER IX.

An Encounter with Farmer Durdles— Miss Smatterly's Pretty Pupils.

AT Wrasper's school there certainly was plenty of freedom. People often remarked that the pupils seemed to play much more than they worked, and Mr. Wrasper was generally spoken of in the neighbourhood as being the kindest of men.

He contributed to local charities in a generous manner, and always had an amiable, if somewhat patronising, word for the poor.

If not exactly popular, he was by no means disliked, and if anyone considered that he did not conduct his school on proper lines, their objections arose from his being considered "too kind" to the boys.

Mr. Foster Moore did not get on so well with the local residents. He could not play the game of suavity so well as his principal, and his manner was reserved almost to sullenness.

It was immediately after dinner on Wednesday afternoon that Tom Tartar started out for a walk with Sam Smith and Larry Turrell. Passing from the playground, they crossed a road and plunged into a copse opposite. They had threaded this by the narrow footpath which ran through it, and had emerged on to the high road near White Gate Meadow, when suddenly Turrell exclaimed:

"Here comes Deaf Durdles in his cart! And, my word, isn't he laying on with that beastly whip of his!"

Tom, glancing along the road, saw a heavily-built, disagreeable-looking man driving a well-laden vehicle, between whose shafts was a decrepit old horse whose ribs were none too well covered with flesh.

That the animal was travelling at its best pace was apparent. But its best was not good enough for the surly-looking driver, for he was lashing the horse viciously, and urging it on with oaths shouted at the top of his voice.

"What an ugly old fiend to have the handling of a horse!" remarked Tom indignantly. "Who is the man?"

"He's a small farmer," answered Turrell, "and he's so deaf that he's known here-

abouts as 'Deaf Durdles.' He's got simply a vile temper!"

"I can see that!" said Tom. "Well, I'm going to stop him slashing that poor old horse of his!"

As he spoke, Tom strode into the centre of the road, just as the vehicle was nearing the spot.

"Git out o' the way, you rip!" bawled Farmer Durdles. "If ye don't, I'll drive over ye, dang me if I don't!"

"Do it, then!" retorted Tom.

Durdles gave the horse a slash with his whip; but the sagacious animal, at sight of Tom barring the way, ignored the lash and pulled up suddenly.

Farmer Durdles gave a yell of fury, and slashed again. The horse, however, trembling violently, declined to budge.

"You cruel brute!" shouted Tom. "Stop thrashing that horse—d'you hear?"

Whether Deaf Durdles heard or not, he certainly did not obey the command. For his surly, moon-like face went purple with rage, and he lashed out at the horse unmercifully.

That was enough for Tom! He made a sudden rush forward, and clambered into the cart. Durdles aimed a savage blow at him with the butt-end of his whip. Tom, however, dodged the blow, snatched the whip from the farmer's grasp, and sprang down into the road again. There he broke the handle of the whip in half across his knee, and, cutting up the thong with his knife, threw the fragments over the hedge.

Then, followed by a volley of oaths and threats from Deaf Durdles, Tom and his two chums turned into a field and continued their stroll.

(To be continued.)

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