

GREAT REVOLT AT ST. FRANK'S—FULL ACCOUNT INSIDE!

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The Thrilling Incident Depicted Above Occurs in This Week's Stirring
"Barring-Out" Story of St. Frank's:—

THE SIEGE OF FORT RESOLUTE!



Armstrong was pulled over before he could give an outcry. Other hands seized him by the legs and, as quick as thought, he was dragged back along the trench.



THE SIEGE OF FORT RESOLUTE!

In this story, the great "Bar-ring-Out" at St. Frank's takes on a new and startling development. For the first time in their

struggle against the authority of Miss Trumble, the self-elected new Head and chairman of the Board of Governors, the Juniors experience a serious reverse. Farmer Holt, an old enemy of the boys at the school, makes a successful raid on the rebels' food stores.

The Juniors' stock of supplies are seized, and then the siege begins. It is hoped that the rebels will be starved out of their stronghold and be compelled to surrender. Nipper, as Leader, is faced with a very difficult situation. It would be a humiliating end to their weeks of preparation for this revolt if the rebels were to be starved into surrender. How will Nipper meet this new peril? That will be answered in the following narrative, together with the exciting series of incidents which lead up to "The Siege of Fort Resolute."

THE EDITOR.

(RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER)

CHAPTER I

THE STRONG MAN OF THE FIFTH!

CRASH!

Cuthbert Chambers, of the Fifth Form at St. Frank's, brought his fist down with a resounding bang upon the table in Study No. 10.

"What I want to know is, are we going to let this woman do just as she jolly well likes?" he demanded fiercely. "Answer me that!"

"Steady on, old man!" said Bryant, as he rescued his cup of tea. "No need to get so violent, you know! You nearly had the teapot on the floor that time! Calm down a bit!"

"It isn't dignified!" added Phillips.
Chambers glared.

"Dignified!" he snapped. "Who cares twopence about dignity? Who do you think we are—a lot of old fogeys? There's too much blessed talk about dignity in the Fifth! I'm fed-up with it!"

Phillips and Bryant looked rather surprised. Strictly speaking, Chambers was the last fellow in the world to talk about dignity. As a general rule he was full of pomposity and swank. But, just recently, a change had come over him. At heart, he was one of the best, and, for all his faults, he was quite a favourite with the Fifth.

"Dignity?" repeated Phillips. "I don't see why you should be fed-up with the subject, old man. Don't forget that the Fifth Form is next to the Sixth, and we shall soon be going up——"

"And don't forget that we're only one form above the Remove!" interrupted Chambers tartly. "There's not such a big gap as you fellows try to make out. While a fellow's in the Remove he can lark about and do what he likes. But as soon as he goes up to the Fifth he's supposed to find his dignity! Pah! It's disgusting!"

And Chambers sat down heavily—totally unconscious of the fact that Phillips had thoughtfully placed a plate of bread and butter on the chair, fearing that his leader's thumps would upset it.

There was a splintering crack, and Chambers gave a fiendish yell.

"What the——"

"You—you idiot!" gasped Phillips. "You've sat on the bread and butter!"

Chambers leapt to his feet, with about four slices of bread and butter clinging to him. He tore them off, and flung them wildly upon the floor. He had an idea that he had been gashed by the broken plate. But he didn't feel much pain, and so he let it pass.

"I suppose you thought that was funny?" he snapped sourly.

"It's a disaster!" growled Phillips. "You don't think we can eat that bread and butter now, I suppose? We haven't got any more, and——"

"Confound the bread and butter!" roared Chambers. "Can't you think of anything else except food? I want to know if we're going to stand Miss Trumble's Tommy-rot any longer?"

Phillips and Bryant sighed.

"Why not let it drop?" asked Bryant. "We've been over it three or four times lately——"

"And we're going over it again now!" interrupted Chambers. "Yesterday, at tea-time, Nipper and Glenthorne, of the Remove, were sacked! Miss Trumble publicly expelled them——"

"It was more or less of a farce," said Phillips. "They're still here, and leading the rebels, too. I don't altogether approve of Miss Trumble, but we can't stand in with the juniors. It wouldn't be in keeping with the—the——"

"The dignity of the Fifth?" asked

Chambers tartly. "There it comes again! I think it's about time we finished with it! If the Fifth has got any dignity, it had better forget it. This is a time of crisis, and you can't get away from it. If we act strongly now we shall have the masters back. And we ought to act strongly. In my opinion, it's up to the Fifth to support the Remove—not by words, but by deeds!"

Chambers' chums said nothing. For twenty-four hours they had heard nothing else. Ever since the excitement of the previous evening, the great man of the Fifth had been "chewing the rag."

He proceeded to chew it even more.

"I'll just go over the facts!" he said grimly. "I'll just point out what's been happening lately——"

"My dear chap, we know it by heart!" groaned Bryant.

"Perhaps you do—but you haven't seen the significance of the facts!" declared Chambers. "So it's up to me to point them out. Only a few weeks ago St. Frank's was in a state of peace and tranquillity. Am I right or not?"

"Have it your own way!" said Phillips.

"In a state of peace and tranquillity!" repeated Chambers firmly. "Then, all of a sudden, Miss Trumble arrives! She swoops down on the school like a confounded tornado! She gets the Head's back up, and the Head resigns. Mr. Lee and Mr. Stockdale and all the other masters get their backs up, and they resign! All because of this woman!"

"Of course, it's rotten——"

"Rotten!" shouted Chambers. "It's insufferable! You can't get away from it! But that's only the beginning—the thin end of the wedge! As soon as the masters clear out, she calmly plants herself here in the Head's place, and gets a whole batch of females down! What are we made of in this Form? Wax, or putty, or what? We allow a woman to boss over us—we allow a woman to teach us in the class-rooms! Don't you call that disgusting?"

"Yes, it's absolutely rotten!" said Bryant seriously.

"I'm glad you admit it!" growled Chambers. "And as soon as these women get control, they start messing the school about! They stop football—they make the Remove go to bed at eight o'clock!"

"Yes, the Remove copped out badly!" admitted Phillips.

"We're all copping out!" declared Chambers! "I'll admit the Remove had the worst of it, but the whole position's bad. I admire the Remove—they had the courage to rebel!"

"It's easy enough for juniors to do that——"

"Oh, is it?" demanded Chambers. "Why is it any easier for them than it is for us? In fact, if we rebelled it would be ten times as good, because we're older. But it's left to the Remove to show us the way."

The other seniors were silent.

"Nipper was the chap who had all the brains!" went on Chambers warmly. "He got the idea of making all those trenches round the old barn. And now the Remove are out there, dug in, and they refuse to shift until the masters come back."

"They're bound to be beaten in the long run," said Bryant.

"Rot!" said Chambers. "Rot! Absolute rot! When those Remove kids start something, they don't give in quickly. And they're going to win through now. They'll win through in a quarter of the time if we support them."

"How can we do that?"

"How?" snorted Chambers. "Why, by going out there and joining them! What would Miss Trumble do if we rebelled? She'd have no control left, and the masters would be back within twenty-four hours."

For once Chambers was displaying a large amount of common sense. His argument was quite correct. While Miss Trumble only had the Remove to deal with she could hold out—hoping against hope that she could bring the juniors to submission. But if the Fifth rebelled as well, her last hope would be gone. She would have to capitulate.

"Just think of what happened yesterday!" said Chambers, with contempt. "What does Miss Trumble do? She sells those meadows to Farmer Holt, and Holt comes along with a crowd of men to pitch the juniors off! Even with the assistance of a snowstorm they couldn't do it! They simply collared Nipper and Glenthorne, and Miss Trumble sacked them. But they're back again, and the whole thing was a farce."

"Those two kids are disgraced, anyhow!"

"Rats!" said Chambers. "The Remove's going to win—and when Miss Trumble gets pushed out, and the masters come back, all the facts will come out. Nipper and Glenthorne will be reinstated, or I'm a Dutchman! We had a lovely chance yesterday—and the Fifth refused to take it."

"The fellows had to think of their dignity," growled Bryant.

"Dignity again!" snorted Chambers. "I've got dignity—I hope so, anyway! But there comes a time when a fellow needs to throw dignity aside. Yesterday, when Miss Trumble sacked those juniors, I stood up and told her that the Fifth was going to rebel! The Fifth supported me—and then backed out at the last minute. The miserable tadpoles!"

"Go easy!" protested Phillips.

"They're nothing better!" exclaimed Chambers sourly. "But it's not too late, even now—there's still time for the Fifth to show its gumption. In fact, I'm going round to all the studies, and I'm going to get the chaps to back me up. I'll put some spirit into 'em!"

Bryant looked up, his eyes sparkling.

"If you get twenty other fellows to join in, I'll be with you!" he declared. "We'll

combine with the rebels, and finish the thing, once and for all."

"Same here!" said Phillips promptly.

"Good men!" declared Chambers. "That's the style! I thought I'd put some ginger into you! And now I'm going off to the other studies, and I'll make the fellows realise that it's up to us to get going!"

He strode out of the room, and went down the passage. It was not often that Chambers let himself go—but when he did he was something like Handforth of the Remove. He was like an earthquake.

He entered one study, and found Stevens and Simms having tea. They looked up, and were rather surprised to see Chambers' red face. He was evidently very excited.

"I'm going to put it to you straight!" said Chambers bluntly. "Are you willing to support the Remove? Are you willing to join the rebellion for the honour of the old school?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Stevens and Simms.

Chambers raved in vain. The seniors insisted upon taking the thing as a joke. Again and again Chambers tried to point out that it was up to the Fifth to get absolutely busy.

But it was useless.

And when he went to the next study it was just the same.

In fact, Chambers found that he had taken on a heavy task. The Fifth Form had been thinking things over, and it had decided that its dignity would not allow it to engage in any rebellion.

CHAPTER II

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER!



CHAMBERS was in a state of acute exasperation by the time he turned into the Fifth Form common-room. He had failed in the studies, but perhaps he would meet with better success here. There were about a dozen Fifth-Formers in the common-room, and Chambers rather liked an audience.

"I've got something to say to you fellows!" said Chambers, as he stood in the open doorway. "I'm just fed-up with the rest of the Fifth, but perhaps you'll show a bit of common sense."

"If it's about the Remove, you'd better dry up!" said one of the seniors. "We half-supported you yesterday, but we hadn't considered everything."

"That was a pity!" sneered Chambers.

"It's one thing for the Remove to hold a barring out, but it's not in keeping with the position of the Fifth," went on the other. "Just think what would happen if we joined these kids——"

"Exactly!" interrupted Chambers. "Just think what would happen! Miss Trumble would crumble up! Within two days she'd be gone, and Dr. Stafford would be back in his old place."

"Oh, rot!"

"It's not rot—it's the truth!" shouted Chambers. "You know it as well as I do. And we should have Mr. Nelson Lee back as a Housemaster. We should have old Pagett back in the Form-room. We often said rotten things about him, but he's miles better than these women!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We've only got to be firm, and the masters will soon be back!" continued the leader of Study No. 10. "I don't like to admit that the juniors are ahead of us—but it's the truth. The Remove has shown us the way. And now we've got to support the Remove."

"It can't be done——"

"It's got to be done!" roared Chambers. "You worms—you weak bounders! If you'd only put some pluck into yourselves, you'd be all right! Follow my lead, and there won't be any more trouble. Miss Trumble is a wash-out! All the other women are wash-outs!"

"Don't yell like that, you ass!"

"I'll yell as much as I like!" retorted Chambers. "I don't care who hears me, either! If Miss Trumble came herself, I'd give her my opinion to her ugly face!"

It was rather a curious coincidence, but there came a swish in the passage just behind Chambers at that moment. And the other Fifth-Formers were rather horrified to see Miss Jane Trumble appear. She paused, her black school gown waving in the draught. But Chambers did not know she was there.

"Dry up, old man!" breathed one of the others. "Go easy!"

"I'm not going easy!" snorted Chambers angrily. "Miss Trumble has made a mess of things ever since she arrived. She's an ugly, old, interfering cat! The sooner she leaves St. Frank's the better! How on earth the Governors were mad enough to elect her Chairman beats me!"

Chambers paused, and stared at two Fifth-Formers who were out of the line of Miss Trumble's vision. These two seniors were making the most extraordinary signs and grimaces—trying to make Chambers understand.

"Have you idiots gone mad?" demanded Chambers. "What's the idea of all this semaphore business? I expect it's the result of Miss Trumble's rotten administration. She's messed up everything, and I'd love to see her kicked out, neck and crop!"

The Headmistress of St. Frank's could stand it no longer.

"Boy!" she screamed.

Chambers twisted round, and gave a gulp.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

He backed into the common-room, utterly dumbfounded. And Miss Trumble followed him in, pale with anger and indignation. The other Fifth-Formers stood looking on, wondering what fearful punishment was about to descend upon the head of Chambers.

"I have listened to your amazing tirade

with utter astonishment!" exclaimed Miss Trumble fiercely. "You wretched boy! How dare you use such expressions? I shall punish you, with the utmost severity. Indeed, I have a mind to expel you from the school!"

Chambers came to himself.

Somehow, the very sight of Miss Trumble acted upon him as a red flag affects a bull. After all his attempts to arouse the Fifth—after his own loudly expressed opinions, he suddenly felt that this was just what he desired.

He was glad that Miss Trumble had come!

"Oh, you're going to expel me, are you?" he exclaimed. "That's just about all you can do, Miss Trumble! You didn't like hearing a few facts about yourself, eh?"

"Dry up, you idiot!" hissed somebody.

"Not likely!" shouted Chambers. "I'm going to have my say! And now that Miss Trumble's here, I'll tell her what I think—to her face!"

The Headmistress was taken aback.

"Be silent, boy!" she commanded. "You are insolent——"

"It's my turn to speak now!" exclaimed Chambers passionately. "Oh, I know you're the Headmistress—and I know that you'll sack me for this! Do you think I care? I'm fed up! Do you hear? Fed up to the neck! And I'm fed up with you!"

The seniors listened with horror.

But Chambers had worked himself up to a pitch of righteous anger. His indignation knew no bounds. He had always been a reckless fellow, but this was certainly the limit.

"Silence!" screamed Miss Trumble. "You impertinent young puppy! You disgraceful——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Chambers. "Before you talk about me being disgraceful, hadn't you better think about yourself? It's not my way to be rude to a lady—but after the way you've been plotting and scheming with that scoundrel Holt, I don't consider you to be a lady!"

Miss Trumble started back, pale and shaken.

"I—I——"

"That's given you a knock, eh?" went on Chambers, the words tumbling out quickly. "If you were a real lady, Miss Trumble, I'd bite my tongue out before insulting you! And now I'm going to tell you what you've done since you came to St. Frank's! I don't suppose you'll like it, but you're going to have it straight from the shoulder!"

"I command you to hold your tongue," said Miss Trumble thickly.

"You can command all you like—but my tongue's going to be busy!" retorted Chambers, pointing an accusing finger at the Headmistress. "You came to St. Frank's, you caused the masters to clear out, and then you made a hopeless muddle of the whole school routine!"

"I will not——"

"You turned the rules and regulations upside down, and messed the Remove about to such an extent that they cleared out!" sneered Chambers contemptuously. "Is that what you call conducting a school properly? There's nothing wrong with the Remove! The kids may be a bit hotheaded, but the majority of them are as sound as a bell! But they were fed up with you, and they cleared! That's what I'm going to do—because I'm sick and tired of all this tomfoolery!"

The Headmistress was speechless.

"The Remove has got you whacked!" went on Chambers tartly. "Why the dickens can't you admit it? Instead of entering into these petty plots, why can't you do the honourable thing, and admit yourself beaten? Take my advice, Miss Trumble, and get away from St. Frank's while you've still got a bit of self-respect left! Recall all the masters, and clear out these old geysers! The Fifth and the Sixth haven't got enough grit to make objections, but they're just as sick of your administration as the Remove is! And that's let you have it—whether you like it or not! And now I'm going to get out!"

"Stop!" shouted Miss Trumble, her voice quivering. "You shall not leave the school now! I intend to——"

"It doesn't interest me what you intend to do!" snapped Chambers. "I'm finished—I'm absolutely through with the whole business!"

Miss Trumble staggered again, and the Fifth-formers in the common-room felt that they required a lot of air. They were hardly prepared for Chambers' move as he turned upon them.

"And as for you!" he roared. "I'm disgusted with the whole crowd of you! You're nothing better than a set of toads and frogs and earwigs! In fact, an earwig's got more brains!"

"Look here, you idiot——"

"I am looking there—and what do I see?" jeered Chambers. "I see a collection of dummies—brainless weaklings who haven't got enough pluck to fight a mouse! Instead of backing me up—instead of having enough courage to stand up for your rights, you stick there like a lot of half-melted jellies! You make me sick! I feel ill when I look at you! You can all go and boil yourselves—and I hope you enjoy it!"

And Chambers, having unburdened himself in this unmistakable manner, strode out with his nose high in the air.

He brushed past Miss Trumble, but made an elaborate pretence of avoiding contact with her. He was just turning the corner of the passage when he looked back.

"I shan't come to St. Frank's again until the master's are here!" he said defiantly. "I'm going out to join the rebels now—and if the Fifth comes along, the Fifth'll get the bird!"

He gave a snort, and vanished.



Like shadows in the night, the raiders began their work. One by one the bags and tins and packages of food were carried out. And the men had to be careful too, so that they should make no sound.

CHAPTER III

IN THE REBELS' STRONGHOLD



"ANOTHER week, at least," said Reginald Pitt.

"Is there enough grub for that time?" asked De Valerie.

"I'm talking about the grub, you lass," said Reggie. "We can hold out as easy as winking. And long before the week is up Miss Trumble will be on her knees. She can't last much longer. We've got her down weak already."

"By jove, I believe we have!" I declared. "She's done nothing since yesterday, but I don't very well see what she can do. We're as safe as houses in Fort Resolute."

Edward Oswald Handforth nodded.

"Think of it!" he said. "Twenty men—rotters of the worst type—attacking us in the middle of a snowstorm, and even then they couldn't do the trick. Why, Miss Trumble must know that we're fixed for good."

All the rebels were full of confidence.

The Headmistress' efforts to get us out of our stronghold had proved unavailing.

Even her trick of selling the property to Farmer Holt had had no decisive result.

Holt had tried to get us out, but he had met with failure. And it was a practical certainty that he wouldn't try again. His hired men had met with such a defeat that they wouldn't dare to come a second time.

The strength of our position lay in the splendid trench system which we had manufactured round Fort Resolute itself—or, to be exact, round the barn. These trenches were so well devised that we could hold the position against any amount of attackers.

And we were quite convinced that Miss Trumble was weakening.

She simply could not allow the present state of affairs to go on. Her helplessness was becoming more manifest with every day that passed. And we were simply waiting for the victory that we knew was coming.

As Pitt had said, our food supply was ample for another week. And even if this gave out, it would be comparatively easy to get a further stock. We might not be able to raid it from the school, but we had money, and we could buy all we needed.

There was every reason why we should feel optimistic.

The harring-out was becoming famous. Every day we had people coming to look at us. Quite large reports had appeared in the papers, and parties would come from Bannington—on purpose to have a look at us in our trenches.

Even better than that, press photographers had appeared on the scene. We had been snapshotted on many occasions, and the photographs had been appearing in the illustrated dailies.

And all this strengthened our cause.

For publicity was just the very thing that Miss Trumble wanted to avoid. Publicity would bring about inquiry—and an inquiry would mean that the whole affair would be sifted to the bottom.

As soon as that happened, we should gain the day.

For when the facts all came out, it would be clearly proved that our cause was just, and that we had acted under extreme provocation. Any court of inquiry would undoubtedly decree that all the blame for the unfortunate affair attached to the Head-mistress of St. Frank's.

That was why we felt so comfortable about the whole business. Before long we were expecting cinematograph photographers on the scene. They were almost certain to come.

It was evening now, and tea was just over.

The early March day was drawing to a close. The sky was clear, but the weather was very cold. A keen wind was blowing over the meadows, which still showed many traces of the recent snow. It was freezing, too, and the ground was pleasantly hard.

Only a comparatively few rebels were in the trenches.

For, until darkness fell, it was quite unnecessary for us all to be at our posts. We could see far in every direction, and would know well in advance if any attack was contemplated.

There came a hail as a figure was sighted in the distance. And the Removites grinned as this figure was recognised as that of Cuthbert Chambers, of the Fifth.

"This ought to be rather amusing!" grinned De Valerie. "Chambers thinks a good bit of himself, and I shouldn't be surprised if he's come to read us a lecture on the subject of discipline."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't think that's likely," I said, shaking my head. "Chambers is with us, you know—last night he was ready to lead the whole Fifth out here, in support of us."

"Thank goodness he didn't!" chuckled Pitt.

"Well, it would have been a bit of a job to accomodate them," I observed. "At the same time, I admire Chambers for his strength of mind. He had the good sense to forget his alleged dignity."

I was rather curious as the Fifth-former strode up.

As soon as he got near, I could see well enough that something out of the ordinary had happened. Chambers was flushed, and there was a war-like gleam in his eyes.

He dropped into one of the trenches, and I went along to meet him.

"Well, Nipper, I've come to join you," said Chambers quietly. "I don't want to upset any of your arrangements, but I intend to stay."

"What!" shouted the rebels.

"I've just had a few words with Miss Trumble," explained Chambers. "I've told her a few home truths, and then explained to the Fifth what I thought of them, I'm sick of the whole crowd."

"Good man!" I said heartily. "We're always ready to welcome rebels into the fold. Any others coming?"

Chambers sniffed.

"They haven't got the pluck!" he said tartly. "But let's go along into the barn—I'll tell you all about it. It's worth hearing."

As soon as we arrived in Fort Resolute Chambers proceeded to go into full details regarding what had happened at the school. He didn't exaggerate much—the story didn't need any—but the juniors were very sceptical.

The yarn sounded tall.

Chambers explained what he had said to Miss Trumble, and he was rather annoyed when he found the Removites grinning. They were openly inclined to doubt him.

"You young sweeps!" snorted Chambers. "Don't you believe it?"

"Well, some of it!" said Bob Christine. "But it was a bit stiff for you to talk to Miss Trumble like that—"

"Didn't she deserve it?"

"Rather!" said De Valerie. "But we can

hardly believe that you really told her all that."

"I can believe it," I said. "Chambers is a bit of a spoofer, but I can swallow this story. When he gets really going, he makes up for lost time! And I'm jolly glad to hear that Miss Trumble had it straight from the shoulder."

"Good!" said Chambers. "I've come here because I believe you kids are doing the right thing. You can bet I wouldn't associate myself with the cause unless I was in favour of it!"

"We're honoured!" said Christine.

"Of course, that goes without saying!" agreed Chambers. "I mean, it's something of an event when a Fifth-Former comes and takes command of things."

"When he does what?" I asked politely.

"You kids have got to realise that I'm doing you a pretty big favour," said Chambers calmly. "I'm the only fellow in the Fifth who's realised that you are worth supporting. And now that I've thrown in my lot with you, I shall naturally expect to take command."

I chuckled.

"There's no harm in expecting, old son," I grinned. "You're recovering! There are signs of the old Chambers coming out. I expect it's one result of the dwindling excitement."

"What are you getting at, my lad?" asked Chambers, frowning.

"Do you think you'll really take command of us?"

"I don't think—it's a certainty," said the Fifth-Former.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Chambers looked round, still frowning.

"I don't believe in this cackling," he said severely. "If you've got any sense at all, you'll realise that it's my place to take on the leadership. I'm older than you are, and —"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry, old man, but kindly allow me to disillusion you," I said gently. "We're glad to welcome you, and you're at liberty to stay as long as you please. But please remember that this is our show, and we're running it. When it comes to leadership, I'm the commander-in-chief, and I'm not relinquishing my command to you."

"Hear, hear!"

"Nipper's our leader!"

"We wouldn't have a Fifth-Former as a gift!"

Chambers looked round, frankly surprised.

"Well, you ungrateful young bounders!" he snorted. "If that's all the thanks I get, I'll clear out—" He paused. "No, I can't very well do that," he added. "I've got to stick here now."

I slapped him on the back.

"The fact is, that dignity of yours is creeping back again!" I grinned. "Don't let it, Chambers. We like you a lot better without it. I can't allow you to take command of things, but if you like I'll appoint

you to the post of Honorary Major of Cadets."

Chambers beamed.

"Well, of course, that makes a difference," he remarked. "What duties shall I have?"

"No actual duties," I said blandly. "But you'll be a major, and you'll be on the Reserve. As soon as you're required, you'll be called upon."

"Good!" said Chambers. "That'll do all right!"

Honour was satisfied, and so were we. But it would be a very long while before the Remove called upon any Reserve Majors.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NUTS ARE FED-UP.



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD grunted.

"It's all very well living like this," he remarked. "At the same time, a chap gets rather tired of it. It's always possible to have too much of a good thing, you know."

"Well, it's better than sticking in the school, and putting up with Miss Trumble's rot!" said Gulliver. "Don't forget how she chucked us out of our study. And things are pretty easy here."

"I'm not growling," said Bell.

Fullwood looked irritable.

"Who's talkin' about growlin'?" he demanded. "I'm simply sayin' that life is inclined to get monotonous. An' if you want to know the absolute truth, I'm rather fed-up with it."

The Nuts of Study A were holding a little confab in Dugout No. 4, which was situated at a junction of two communication-trenches. They had the little cave-like place entirely to themselves. It was slightly later in the evening, and Fullwood and Co. were off duty.

"What's the idea of bringin' us out here?" asked Bell, after a few minutes. "It's a lot better in the barn, with the oil-stoves. It's jolly cold out here, an' there's a rotten cuttin' wind."

"I brought you out because I want to have a word in private," replied Fullwood.

"I suppose you haven't got such a thing as a cig.?" asked Gulliver.

Fullwood groaned.

"I'm dyin' for one myself!" he exclaimed. "That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. As I was sayin', there's plenty of fun in bein' a rebel, an' we get out of the lessons jolly well. But when a chap wants a quiet smoke, he's dished!"

"Yes, we're pretty well tied up here, ain't we?" remarked Bell. "We can't pop out an' buy anythin'. We're kept here all the time, whether we like it or not. I've been longin' for a game of cards, too."

"Or billiards?" suggested Fullwood softly.

"By gad, rather!"

There was something in Fullwood's tone

which made his chums look at him rather sharply.

The three nuts had been practically no trouble. They had performed their duties with the rest of the cadets, and had behaved so well generally that the other Removites were beginning to have a better opinion of them.

"That's why I've brought you out here now," said Fullwood. "We can't smoke, we can't have a game of cards, or anythin'. An' it struck me that we might be able to sneak an opportunity."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it'll be easy," said Fullwood, lowering his voice. "Look here, to-night we shall all three be on duty in the same

wood. "Well, we've got a two-hours' spell until eleven. There's about one chance in a thousand of any attack happenin'. In fact, it's so remote that we can look upon it as an impossibility."

"But——"

"Wait until I've finished," murmured Fullwood. "As I say, we shall be at the end of the salient, and we can do practically as we like for two hours, without a soul being the wiser. How would you fellows like a little game of billiards?"

"Billiards?" repeated Bell, staring.

"Exactly!"

"But, you silly ass——"

"All we've got to do is to slip off down the towing-path, an' we shall be on the road

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trench. It's a front line trench at the rear, not very far from the river. It's one of the quietest spots of the whole defence system."

"I expect that's why we're put there," growled Bell. "I've got an idea that Nipper doesn't trust us very much."

"Oh, rot!" said Fullwood. "One part of the trench is just as important as another. I was just sayin' that we shall be fairly close together to-night—right at the end of the river salient. There'll be nobody else near by, an' everythin' will be as quiet as the grave."

"But what's your wheeze?" asked Gulliver, with interest.

"We shall go on duty at nine," said Full-

wood. "We shall have a sharp walk to Bannington, an' get there about half-past nine. We can have an hour of billiards in the Wheatsheaf—cigs, all the way there an' back—an' arrive home just before eleven. How's that?"

His chums were startled.

"But—but we shall desert our posts!" exclaimed Gulliver blankly

"Of course!"

"You reckless ass!" said Bell. "We can't do that! We're supposed to hold that part of the line—to be on the watch, in case the enemy come. We can't slip off like that!"

"Oh, you make me sick!" snapped Fullwood irritably. "You're both longin' for

a smoke, an' you'd both love a game of billiards. But as soon as I suggest a good way, you start objectin'."

"Oh, don't be silly!" growled Gulliver. "We'd like it just the same as you would. But would it be safe?"

"Safe as houses!"

"Supposin' old Holt makes an attack——"

"That's about as likely as an earthquake!" interrupted Fullwood. "That last affair was enough for him. Holt won't take any more risks, believe me. Of course, I wouldn't care twopence, only Nipper an' his crowd might get scared. If they discovered that we were away from our posts, there'd be a row. But we shall be safe."

"Oh, well, I'm game," said Bell.

"Same here," agreed Gulliver. "We couldn't do it before because we haven't been on duty at the right time. But, I say. Supposin' Nipper or Pitt comes round on an inspection tour?"

"We've got to risk that, of course," said Fullwood. "It would be rather queer if they did. We've been on duty plenty of times, an' nobody's come round. Anyway, I think it's worth the risk!"

"By gad, so do I!" declared Gulliver. "Now I come to think of it, there's no reason why we shouldn't have a bit of enjoyment. I'm with you, Fully. Are you sure we're on duty at nine?"

"Certain!"

"Good enough! We'll slip away as soon as we can after the hour strikes," said Bell. "That's a bet!"

And the three Nuts, having come to this traitorous decision, strolled back with quite easy consciences. It did not seem to strike them that they were planning to desert their posts when they were most badly wanted. It did not occur to them that if the river salient was left unguarded, the enemy would be able to slip quietly into the trenches without anybody else knowing. The Nuts of the Remove were quite easy in mind.

And they waited anxiously for nine o'clock to arrive.

CHAPTER V.

DESERTING THEIR POSTS—AND THE RESULT!



NINE o'clock boomed out slowly and solemnly from the old clock tower of St. Frank's, and the sound came quivering across the meadows to Fort Resolute. And there were immediate signs of activity.

For nine o'clock was the time for changing the guard, so to speak. A good many fellows came off duty in order to go to bed. Others were booked to take their places—until eleven. The whole system was well worked out, and always went smoothly.

Reginald Pitt and I and Bob Christine stood just outside the barn, giving instructions as to where the various cadets should go. For, during the day, I always mapped

out the different positions for the different fellows.

I had particularly entrusted Fullwood and Co. with the quiet riverside section because there was very little prospect of an attack from that side. The ground just beyond the outer trench was completely flooded. Any approach from that side would be both difficult and risky.

The flooded ground was covered with a thin film of ice. Any possible attackers treading on this ice would give instant warning of their approach. So it was practically certain that nobody would come along from that quarter. So the trench could be entrusted to the Nuts of Study A.

It was about ten past nine when Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell found themselves in their positions. It was accordingly dark, and it was only with great difficulty that one could see for a dozen yards. In spite of the frost, and the clear sky, there was a bit of a ground mist. It clung close to the meadows, making visibility very bad.

Gulliver and Bell crept up to their leader after a few moments. For, of course, their positions were separated by a good many yards.

"Well, is it all right?" whispered Bell.

"Yes—and we shall have to hurry!" said Fullwood. "It's nearly a quarter past already, an' if we're not careful we sha'n't get there till ten. It'll hardly be worth goin'."

"Oh, come on!" said Gulliver, climbing up the side of the trench.

"Not that way, you fool!" snapped Fullwood. "We've got to go right to the end, and then slip out and make a bee-line for the willow-trees. It's a bit longer round, but we shall escape all that thin ice. We don't want to make a row, an' rouse everybody."

Fullwood had taken a good look at the position by daylight, and he knew exactly where to go. The next fellow on duty near the salient was Armstrong. But, by listening carefully, Fullwood found that Armstrong had gone further along, and was having a chat with Church. So the three Nuts were able to slip out in the darkness without any fear of being detected.

After worming their way along for ten or twenty yards, they rose to their feet, and ran along towards the towing path. There was no fear now. The mist completely concealed their movements.

But Fullwood and Co. were not aware of the fact that a pair of sharp eyes was on them. Standing just against one of the willow trees, and quite hidden, was a man. He had been there ever since darkness had fallen—on the watch. He was very startled when he saw the three juniors leaving their posts of duty. And he was inwardly pleased, too.

He waited until the Nuts had set off along the towing path, and then he hastened away.

He went in the opposite direction, and after going several hundred yards, he came upon a tiny tent, which was pitched behind

a clump of trees—and hidden from Fort Resolute by an intervening hill.

The man went up to the tent, and another man immediately rose to his feet in the interior. The glow of his pipe could be seen in the darkness.

"Who's that?" came a sharp voice.

"All right, sir—only me!" exclaimed the watcher. "I've got something to report, Mr. Holt. It may be important."

Farmer Holt came out of the tent, and knocked his pipe out.

"Well, Jellson, what is it?" he asked.

"I was standin' by them trees on the watch, sir—just as you told me!" exclaimed the man. "An' not more than five minutes ago three o' the young gents come out an' slipped off down the towin' path. Seems to me as though they was desertin' their posts."

And Jellson explained the situation in detail.

Farmer Holt listened with particular interest, and his eyes were gleaming by the time the man had finished his report.

"Well, darn my skin!" exclaimed Holt, taking a deep breath. "We wanted a bit of luck to-night, but I never hoped for any as good as this, Jellson. So that part of the trench is left without any o' them young rips lookin' after it? Why, that's just what we want."

"So I was a thinkin', sir," said Jellson.

The farmer considered for a moment.

"They may not be away for long," he said at length. "Not more than an hour, anyway. So we can't waste no time. You'd best get straight back, creep up to that trench, an' drop in it. Have a good look round, and then come back to me an' report."

"What if them young gents grab me, sir?" asked Jellson doubtfully.

"You've got to do as you're ordered, my lad, so don't you get arguin'," snapped Holt. "You ain't afraid of a few kids, I suppose? by thunder! A man who went through the war, jibbin' at a pack o' schoolboys playin' at soldiers! Get off, an' don't waste no time! And remember that ice on the lower part o' the meadow. If you get crackin' that, it'll make a fearful noise."

Jellson grinned, and went off. And very shortly afterwards he proved that he knew quite a good deal about night raiding expeditions. He had had plenty of experience on the Western Front, years earlier, and he had not forgotten the lessons he had learned.

At any rate, he was back within twenty minutes. And his report made Farmer Holt even more satisfied than before. For Jellson declared that the salient was absolutely deserted, and that there were only three other boys on duty between that section and the barn.

"This is grate news!" said Holt keenly. "I've got my men ready, an' we won't mess about with talkin'. You'll come with us, Jellson, an' lead the way. By glory! We'll

make them young rips understand we ain't to be trifled with!"

Farmer Holt seemed to overlook the fact that but for Fullwood and Co's neglect of duty, he would never have had the chance to get within the defences. If those three juniors had remained on the alert, it would have been absolutely impossible for any enemy scouts to get near.

As it was, the way was left open.

And Farmer Holt crept up to the exposed trench, accompanied by a dozen men. Obviously, they had some special game on hand—something particularly planned and carefully thought out.

One by one the men followed Jellson. In single file, they went across the meadow in the mist. They made no sounds, and they dropped into the deserted section of the trench like so many shadows. By the time they were all down, there was no sign that they had come on the scene.

They crept along stealthily and grimly.

And after a little while the foremost raiders caught sight of a figure stamping up and down a certain portion of the trench. This figure was Armstrong—on duty, and keeping himself warm. Now and again, Armstrong would pause, and look out into the mist.

This night duty was the part of the barring-out which the fellows did not like. It was lonely, chilly work. But nobody had grumbled yet. It had to be done, and so what was the good of growling?

Armstrong was just turning, when he suddenly heard a tiny sound behind him. He thought that a pebble might have dropped. Then—at that very moment, a pair of hands were clapped over his mouth.

"Gug—gug—gugh!" gurgled Armstrong helplessly.

He was pulled over before he could give any outcry. Other hands seized him by the legs. And, quick as thought, he was dragged back along the trench. A scarf was tied round his mouth, and ropes were passed round his ankles and wrists.

A few moments later Church met with a similar fate. He was taken to the spot where Armstrong was lying, and only seven minutes had elapsed when Singleton joined them.

In every case, the raiders had succeeded in capturing the juniors without the slightest sound having been made. All the other rebels on duty had not the faintest inkling of what was going on.

It will be understood that the outer trench system completely encircled the Fort. Nearer the Fort lay some more trenches, with cunningly devised communication trenches in between.

All the rebels on duty were in the first line trench—so that they could be on the alert in the event of any surprise attack. If everything was quiet, no alarm would be given, and the whole camp would be quiet until eleven o'clock. At that hour other fellows would come on duty.

But, until eleven o'clock, the communication trenches would be deserted. Accordingly, it will be seen that these raiders, once inside, had an absolutely clear field.

Fullwood and Co. were absent of their own accord, and this had enabled Holt and his men to break through the defence. The other three juniors had been captured because the enemy had come upon them in absolute silence.

And now this whole section was open and exposed. A hundred men could have come into the trenches without the rest of the rebels being aware of it.

But only Holt and his handful of men came.

This seemed to indicate that no actual fighting was intended. And it was soon proved that this was really the case. Like shadows, the men crept towards the barn—which lay in darkness and silence.

The reason for this was clear.

The juniors off duty were asleep—except for one sentry who remained awake in the loft. Immediately in front of the barn the mist seemed to be thicker than anywhere else.

Once again, the weather conditions were helping the enemy.

Jellson was the first man to get into the barn. He only opened the door a few inches. After that, he edged it wider and wider. And, as he had anticipated, the lower part of the barn was empty. There was no reason why any fellows should be here.

A small oil stove was burning in one corner. There was a big boiler on the top of it, and the barn was filled with a pleasant odour of cooking. As a matter of fact, Fatty Little had left a gammon of bacon in that boiler, and it was cooking during the night.

And the insignificant light from the stove was quite sufficient to show the men all they needed. Silence was necessary. For there were juniors upstairs, and several of them might be awake.

It must be confessed that Holt's men were smart.

And the object of their raid was now apparent. They went straight to the food corner. Here all the grub supplies were kept. Holt had known well enough that he would find all the food in the barn.

There was nowhere else where it could be kept.

It lay there, in a corner. There were tins of sardines, salmon, bags of flour, oatmeal, tins of biscuits, and a hundred and one other articles of diet. We had practically emptied the school storerooms in order to obtain our supply. Hanging from a nail were two sides of bacon, and a cut portion of another. And over half a case of eggs was lying against the wall.

Like shadows in the night, the raiders began their work.

One by one, the bags and tins and packages of food were carried out. And the men had



And in a few moments we were rewarded, for I caught sight of a faint little glow. It was the bowl of a smoker's pipe. And now I could distinguish the man himself.

to be careful, too, so that they should make no sound. There were a dozen raiders.

And when a dozen men start on a job of that kind, they do not take very long to accomplish it. The parcels were passed from hand to hand. They were all dumped just at the rear of the barn. Not a single morsel was left. Even the eggs were taken—and even the gammon of bacon was taken out of the boiler. The only sign of food left in the barn was the smell.

And then the raiders vanished.

They did not carry the food away with them. This was quite out of the question. But, only a few yards away, lay a deep ditch. The bottom of it was choked with thick mud, and it was protected by an overhanging bank that the frost had not reached.

One by one the packages were dropped into the ditch. They all vanished from sight with a soft gurgling sound. And, in a very short time, the rebels' precious food supply had vanished from sight for ever.

This was a kind of bog, and it would never be possible to get the food up. Even if such a thing could have been done, only the tinned stuff would have been eatable.

Farmer Holt was chuckling to himself with keen delight.

He had performed the very manoeuvre that he had planned. Earlier in the evening he had hardly thought it possible that he would be rewarded with such success. But now the thing was done.

And, in the same silent fashion, the men vanished. They crept along the communication trenches, reached the outer defence line, and then completely disappeared in the mist.

The time was now just half-past ten.

And the next twenty minutes slipped by in silence. No sign came from any of the trenches. The rebel encampment was in a state of peace. At just five minutes to eleven

there came a slight sound at the corner of the river salient. And three figures loomed up.

They were the figures of the returning truants.

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell dropped into the trench, and then they stood listening for a few moments.

"There you are—what did I tell you?" breathed Fullwood. "We've done it comfortably."

"Only just in time, though," whispered Bell.

"That doesn't matter—we're back," said Fullwood. "We've had a good time, and we've got a supply of cigs. The camp's as quiet as you like, and nobody will ever know that we went away."

But little did the Nuts know of the disaster they had brought about!

CHAPTER VI.

THE INQUIRY.



CURIOSLY enough, nobody noticed that Armstrong and Church and Singleton were missing when the guard was changed at eleven o'clock.

This was not very astounding, after all. For the three fresh juniors who took up their positions naturally presumed that the other three had already left them—that they had, in fact, hurried off to

the barn at the stroke of eleven, and before they were actually relieved.

And so, by this little piece of chance the camp still remained in ignorance of the tragedy. The food corner in the barn was so dark that nobody noticed that it was empty.

In fact, the first fellow to make any discovery was Fatty Little.

Dawn arrived, and Fatty got up early. He always went to bed in good time, so that he could get up in order to attend to the food problems. Fatty was exempt from the ordinary cadet duties.

He came down the ladder just as it was getting light, extremely hungry, and with thoughts of boiled gammon in his mind. He was busily making plans for breakfast, too.

He had decided that he would have a big batch of boiled potatoes. And he had to make some bread, too. And, with a mind full of every kind of food, he went to a big steamer, and raised the lid.

"It ought to be done beautifully by now!" he murmured. "Great bloaters! It'll be simply ripping for brekker—Why, what the—"

Fatty broke off, gaping.

He stared into the boiler.

There was nothing in it except water! The gammon had entirely disappeared. And a great wrath surged up in Fatty's breast. He glared round him with eyes that fully expressed his feelings.

"Some greedy bounder has pinched the bacon!" he snorted. "Great pancakes! I'll jolly well find out who did it!"

"Talking to me?" asked Handforth, as he came down the ladder. "Yow! Jolly cold this morning! That's what I don't like about this camp life. It means getting up so jolly early!"

"Blow getting up!" shouted Fatty. "What about my bacon? It's gone! I was boiling it for breakfast—"

Again he broke off, and this time he nearly fainted. For he had turned round towards the food corner, with the instinctive feeling that he would have to provide something else for the early morning meal.

And Fatty Little's eyes goggled.

The food corner was empty!

Fatty stared again, gasped, and uttered a choking cry. Then the truth dawned upon him with terrible force. He let out a bellow which caused Handforth to give a clear jump.

"You—you blithering ass!" snapped Handy. "What's the idea of making that terrific din?"

"Look!" howled Fatty. "Look!"

He pointed wildly to the corner.

"Are you going dotty?" snorted Handy. "There's nothing to see there!"

"It's gone!" moaned Fatty.

"What's gone? I'm blessed if I can—"

"The food—the grub!" hooted Fatty. "Can't you see? All our stores have gone! Somebody must have shifted them in the

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night! Even the gammon was taken out of the boiler!"

Handforth, who was hungry, stared at the food corner, and then got excited. He rushed about like mad, with Fatty accompanying him. They searched high and low. They even went outside, and made a complete circuit of the barn. But the food had vanished as mysteriously as a mist.

And while the the juniors were still desperately looking about, I came in from the trenches, accompanied by Tommy Watson and Reggie Pitt. We were hoping that Fatty would soon have some food ready.

"Well, the night's passed quietly—and that's one relief," I was saying. "I don't think we shall have an attack in the day-time—Hullo! What's the matter with Fatty?"

"I expect he's lost a couple of biscuits!" chuckled Pitt.

We came up, and Fatty turned to us.

"The grub!" he said faintly. "It's gone!"

"We can't eat grub, and keep it as well!" said Tommy Watson. "But there's plenty left in the stores——"

"The stores have gone!" roared Handforth violently. "Everything—even the flour and the eggs and the bacon! There's not a crumb left! The grub's vanished!"

I was rather startled at first, but after a few minutes I became intensely grave. For a brief examination was sufficient to show me that the food had indeed disappeared from the barn. It could be nowhere else. Not any of the cadets would play a practical joke with the food. Besides, it couldn't have been stored in any other spot.

"What does it mean?" asked Pitt blankly.

"I don't exactly know!" I replied, setting my teeth. "But one thing's certain—we've been raided during the night!"

"Raided!"

"Of course, we have!" I exclaimed grimly. "I don't pretend to know how they got in—but they did get in! The enemy has done this, my sons! Without us knowing anything about it, they got through the defences, and took our food away. This is the biggest blow we've ever had!"

Other cadets were coming in now, and the news soon spread. And consternation reigned in the camp. Fatty little was raving up and down, nearly off his head with worry.

"There's got to be an inquiry at once!" I declared. "If all the fellows were properly on duty during the night the enemy could never have got through. That's absolutely certain. It's as clear as anything that somebody must have deserted their posts."

"Or else gone to sleep," suggested somebody.

"That's hardly likely," I said. "The chaps wouldn't go to sleep in this cold weather. I mean to make a full investigation——"

"I say!" shouted De Valerie, running up. "Three of the chaps are missing! I've just

been making inquiries, and there's no sign of Singleton or Church or Armstrong!"

"Possibly that accounts for it," I said. "There must be a search at once. If the three chaps aren't in the camp, we shall have to assume that they've been captured and taken away."

"Oh, my goodness!"

The search was a brisk one—and quickly over. For the three missing juniors were discovered in one of the dugouts. There was a big sensation as they were hauled out. For they were all bound up, and they had thick scarves round their faces.

As soon as they were released, I told them to march up and down for a bit before explaining anything. For they were stiff with cold. But Armstrong wanted to speak at once.

"We were collared by the enemy!" he gasped. "Hours and hours ago! We've been in that dugout all night. Do you mean to say that you idiots didn't know about it?"

"There was no alarm, and we couldn't know about it," I retorted. "I want to know how the enemy got into the trench."

"That's what I'd like to know, too!" exclaimed Armstrong.

And, with a good bit of detail, he described exactly what had happened. Church and Singleton had a similar story to tell. The three unfortunate juniors were in a rather bad way. Chilled through and through, they were probably in for severe colds. I told them to get to bed at once. But they would not agree.

"We've got to see this thing through first!" said Armstrong.

"So you ought!" declared Hubbard. "We've got no grub—and it's your fault. What's the good of leaving chaps like you on guard——"

"Our fault?" interrupted Armstrong indignantly.

"Dry up, you chaps! Let me attend to this!" I broke in. "I'm not blaming you, Armstrong, or the other fellows either. I think I can rely on all of you to tell the absolute truth. Did you go away from your posts?"

"Not for a minute!" they exclaimed, in unison.

"How did these men spring on you?"

"They came along the trenches!" replied Armstrong. "I hadn't got any idea of any trouble. And all of a sudden these men appeared from the direction of the salient trench. They crept up——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "These men were actually in the trench?"

"Yes."

"And they came from the salient?"

"Of course they did!"

"Who was guarding the salient between nine and eleven?" demanded Pitt.

"Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell," I replied grimly.

There were many exclamations.

"I'll bet those cads deserted their posts!" said Watson furiously. "They never ought

to have been allowed to be on guard——"

"They had to do their share, just the same as anybody else," I broke in sharply. "I put them in that position because it was the least likely one to be approached. Where are they?"

"Upstairs in the loft—asleep."

"All right—bring them down!" I ordered. "If anybody can throw light on this mystery, Fullwood and Co. can. We're going to get to the bottom of it as soon as we can. Let's have the three down!"

And a dozen fellows rushed off to rouse Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell.

Those three youths were peacefully sleeping at the time, and had little idea of the fate which was in store for them. They had neglected their duty. And now they were going to be placed on the carpet.

Matters did not look pleasant for the Nots of Study A.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COURT-MARTIAL.



GULLIVER shivered as he got dressed—and it was not altogether on account of the cold. He was looking pale, too, and Bell was also very shaky. Only Fullwood remained normal.

"I knew something would come out!" muttered Gulliver. "It was a dotty idea——"

"Don't talk, you fool!" said Fullwood. "Some of the other chaps'll hear you! Leave all the jawin' to me. I know what to do, an' I'm quite ready to answer any questions."

As soon as they were dressed they went down the ladder, and found a kind of court-martial all ready in the lower part of the barn. Other rebels had been posted outside, in order to keep strict watch.

I was looking very grim, and I gave Fullwood and Co. a keen glance as they were brought in front of me. I could not very well detect any uneasiness about Fullwood—he usually managed to conceal his emotions very well. But Gulliver and Bell were plainly uncomfortable.

"What's the game?" asked Fullwood coolly.

"Raiders entered the camp during the night, and stole our food supply!" I replied. "They took everything. We haven't been left with a crumb. It's very serious."

"All the grub gone!" muttered Bell blankly.

"What's it got to do with us?" asked Fullwood. "We weren't the only fellows on

duty, I suppose? I'm hanged if I can see why you should drop on us——"

"I haven't dropped on you," I broke in. "I should like to remind you that I am the commander-in-chief of this force, and it isn't your duty to question any of my actions."

"Sorry!" said Fullwood tartly. "Well, my lord?"

"Certain facts have come to light which indicate that the raiders entered our defence system by means of the river salient!" I exclaimed. "That part of the line was held by you three fellows."

"The enemy came along from the salient!" exclaimed Armstrong. "Why didn't you see them, Fullwood? They came down your trench——"

"Sorry, Armstrong, but I'd rather do the questioning, if you don't mind," I exclaimed. "Now, Fullwood, we'll take you first."

"That's very kind of you," said Fullwood, yawning.

"I'm not going to suggest that you are to blame in any way," I went on. "Until a fellow is proved guilty, I don't accuse him. This court-martial is simply being held to obtain the facts. It's really a kind of inquiry. Were you on duty at your post between the hours of nine o'clock and eleven o'clock?"

"Of course I was."

"Did you see any suspicious circumstances?" I asked. "Did you notice any figures creeping along——"

"What's the good of askin' fool questions of that sort?" interrupted Fullwood. "If I had seen figures movin' along, I should have given the alarm. My section of the line was quiet all the time I was on duty."

"Did you leave your post at all?"

"No."

"Not even for five or ten minutes?"

"I didn't leave it for a second!" replied Fullwood deliberately. "And I didn't go to sleep, either. When I'm on duty, I do the job properly. An' I don't like these insinuations——"

"You—you rotter!" snorted Handforth. "I jolly well believe——"

"Don't interrupt, Handy! This is serious!" I said curtly. "I'm not insinuating anything, Fullwood. You have definitely stated that you didn't leave your post for a single minute. You can stand aside for a little while. Gulliver, I want to question you."

Gulliver stood before me, looking shaky.

"I think you held the position next to Fullwood—about ten or twenty yards away?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it," said Gulliver.

"Did you leave your post at all during——"

"No, of course not!" broke in Gulliver, with unnecessary haste. "That's a bit thick, you know! I didn't move once! I remained at my post the whole two hours."

"Didn't you have a word or two with Fullwood or your next sentry?"

"Not a word!" said Gulliver.

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THE atmosphere in the editorial sanctum of the "Daily Echo" was a trifle more hectic than usual. Standing before an expensive mahogany desk on which he thumped his fist from time to time, the editor of that journal glared at the man before him.

"What do you call yourself, Parkinson?" he demanded angrily. "A crime reporter? A journalist? A live wire? Bosh! Rubbish!"

He turned and pointed through the window to the imposing offices of the "Daily Wire," the great rival paper on the opposite side of the road.

"That rag over there," he went on, "they've got a man who is a crime reporter. A real one, too, Mervyn Hume. That's the man. Ever heard of him?"

"Heard of him!" retorted the crime man of the "Echo" stung by his chief's sarcasm. "I'm tired and fed up with having that fellow's name chucked at me day and night, Hume, Hume, Hume! That's all I hear in this place, Hume is confoundedly lucky. But still, there are plenty of points I can give him——"

"In playing marbles," put in the irate editor of the "Echo" unkindly. "But you've got nothing on him when it comes to getting crime stories. Have a look through last month's files and find a decent crime story that wasn't partly lifted from the 'Wire'.

Show me something exclusive that you brought in. You can't."

The shifty eyes of the crime reporter blinked.

"How can I compete with Hume," he asked, "when his paper allows him to spend as much money as he likes. Money is the secret of his success and nothing else."

The voice of Marlinson, the editor of the "Echo" took on a quieter note.

"It's not a question of money," he said, "but brains and energy—chiefly brains. Hume can go out on a mystery and show even the police themselves how to unravel it. That man can get to the bottom of anything, and that's how he gets his stories.

"He investigates them for himself. He doesn't wait for the police to come to some conclusion and then go down to the Press Bureau at Scotland Yard with every other crime man in Fleet Street for what they choose to give him. He finds out for himself.

"But if you think it is a question of money, Parkinson, and that you are not allowed enough, we can soon alter that. You can spend exactly what you like providing you deliver the goods."

Mr. Marlinson paused and breathed hard through his nose.

"Do what you like, only for heaven's sake deliver the goods. Bring in something no one else has got—especially something the

'Wire' hasn't got. I tell you they are beating us all along the line. But it's got to stop.

"I want to make myself quite clear. If you don't get a move on and give Hume and the 'Wire' a run for their money you get fired. See? You get the bullet from this office and out you go. So now you know how things stand."

And with that Mr. Marlinson dismissed the discomfited crime reporter and settled down at his desk to devise some means of reviving the drooping circulation of his paper.

Certainly Mr. Marlinson had something to be annoyed about. Day after day, week after week, the "Wire" had beaten them hollow. Scoop had followed scoop with almost monotonous regularity. And the exploits of Mervyn Hume, the great newspaper sleuth, as well as the stories he obtained formed one of the main topics of the day.

This was bad enough for the "Echo" from an advertisement point of view: but what made it worse was the fact that the circulation of that journal had, in the past, been built up largely on its crime stories.

And the "Echo's" readers, week after week, since the advent of Hume on the "Wire" had been gradually deserting the former paper for the latter.

It was a position not cheerful to contemplate.

But if Mr. Marlinson felt satisfied with the decision he had come to, Elias Parkinson, the crime investigator of the "Echo" did not. He left his chief and made straight for the reporter's room in no pleasant frame of mind.

Like most inefficient workers he blamed other people for the trouble he had brought upon himself. He bitterly cursed the name of Hume, and resolved to make him sit up at some future time. In the meantime, however, he had his own position to consider.

He had got to get a scoop within the week. But how, with Mervyn Hume across the road, who scented out even the smallest story in a manner which more resembled a bloodhound than a human being?

If only he could stumble across some exclusive story, some curious crime, or if he could only get to the bottom of some of the mysteries which even at that moment were puzzling the police, he would have done something to save his reputation.

But Elias Parkinson knew his own shortcomings better than anyone else. He knew that he was incompetent and, barring a miracle nothing like that could possibly happen.

Parkinson's mind worked furiously. He now had a free hand and could spend as much of his paper's money as he liked. And if he could not get results by fair means he resolved to get them by foul.

He had several schemes in mind, each one a little more desperate than the others. He decided to try out the first one: so leaving the offices of the "Echo" he made his way across Fleet Street and entered the wide,

plate glass doors of the opposition paper. Here he sent up his card with a request to see Mervyn Hume.

In the ordinary course of things Hume did not see visitors without an appointment. But because the present visitor was a colleague he sent down a message requesting him to be shown up.

Some minutes later Parkinson entered the room, and greeting him briefly, Hume indicated a chair. He was more than puzzled for the reason of the visit. He was not on very intimate terms with the "Echo" man for whom he had always entertained a dislike, and for another thing, no matter how friendly crime journalists may be in the ordinary way, it is rarely they visit each other's offices. It is not diplomacy.

His visitor seated, Hume turned to him to learn the reason of his call. But the "Echo" man did not reply at once. Instead, he sat and blinked as though he did not quite know how to start.

Eventually, as though summoning courage, he leaned forward in a confidential attitude, and lowering his voice said: "You're in Fleet Street to get a living like the rest of us, aren't you, Hume?"

Hume looked puzzled.

"To a certain extent," he said, making no effort to disguise his astonishment, "Although I am not dependent on what I earn on the 'Wire'."

"Well, I have come to you with a business proposition," blurted out Parkinson. "I want to buy a story of you, a real decent crime yarn. But it must be something good and exclusive. And for that I am willing to pay fifty pounds—"

"But I am under contract to supply all my stories to the 'Wire,'" protested Hume colouring at this amazing request. "Do I understand you are offering me fifty pounds as a bribe in consideration of giving you one of my stories instead of the 'Wire'?"

"You needn't put it so crudely," mumbled Parkinson, his shifty eyes blinking. "Business is business, you know, and I have come to you with a business offer."

"I see," said Hume in a level voice, only with difficulty retaining his temper. "But I turn it down. That is all Mr. Parkinson, good-day."

And Mervyn Hume rose to his feet to show his visitor out. But Parkinson, disregarding the danger signals, was not ready to go. He wanted to stay and argue.

"See here," he began, "That's all rot about your contract—what I mean to say is, this little affair can be arranged between ourselves and no one need be any the wiser. We will make it sixty quid if you like, now what do you say?"

"Please go," said Hume icily.

"You mean you won't accept my offer?"

"That's it; now get out."

"W-why, you—you—hang you! who the dickens are you telling to clear out?" demanded the "Echo" man losing all control of himself.

"For two pins I'd—I'd—" He did not

finish. For at that moment Hume rose suddenly to his feet, kicked open his office door, and gripping the opposition representative by his skinny shoulders, hurled him from the apartment and slammed the door.

There followed a series of angry imprecations outside, a vindictive kick on the door. "I'll get even with you for this," bellowed Parkinson. There followed the sound of retreating footsteps as he made his way down the passage and out of the building.

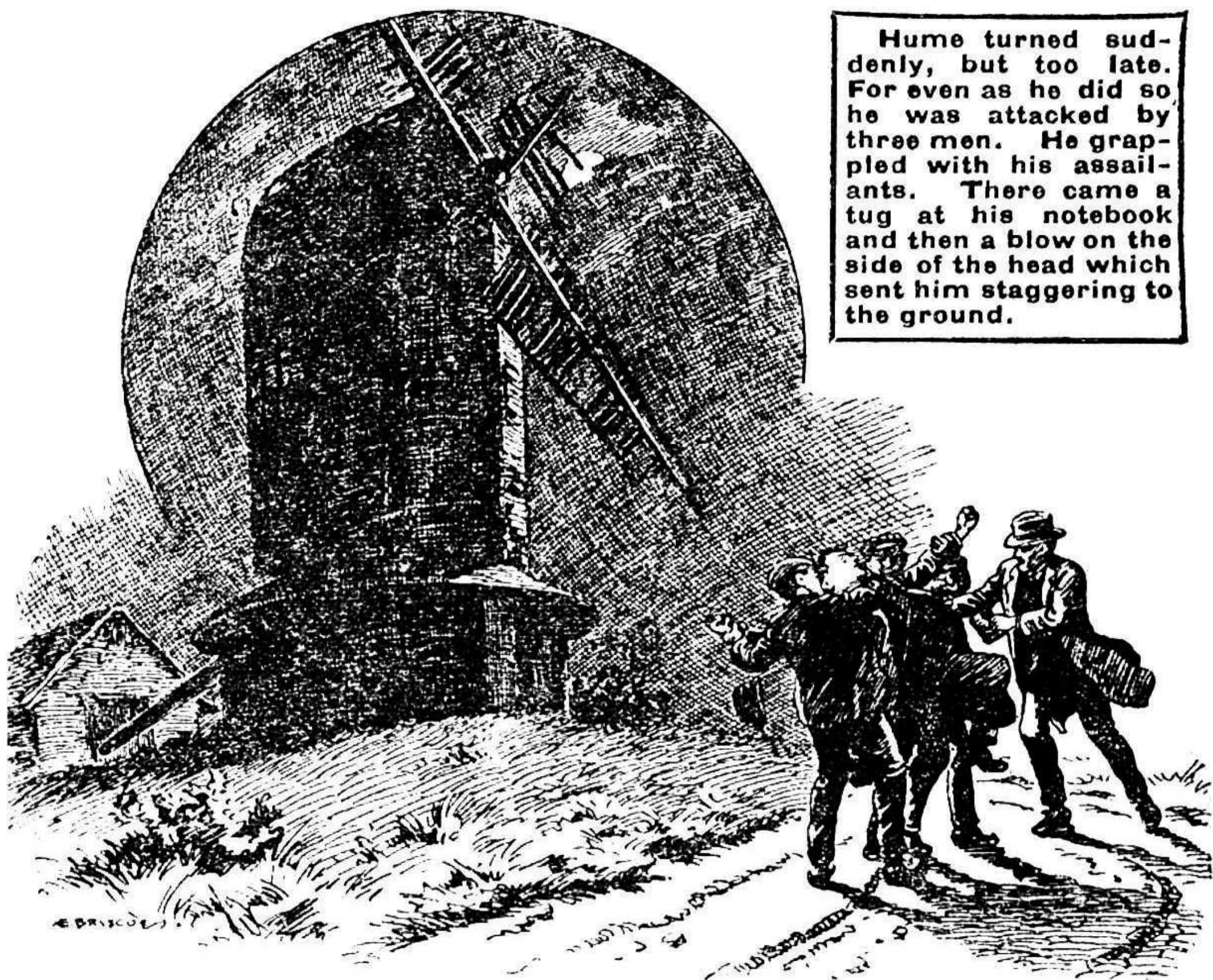
"So that's that," murmured Hume to himself as he sank into a chair. "In all probability friend Parkinson has been hauled over the coals by his chief for not putting

Department, Scotland Yard came to him over the wire.

"We have got something on this afternoon that may interest you, Hume," said the worthy inspector. "And I thought you might like to come along. We are raiding a little coining den. Nothing very big of course, but there may be a bit of a fight which should mean a story for you.

"You'll come? Good. Pick me up outside Westminster Station in an hour's time. Oh, by the way, it won't be an exclusive. One of my men has tipped off the information to that fellow Parkinson of the 'Echo.' Can't stand the chap personally, but still,

Hume turned suddenly, but too late. For even as he did so he was attacked by three men. He grappled with his assailants. There came a tug at his notebook and then a blow on the side of the head which sent him staggering to the ground.



up a better show. But I don't think he'll attempt to bribe me again in a hurry. I have a sort of an idea he may get up to some pretty tricks to keep his own end up after this. However, we shall see."

And with that Mervyn Hume dismissed the matter from his mind and settled himself down to puzzle out a little mystery that had given him considerable trouble for some days past.

Half an hour had elapsed when his meditations were interrupted by the whirr of the telephone call. He answered the call and the voice of his old friend, Det-Inspector Marsham of the Criminal Investigation

you can divide the yarn. See you later then. Bye-bye."

The inspector rang off and Hume ignited a cigarette. He was not best pleased that the "Echo" man should be present at the coming raid, but it was a thing he could not very well object to. Not that there was much in the story from Hume's point of view, but it would be just as well to go along and get a paragraph—providing nothing more important turned up.

Mervyn Hume picked up his hat and was about to leave for Westminster Station when the telephone bell whirled again. Stifling a yawn he picked up the receiver. The next

moment his languid air gave place to one of keenness and amazement.

"General Warrington dead!" he repeated into the mouthpiece, "Murdered, you say? Who is that speaking? Oh you are the general's secretary, speaking from the house, are you? Right! I'll be along at once. You have informed the police, of course? Right. Thanks for letting me know, I'll do what I can of course—yes, I'll come right away, Good-bye."

Hume replaced the receiver and regarded his well manicured hands with a puzzled brow. He then rang up the offices of the British and Oriental Steamship Company and asked for Mr. McCallum, the chairman, with whom he was well acquainted.

"This is Hume of the 'Wire'." he called, "Can you tell me, McCallum, whether General Warrington sailed in the 'Empress' this morning, or whether he changed his plans? Yes, I am a personal friend of the General—in fact I was present at a farewell dinner given to him last night. He did sail? You are quite sure? Oh, that's all I wanted to know, thank you. Good-day Mr. McCallum."

"Fortunate for me that I happen to know the General," murmured Hume to himself. "There appears to be a little trickery here, but I'd better make quite certain before I decide not to go down to his house. Can't afford to miss this if it is true."

He picked up the telephone again and called for the supervisor. Explaining who he was he asked who had last rung him up. A low whistle escaped him on being informed that the call had emanated from a public call office.

Further enquiries revealed the fact that the call office was situated in St. Paul's Station—and since General Warrington's house was at Lancaster Gate, some miles away, it occurred to Hume as being rather strange that his secretary should make a call of such an urgent nature from the City.

And so, putting two and two together, Mervyn Hume made four. That is to say, he came to the conclusion that General Warrington was very much alive, and that the telephone message he had received was merely a hoax in very bad taste.

But who should want to fool him in this manner? Then Hume remembered his appointment with Det-Inspector Marsham. He remembered too, that Parkinson, as he already knew, was more than anxious to get a "scoop."

And since only Hume and Parkinson in all Fleet Street were aware of the coming police raid on the coiners' den, what was more likely than that Parkinson should endeavour to get his rival out of the way for a while by a false telephone message, and so leave the coast clear for himself to obtain an "exclusive" story of the raid.

The more Hume thought of these things, the more he became convinced that he had arrived at the correct conclusion.

"That's it," he told himself, "Parkinson wants to send me off on a wild goose chase

to the other side of London. But I rather fancy he will be unlucky. A nice little scheme and quite worthy of him. But not quite cute enough!"

Without further waste of time Mervyn Hume left his office, and made his way to Westminster Tube station where he found Det-Inspector Marsham impatiently awaiting him.

"Where's Parkinson?" demanded Hume when greetings were over, "I understood he was coming along too."

"Quite right," replied the inspector. "Parkinson arrived in a very cheerful frame of mind and has gone on in front being too impatient to wait. He seemed as chirpy as a bird over something, but what it was I don't know."

"I think I can guess," murmured Hume with a faint smile, and without more ado he told the Scotland Yard man of the bogus telephone message, and the conclusion he had arrived at in regard to it.

"Had I not known that General Warrington was sailing for the East this morning I might have wasted valuable time running down to his house at Lancaster Gate, and making myself look a fool into the bargain. As it is, however, I rather fancy Parkinson is the one who will look a fool when he sees me turn up as though nothing has happened."

The detective chuckled.

"You're right," he agreed. "The only thing is, he won't see you turn up. As a matter of fact the raid has been postponed. Our birds got wind of what was coming and bolted."

"Parkinson wouldn't have got much even if I had been taken in by that dud telephone message then," smiled Hume.

The Inspector nodded.

"That is so," he said, "But if you take my advice, Mr. Hume you will keep an eye on the fellow. He's out to pinch your thunder, by hook or by crook."

The two men gripped hands and parted, the detective returning to Scotland Yard and Mervyn Hume to Fleet Street.

What Parkinson's next move would be, Hume did not know, of course. Nevertheless, he had a pretty good idea. And when he was alone in his private room once again, he prepared to circumvent it should it be what he thought.

The next half hour he was busily engaged in writing in his notebook. And when he had finished he stuffed it into his pocket with a satisfied chuckle.

But for the next couple of days nothing of any consequence happened, and Hume spent most of his time lounging alternately about the office and the "News Club." It was on the evening of the third day after the receipt of the bogus telephone message that William Whitehead, the red-headed office boy of the "Wire"—otherwise known as Nunky—dashed into the "News Club" and demanded to see Mr. Hume as quickly as possible.

The message was delivered to the great newspaper sleuth by a waiter. He at once

left the lounge and made his way to the hall where the red-headed one was waiting. As he did so, the figure of Parkinson of the "Echo" which had been partly hidden round the corner of a telephone cabinet emerged and followed.

"There's something on down at Monksville, the chief wants you to look into, Mr. 'Ume," he heard the office boy exclaim excitedly. "A body or something has been discovered in an old mill. You know, Mr. 'Ume, one of these 'ere places wot's supposed to be 'aunted——"

"Ho, is there," muttered Parkinson taking great care to remain out of sight. "Something down at Monksville your chief wants you to look into, eh? A body found in what our young friend calls the 'aunted mill."

Parkinson rubbed his hands together delightedly and emitted a self-satisfied chuckle.

"Well, I don't see why I shouldn't have the story too. Hume wouldn't sell me one, but there are more ways of killing a cat than drowning it."

And with this somewhat cryptic utterance, taking great care that he was unobserved, the cunning crime reporter of the "Echo" followed Hume and the boy from the club out into Fleet Street.

He saw Hume and the boy enter the office of the "Wire" only to emerge again a few minutes later and step into a cab which had evidently been in waiting. As the vehicle moved off through the traffic, Parkinson hailed another cab and instructed the driver to follow it. The wooden-faced driver made no remark but did as he was bid.

Hume's cab rattled over Blackfriar's Bridge and followed the high road through the dreary suburb of Brixton until it emerged on to the Brighton Road, the cab containing the opposition reporter doggedly following.

The trail led through Reigate where the Brighton Road was left, and then continued up a by-road in the direction of the peaceful hamlet of Monksville. Fortunately for Parkinson dusk was beginning to fall, and there was little chance of his quarry detecting the pursuit.

About a mile before Monksville was reached the "Echo" man stopped his cab, paid the driver who returned towards London, and continued on foot. A taxi cab was something of a curiosity in that Surrey hamlet, and Parkinson did not want to attract unnecessary attention by arriving in the hamlet in such a vehicle so soon after Mervyn Hume.

But when he did eventually arrive, he learned that Hume and a red-headed youth had left their cab in the village and had proceeded on foot to Fosset's Mill, a short walk from the western end of the village.

Parkinson decided therefore to learn what he could in the village of the discovery in the haunted mill he had heard referred to in the News Club. But beyond the fact that Fosset's Mill was supposed to be haunted, and indeed, had been haunted for many years past, now, he was no wiser at the end of his investigations than when he started.

Eventually he drifted into a small inn

where he ordered some bread and cheese and beer, and sat down to think things out. By carefully pumping the inn keeper he learned the story of the ghost which was supposed to haunt Fosset's Mill.

There was not much in the yarn, but from what he gathered it seemed that Fosset's Mill had been reputed haunted for about a couple of years. There was nothing much in that, of course, but what did arouse the newspaper man's curiosity was the fact that pitiful screams, like the wailing of a child in agony had recently been heard to come from the old mill by several people in the village.

Who was responsible for the wailing the inn keeper did not know, but was inclined to believe, with the rest of the villagers, that it was the spirit of some woman who must have been murdered there at some time or another in the past.

Parkinson listened to this rather idiotic chatter with considerable interest. He guessed pretty well that as usual, Hume was well supplied with a whole host of details, and already probably knew ten times more about the affair than he, Parkinson, was likely to discover in a month of Sundays.

This fact seemed to disturb him considerably. If only he could get hold of the full story instead of Hume it would certainly be a scoop worth talking about. That there was some deep tragedy connected with the haunted mill he now felt certain.

As he was turning these things over in his mind a sudden idea came to the "Echo" reporter which caused his little shifty eyes to blink and gleam with satisfaction.

Paying his score he rose and quitted the inn and made his way just outside the village to where a small encampment of gipsies was pitched. Here he got into conversation with a couple of men, followed low whisperings and an exchange of treasury notes, and the little party set off up the road in the direction of Fosset's Mill.

On their way they were passed by a red-headed youth proceeding towards the village. It was Nunky, the office boy of the "Wire." Parkinson guessed and rightly too, that he was probably going to ring up his office to reserve a column of space for the story Hume would send later.

But in the growing dusk the boy did not recognise the man from the "Echo" a fact for which the latter was very thankful.

It was quite dark save for the pale light of a watery moon when Parkinson and the two gipsies eventually arrived outside the mill. They could see a waving beam of light which told them the place was occupied and that someone was moving about.

A muttered consultation followed and the three men hid themselves behind a clump of bushes at the rear of the mill. They could hear quite distinctly movements from within; but still they waited. Eventually a head appeared from an opening in the upper part of the mill and peered down on them. But this they did not see.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and then came the sound of footfalls on the wooden stairs inside the mill. A few seconds later the figure of Mervyn Hume emerged stuffing a notebook into his pocket as he did so. He set off in the direction of the village; but before he had barely got clear of the ruined mill three figures stole silently across the soft turf in his rear.

He turned suddenly; but too late. For even as he did so came a sharp command, and the next moment a heavy fist crashed into his jaw. He grappled with his assailant but was immediately attacked from another quarter. There came a tug at his pocket containing his notebook, a yell of anguish from a man whose shin he had used as a target for his boot, and then a blow on the side of the head which sent him staggering to the ground.

He rose dizzily, the sound of running feet coming faintly to his buzzing ears. But by that time his mysterious assailants were well across the field in which the mill was situated, running for all they were worth towards the hamlet of Monksville.

Mervyn soon assured himself that he was not seriously injured and then felt for his pocket book and his purse. The latter still reposed where he had last placed it, but his notebook had vanished.

In the ordinary course of things for a reporter to lose his notebook when engaged on a story is nothing short of a tragedy. But curiously enough his loss did not seem to affect Hume as much as might have been expected. In fact, he smiled slowly to himself, and dusting his clothes continued his interrupted journey to the village.

Here at the local post office he found the office boy who reported that the space had been reserved as required. Hume did not tell him of his adventure near the haunted mill, however, but hurried to the station where he was just in time to catch the last train back to town.

He smiled to himself several times on the way. For the identity of his assailants was not wrapped in the mystery one of them, at least, supposed. For by the pale light of the watery moon, before he received the blow on the side of the head, Hume had distinctly recognised one of his assailants as—Elias Parkinson of the "Echo."

Arrived in town, Hume sent Nunky back to the office with a message to the effect that there would be no story that night, but to expect one in the morning.

Arrived in town Hume made straight for his office where for the next ten minutes he was busily engaged in writing a story from some rough notes contained on the back of an envelope.

This done, he handed his handiwork to a printers boy and returned to his chambers in Lincoln's Inn where he slept soundly until late in the morning. At about ten o'clock he rose and left for his office where Harvey Frost the news editor, was waiting for him in a state of considerable excitement.

"Hume," gasped the news editor pushing the crime investigator into a chair, "We have missed one of the greatest stories of the day. The body of a woman believed to have belonged to a Russian Countess was found buried beneath the floor of an old mill at Monksville last night. It's a great story, but we haven't got a word about it. The 'Echo' have beaten us hollow. It's splashed all over their contents bills, and they have got a double column story on their front page. What have you got to say about it?"

Hume smiled slowly and offered the excited news editor a cigarette.

"I have read the yarn," he drawled, "and Frost, curiously enough I wrote that very yarn myself—"

Frost stared.

"What the thump do you mean?" he ejaculated.

"Just this. I thought I would try my hand at fiction—real melodrama sort of stuff, don'tcherknow. I wrote quite a thrilling little tale set in the haunted mill at Monksville. Jotted it down in my notebook, as a matter of fact.

"But unfortunately, I happened to go down to that part of the globe last night to clear up a little mystery—"

"But the story you put in about the haunted mill said something about the place having been taken over by some company and being used as a slaughter house for pigs," interrupted Frost.

"Quite. That was the explanation of the mystery. The inhabitants of the village, apparently, knew nothing about this, and they assumed that the noises they heard emanating from the old mill were due to the presence of a ghost.

"But as I was saying, it was unfortunate I went down there, because a few minutes after I left the mill I was set upon by a small gang of roughs and my notebook was stolen—"

"It was all a plant, then?"

Hume nodded; but before he could make audible reply the red-headed office boy of the "Wire" burst into the room with a narrow strip of white paper torn from one of the tape machines.

"Mr. 'Ume," he exclaimed, "Scotland Yard have just sent out a denial of that story wot appears in the 'Echo' this morning. It's all a fake, and the message says either they have faked it purposely or their correspondent has been the victim of a practical joke."

If further proof had been needed of the accuracy of Hume's extraordinary statement, here it was. Harvey Frost stared at the great crime investigator a moment and then burst into a wild roar of laughter in which the office boy joined.

"My hat," he exclaimed. "that's put paid to Parkinson's career at the 'Echo' and no mistake. And this statement, though not strictly accurate was not very far out.

THE END.

THRILLING NEW DETECTIVE SERIAL JUST STARTED!



THE BLACK MASK

Grand New Serial
Detective Story of
Nelson Lee and
Nipper.

INTRODUCTION.

Olive Brent, the beautiful young ward of Mr. Matheson, has mysteriously disappeared after a visit to the theatre with some friends. She was wearing at the time the valuable jewels which had belonged to Mr. Matheson's dead wife.

Upon enquiries, Mr. Matheson discovers that the girl had gone to his residence at Coburg Square after she had left her friends. On searching his house in Coburg Square, Mr. Matheson finds that his ward has been there, and apparently left in a hurry with her jewels. The French maid who was with Olive Brent is found senseless in her room under the influence of a drug. Nelson Lee is called in, and ascertains from the constable on duty in Coburg Square that Miss Brent was seen to return to the house in company with a young man whose description corresponds with Lester Halford, an admirer of the missing girl. The detective's investigations will be continued below.

(Now read on)

"MISS BRENT'S night-robe has disappeared," declared the detective. "Disappeared?" Mr. Matheson repeated, in a puzzled tone.

"Yes, it isn't anywhere in the room."

"Olive took it with her, of course. And she must have worn it, as she left the bag behind."

"It would seem so. Matheson, oddly enough. She would hardly have carried it in a parcel when she had a bag to put it into. As for these articles, I presume Miss Brent brought them to town with her in the bag."

"I have no doubt she did, Lee."

"Then what was she wearing when she departed in the night?"

"I don't know. I have just been wondering about that. Why did she not put on the costume which she brought from—"

Douglas Matheson stopped abruptly. He glanced into the empty wardrobe, and turned

to the detective with a look of perplexity on his face.

"There were other things here!" he declared.

"Other things?" said Nelson Lee.

"Yes I noticed them on the day Olive left for the country," Mr. Matheson replied, "when she called me into her room to help her to strap her trunk."

"What were the things?"

"A pair of black boots, a black picture-hat with a wide brim, and a long, grey cloak. They were in the wardrobe that day, I am positive, and they are not here now."

"No, there is nothing here. I wonder if Miss Brent brought a spare costume with her from the country yesterday with her bag?"

"I believe not. The bag is a very small one, as you perceive, and it could not have held more than her toilet articles and her night-robe, and the clothes she wore at the theatre. She has certainly taken with her the things that have been in the wardrobe during the last couple of months."

"Then it is to be assumed, Matheson, that when the girl went off in the night she was wearing the black boots and the picture-hat, and the grey cloak over her night-robe."

"Yes, it would appear so. I can't understand it."

"What of this black skirt hanging on the chair?"

"That also was in the wardrobe, Lee. I omitted to mention it."

On the whole it was a very queer affair. What interpretation was to be placed on the peculiar discoveries which had been made? Whether or not Olive Brent had gone away to be married to the young man—and the constable's statements indicated that she had—some of her actions seemed to be incapable of a satisfactory explanation.

Having on the previous day come up from the country to the house in Coburg Square, with her French maid, attired in the brown costume, she had changed her clothes, ac-

accompanied her friends, the Draycotts to the theatre, and returned to Coburg Square.

She had undressed, and got into bed; and subsequently, after drugging the maid, she had departed by the rear of the premises, taking her jewels with her. So far, all could be accounted for, admitting that the girl had eloped with Mr. Halford. But why had she gone off in the night so thinly clad, wearing the long, grey cloak over her night-robe? Why had she not put on the brown costume, the brown shoes, and the brown hat? Why had she left behind her these things, and the bag, and the toilet articles on the dressing-table? Here were indeed the elements of an intricate mystery. Nelson Lee and Douglas Matheson stared at each other in blank bewilderment.

"I have no idea what to make of it," said Mr. Matheson. "I can almost believe that Olive was mad."

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders. His attention was drawn to the silk skirt that hung from a chair; and, looking at it closely, he saw that there had been cut from the bottom of it a strip about four inches in width, by a foot in length. He made no remark.

Bending his gaze on the floor, he perceived two small, round bits of black silk, nearly the size of a penny. For a moment his eyes narrowed, and his brows were knit in conjecture. Then his features were as inscrutable as a mask again.

"Come, Matheson, I have finished here," he said quietly. "Let us go back to the maid."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FRENCH MAID'S EVIDENCE.

IT was a real mask, in a way of speaking, that Nelson Lee wore. Though his placid countenance did not show it, his interest and curiosity had been keenly stirred by the discovery he had just made relating to the black silk skirt. He was tensely absorbed in thought, groping for a glimmer of a theory which eluded him, when he returned with Douglas Matheson to the other bedchamber.

The French maid was lying in the same attitude, still fast asleep, her face still flushed.

Nelson Lee had failed to grasp the theory, and he put it from his mind now.

His gaze rested for a moment on the cork and the glass that were on the dressing-table, and then, having looked around the room, he dropped to one knee by the side of the bed, brushed his arm under it, and produced an empty stout-bottle, which was of the same size, and bore the same label as the bottle in Olive Brent's bedchamber.

"I was sure this was somewhere about," he murmured, as he stood erect. "The empty bottle is not in itself significant, Matheson. But the fact that the cork is on the table yonder, and that the corkscrew is in Miss Brent's room, point to deductions which may throw some light on—"

Nelson Lee stopped as the bed gave a creak. The maid had stirred, and was shaking off the slumber that had held her for hours. She yawned, and opened her eyes, and sat up; and when she had stared vacantly at Douglas Matheson and the detective for a few seconds, open-mouthed with astonishment, she gave a quick start, and the colour ebbed from her face, leaving it almost white. It was as if some disturbing memory had suddenly flashed to her confused mind.

"Oh, sir!" she gasped. "Oh, sir, is it you? I—I thought you were abroad!"

"I returned last evening," Mr. Matheson replied sharply. "I went first to Chorley Wood, and came from there back to town, expecting to find Miss Brent here. I knew she had arranged to go to the theatre with her friends the Draycotts."

"And who is this strange gentleman, sir?" Diane Merode asked. "Why, have you brought him into my bedroom?"

"He is Mr. Nelson Lee. I dare say you have heard of him."

"Mr. Nelson Lee? The detective?"

"Yes, that's right. He is helping me to investigate this amazing affair. Where is your mistress? Where is Miss Brent?"

"She is in bed, sir!"

"She is not, Diane. She is missing."

"Missing? She must be somewhere in the house!"

"No, she isn't. She went off in the night, and she took her jewels with her."

"My mistress went off in the night, sir? She took the jewels? And—and she hasn't—"

The maid's voice faltered and choked. Her eyes were dilated, and on her face was a look of utter stupefaction, which Nelson Lee, who was watching her narrowly, knew to be genuine, and not feigned.

"I can't understand it at all, sir!" she declared, after a short pause. "It is a mystery to me!"

"You must know something!" Douglas Matheson exclaimed. "Don't try to deceive me, Diane. There is reason to believe that my ward has gone away to be married to Mr. Lester Halford. Did she meet him when she arrived in London yesterday with you? Has he been to Chorley Wood during my absence, and—"

"That is enough," Nelson Lee interrupted. "Let me talk to this young woman, Matheson."

He gazed sternly at the maid.

"You have been drinking drugged stout," he said. "That is why you have slept so long and so heavily."

Diane Merode shook her head. "I don't see how the stout could have been drugged," she replied. "I brought the bottle from the larder."

"You brought two, not one," Lee told her.

"Yes, I brought two," the maid assented. "I wanted a drink, as I felt a bit queer. One bottle was for my mistress, and the other for me."

"You opened both bottles in Miss Brent's bedchamber, did you not?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"And you carried the one bottle, and the drawn cork, to your room. Why?"

"Because I didn't want my mistress to know I had taken the stout. That was the reason."

"Was this before your mistress came back from the theatre?"

"Yes, it was before."

answered, "and it rolled under."

"The kitchen door was unlocked all night. Can you explain that?"

"No, sir, I can't. I was in the kitchen several times last evening, but I didn't notice whether the door was locked or unlocked. I have told you all I know. As for Mr. Lester Halford, he has not been to Chorley Woods while Mr. Matheson was abroad, and I haven't seen him since I came up to London yesterday with my mistress."



Bending his gaze on the floor, he perceived two small, round bits of black silk, nearly the size of a penny. For a moment his eyes narrowed, and his brows were knit in conjecture. Then his features were as inscrutable as a mask again.

"At what time did Miss Brent return?"

"At about twelve o'clock, sir, as she had said she would. I was waiting for her in her bedchamber, but I didn't stay. I bade her good-night, and went to my own room, where I drank the stout I had taken there. Then I undressed and got into bed, and I know nothing more until I awoke just now."

"How came the empty bottle to be under the bed?" Nelson Lee continued.

"I dropped it on the floor," Diane Merode

"And the stout you drank last night? You don't believe it was drugged?"

"I don't see how it could have been sir, as I said before. I have always been a heavy sleeper."

During the questioning the French maid had shown some signs of agitation, and of uneasiness as well. Her cheeks had alternately flushed and blanched.

She was perfectly self-possessed now, however. She gave a shrug of the shoulders,

a petulant little shrug, as if she resented the presence of the two men; and she did not flinch, or change colour, under the cold, searching eyes of the detective, who gazed at her in silence for a few seconds. He did not interrogate her any farther.

"You had better go to sleep again, mademoiselle," he said quietly. "You will need more rest. I have no doubt you feel languid, and have a slight headache. The stout was too strong for you."

He spoke a word to Douglas Matheson, and, leaving the bedchamber, the two descended the stairs, and entered the library on the lower floor. Stepping to a window, Mr. Matheson drew aside the curtains, and looked moodily down the garden to the road, where a milk-cart was passing.

Nelson Lee lit a cigarette, and stood by the fireplace, his hands in his pockets, and his face very grave. He was worried, apprehensive in regard to Olive Brent, and he was sure he had reason to be. Since his interview with the maid he had grasped the glimmer of a theory which had eluded him before, and he was now satisfied that he had solved the mystery, at least to a great extent.

But he was not disposed to take his companion into his confidence. He wished to spare him anxiety and distress as long as he could. It was barely possible, moreover, he felt, that there might be a flaw in his deductions.

"I can guess what you think of this affair, Lee," remarked Douglas Matheson, as he turned from the window. "You look as if you were worried."

"I am somewhat perplexed," Nelson Lee admitted, in an absent tone.

"Perplexed? I don't wonder. So am I. Why did Olive go off so thinly clothed, leaving behind her the brown costume and the bag, and the other things? You can't account for it, clever though you are, and neither can I. But that is of no importance. It doesn't alter the main facts.

"Olive has eloped with Lester Halford, of course, and I am afraid he will persuade her to sell the jewels. I value them highly, as you know, because they belonged to my dead wife. And I am most anxious that they shall be recovered."

"I am far from certain, my dear fellow, that your ward has run away to be married to Lester Halford."

"You doubt it, Lee?"

"I do. I strongly doubt it, Matheson."

"Well, I don't. There is no other plausible explanation. In view of what the constable told us, I don't see how you can

Douglas Matheson paused abruptly. "Perhaps I can get some information," he added, "that will lead you to change your mind."

There was a telephone in the room, and on a desk lay a directory of subscribers. Mr. Matheson opened the volume, and rapidly turned the pages and then, moving to the

telephone, he rang up the exchange, and was promptly connected with the number he called for.

He conversed with somebody for several minutes, and when he hung the receiver on its hook, and swung round, there was an expression of triumph on his face.

"There's evidence for you!" he declared. "There's proof that I was right. You heard part of the conversation, Lee, and you must have caught the drift of it."

"I have been talking to the porter at Georgian Mansions, in the Kensington High Street. He has been on duty since twelve o'clock last night. He told me that young Halford came in at half-past twelve, and went up to his chambers; that three-quarters of an hour ago he came downstairs with a bag, hailed a cab, and drove off in it."

"The porter also stated that he overheard Lester Halford tell the chauffeur to drive him to Waterloo as quickly as he could, as he wanted to catch an early train to Bournemouth; and that he recognised the chauffeur as a man of the name of Joe Dibbin, who lives in Holland Mews. How's all that for confirmation, Lee?"

Nelson Lee's countenance changed slightly, and his brows were knit in conjecture again. But only for an instant. What he had been told could not weaken his chain of theories, which were based on shrewd deductions, and were at variance with the views held by Douglas Matheson.

"It is merely circumstantial evidence you've got from the porter," he said, "and so is the fact that the constable saw Miss Brent talking to young Halford on her return from the theatre. And circumstantial evidence is not always trustworthy."

"It is in this instance," Douglas Matheson asserted. "It is absolutely reliable. Olive went off hurriedly in the night to catch a train to Bournemouth, and Lester Halford followed her by a later train."

"The girl started on so long a journey dressed as she was? Preposterous!"

"Not at all. She meant to buy what she needed at Bournemouth this morning."

"You can't shake my conviction," said Nelson Lee.

"And you can't shake mine," Mr. Matheson replied. "I'll stick to it that Olive has eloped with young Halford."

"We won't argue the point. I will settle the question for you, though, in one way or another. I will have my boy Nipper, see the chauffeur, Dibbin, get any further information that he can from him, and run down to Bournemouth."

"I wish you would, Lee."

"Very well. I won't waste any time. I would go myself were I not inclined to work in another direction. By the way, how long has Mademoiselle Merode been Miss Brent's maid?"

"For about a year."

"Has she a lover? Has any man been paying attentions to her Matheson?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Has she any relatives in London?"

"Yes; she has an aunt. A Madame Bonnard, who has a small laundry in Dean Street, Soho."

"The maid has been in the habit of visiting her aunt, I suppose."

"I dare say she has been, Lee. But why are you interested in Diane Merode?"

Nelson Lee evaded the question.

"Keep an eye on the maid," he said.

"See to it that she stays in the house. Don't let her slip off on any pretext. You had better send a telegram to your place in the country, and have the servants who are there come up to town to-day. And don't report this matter to the police. Leave me to deal with it."

Lee paused, and glanced at his watch.

"I will go home now, and instruct Nipper," he added. "I will see you again tomorrow, Matheson, or you will hear from me."

CHAPTER V.

THE INTERVIEW WITH LESTER HALFORD.

THE postponement of the shooting-trip to Suffolk had been a disappointment to Nelson Lee, but he was consoled by the belief that he had in hand a case which particularly appealed to his professional zeal, and his deductive powers—a case of circumstantial evidence which, strong though it was in some respects, was contradicted by other and mysterious circumstances.

He returned to the Gray's Inn Road with an absorbed mind, gravely apprehensive in regard to Olive Brent. Nipper was waiting impatiently for his master. The two sat down to breakfast, and when Lee had given the account of what had occurred at Douglas Matheson's residence in Coburg Square, and had spoken of the discoveries he had made—he did not mention his vague theory—he told the lad what to do.

"Though I am satisfied that Miss Brent has not eloped with Lester Halford," he said, "it is barely possible that the young man can throw some light on the mystery. I will leave it to you to trace him, if you can, as I propose to work in another direction. Find the chauffeur, Dibbin, learn what you can from him, and come back to report to me."

Nipper set off without delay. He took a cab to Holland Mews, close to the Kensington High Street and, after making an inquiry of the coachman, he rapped at a small door adjoining a garage. It was opened by Joe Dibbin himself. He frowned at the lad, and remarked, in a surly tone, that he had been out all night with his cab, and was having a bite to eat before going to bed.

Nipper briefly explained the object of his visit, and slipped a coin to the chauffeur, whose sullen expression relaxed.

"Yes, I know Mr. Lester Halford," he said. "I picked him up outside Georgian Mansions early this morning, and drove him over to Waterloo. He told me he had

to catch an early train to Bournemouth."

You don't know whether he meant to go there or not, I suppose," the lad replied.

"I don't doubt he did," Joe Dibbin answered. "I heard him tell a porter to carry his bag to the Bournemouth express, and keep a seat for him in a first-class compartment."

"How was Mr. Halford dressed? Do you remember?"

"He wore a grey suit, and a grey soft hat, and he had a dark blue overcoat on his arm."

"Did he seem to be cheerful?"

"Cheerful? No, my lad, it struck me he was in a grumpy mood. He looked as if he had lost the last friend he had in the world."

"Thanks very much. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

Satisfied with what he had learned, Nipper promptly drove back to the Gray's Inn Road, and reported to his master. And a few minutes later, having been freshly instructed by Nelson Lee, he was on his way to Waterloo. He did not have to wait there long for a train.

He arrived at Bournemouth, at the Central Station, shortly after two o'clock. He had something to eat and drink at the platform buffet, and then he started on a round of the principal hotels, judging that he would find Lester Halford at one of them.

Having tried the Metropole and the Lansdowne, the Queen's and the Imperial, he called at several others in the Christchurch Road; and finally he went to the Royal Bath Hotel on the Front.

"Is a Mr. Lester Halford staying here?" he asked of the clerk at the desk.

The clerk glanced at the register.

"Yes, there is a gentleman of that name," he replied. "He came this morning."

"Was there anybody with him?"

"No; he was alone."

"Is there a Miss Olive Brent staying here?" the lad continued.

The clerk shook his head.

"No lady of that name," he answered.

"Is Mr. Halford in?"

"No, he left his key at the office a couple of hours ago, and went out. He hasn't come back, for the key is still here."

Nipper turned away, and, on the chance of discovering the young man in the town, he wandered about for hours, and was unsuccessful in his quest. At intervals he returned to the Royal Bath Hotel, to find that Lester Halford was still absent.

He had supper at a restaurant, and when he again returned to the hotel at ten o'clock, to be informed that Mr. Halford had not come back, he settled himself in an easy-chair in the smoking-lounge. He was so tired that he presently fell asleep, and he did not awake until between eleven and twelve o'clock.

There was only one other person in the lounge—a young man in a grey suit, looking very dejected, who was seated at a small

table. He was smoking a cigarette, and in front of him was a glass of whisky-and-soda. There could be no doubt as to his identity, Nipper, recognising him at once by the description he had had of him, went over to him, and touched him on the arm.

"You are Mr. Lester Halford, I think," he said.

The young man glanced up, with a start.

"That's my name," he assented. "But you are a stranger to me. Who are you?"

"I am Nipper, Nelson Lee's assistant."

"Nelson Lee? The detective?"

"That's right. Nelson Lee heard of you from Mr. Douglas Matheson, and I learned from the chauffeur, Joe Dibbin, that he had driven you to Waterloo early this morning to catch a train for Bournemouth. So my governor sent me down here to find you, and——"

"Nelson Lee!" the young man exclaimed, staring in bewilderment. "Douglas Matheson! What do they want with me? What on earth are you talking about? Why were you sent to Bournemouth to find me?"

"Because Miss Olive Brent disappeared from her guardian's house in Coburg Square last night," said the lad, "and Mr. Matheson was sure she had gone off with you. A constable saw you talking to her outside the house when she returned from the theatre."

"Olive Brent has disappeared? Good heavens, can it be possible?"

"Yes, under queer circumstances. And she took her jewels with her. Mr. Matheson made the discovery. He returned from abroad last evening. He sent for Nelson Lee this morning, and put the case into his hands. And that's how it happened the governor sent me to Bournemouth to look for you."

The two were alone. There was nobody to overhear their conversation. Continuing, Nipper fully explained matters, repeating all that he had been told by his master.

Lester Halford listened in silence, his features twitching painfully. He was agitated and distressed.

"I don't understand it," he declared. "It is as much of a mystery to me as it is to anybody else. I will be perfectly candid with you, my boy. I've been in love with Olive Brent for months, and have often asked her to marry me. She has always refused. She cared for me only as a friend, she said, but I wouldn't give up hope."

"I knew that she had come up to town from the country to go to the theatre last night with her friends the Draycotts, and I waited for her outside the house in Coburg Square. Again I asked her to be my wife, and again she refused. She told me it was hopeless, and I was so upset that I resolved to get away from London."

"I came down to Bournemouth this morning, and I have been for a long walk along

the coast to Poole, trying to forget my sorrow. That is my story, and it is the truth. You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, I do," said Nipper. "But can't you account in any way for Miss Brent's disappearance?"

"I can think of only one explanation," Lester Halford replied. "Somebody else Olive was in love with—some other man—and she went off secretly to be married to him."

"With the jewels that belonged to her guardian? Mr. Matheson only loaned them to her."

"I don't suppose it occurred to her that she was doing wrong in taking the jewels with her. She may send them back."

"Perhaps so. Do you know of any particular man with whom Miss Brent might have eloped?"

"No, my boy, I don't. She had a number of acquaintances, but I don't think she cared for any of them in more than a friendly way."

Lester Halford shook his head.

"There is no hope of it," he went on sadly. "No hope. I shall love her as long as I live, though."

He looked so utterly miserable that Nipper was sorry for him. He could not offer him any further comfort. He rose, and, bidding the young man good-night, he left the lounge. The Royal Bath was too luxurious for his taste, and too expensive for his purse; so he went to the Waverley Hotel, in the Holderness Road, and slept there.

He was up early the next morning, in time to have his breakfast and catch the eight o'clock train to Waterloo. And a little more than three hours later he reached home, and told his story to Nelson Lee, who listened to it without comment, and remarked that it was just what he had expected to hear.

"Yes, it is as I thought," he went on, in a grave tone. "Douglas Matheson was wrong. The girl did not elope with Lester Halford, or with any other man. That theory is eliminated."

"It is a most mysterious and sinister case we have to deal with, though I can see a glimmer of light in it. More than a glimmer, in fact."

"Consider the circumstances. Did Olive Brent drug the French maid, or did Diane Merode, while intending to drug her mistress, drink the wrong bottle of stout by mistake? Why did Miss Brent leave the house so thinly clad? Why did she tear a strip from that black silk skirt, and cut two round holes in it? Why did she——"

He was interrupted by Nipper, who had strolled to the window, and was gazing down into the street.

"There's a cab stopped outside!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Matheson is getting out of it! It looks as if he is awfully excited, guv'nor! I'll bet he has some news for us!"

(To be continued.)

(Continued from page 14.)

"Who was our next sentry?"

"Why, Bell—he was on the left, and Fullwood was on the right. But I didn't say a word to either of them—we didn't even meet," exclaimed Gulliver.

"And everything was quiet during the two hours?"

"Yes."

"That'll do," I said, "Bell!"

Bell stepped forward.

"I don't think it's much good questioning you, but it'll only take a minute," I exclaimed. "I think you were on duty in the river salient. Did you leave your post for anything?"

"No—not at all!"

"Didn't you walk up and down the trench?"

"Oh, of course, I did that," said Bell. "Once or twice I met Gulliver, and had a word with him——"

"Oh, did you?" I broke in sharply.

"No!" said Bell, in confusion. "I—I mean, I didn't meet Gulliver at all!"

"In other words, you overlooked for the moment that Gulliver had given a totally different answer," I exclaimed grimly, "I've heard quite enough to convince me that you've been telling nothing but lies—all three of you."

"Lies!" shouted Fullwood hotly.

"Yes, lies!" I thundered. "You contemptible cads! You left your posts last night, and if you had an ounce of decency, you'd admit it, instead of standing before me and lying!"

The rebels gathered round menacingly.

"Well, if this is what you call a fair court-martial, I'm surprised!" sneered Fullwood. "It's no good you tryin' to make us the scapegoats for this rotten business. We didn't let the enemy in——"

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted. "You have told me, Fullwood, that you didn't leave the trenches last night?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"If you didn't leave the trenches, how do you account for the condition of your boots?" I asked quietly. "And how do you account for the condition of Gulliver's boots—and Bell's boots?"

"Boots!" said Fullwood, with a start.

He stared down, and the other juniors stared, too. Then they looked at me in astonishment.

"What about our boots?" snapped Fullwood.

"Nothing much—but I wasn't aware of the fact that we had any tar here!" I retorted.

"Tar!"

"Yes, you cad, tar!" I snapped. "All three of you have got splashes of fresh tar and grit on your boots. And that tells me plainly enough that you were in Bannington last night. They've been tarring the roads of the town for the last week or so. Well? What's your answer?"

Fullwood gritted his teeth. He knew that

I had got him. As a matter of fact, the Nuts had run through a long patch of freshly tarred road just on the outskirts of Bannington. They had not seen it very distinctly, but they had smelt it.

"My hat!" said Pitt. "That's pretty cute, you know! Just the kind of deduction that Mr. Lee might have made! And it's floored these cads, too."

"Not much of a deduction," I said quietly. "The fact speaks for itself. All you fellows know that we haven't got tar here. And yet these three pairs of boots are absolutely spattered."

"You're very clever!" sneered Fullwood. "Those tar splashes have been on our boots for over a week."

"Of course they have!" said Gulliver and Bell.

"That's a beastly lie, because I saw you brushing your boots only yesterday morning," said De Valerie. "You can't get out of it, you rotters. The best thing you can do is to own up."

"I think we can safely say that the prisoners are guilty," I exclaimed. "These three traitors neglected their duty—and there's not the slightest question that Holt's men saw them go. So they took advantage of the fact, and entered the deserted trenches."

"So we've got these beasts to thank for the whole trouble!" said Armstrong, fiercely.

"They've made us lose our supply of grub, and now we shall probably find ourselves in a hopeless mess. The whole disaster is due to these rotten cads!"

"Chuck them out!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We won't stand them in this crowd!"

"They ought to be shot at dawn!" snorted Handforth. "That's the sentence for traitors!"

"We can't shoot them, and we can't pitch them out," I exclaimed. "But we'll give them some severe punishment. We can't let a thing like this pass unnoticed. It's the greatest crime of all to neglect a post of duty."

"It wasn't our fault!" said Gulliver, with a whimper. "It was Fullwood's idea! Bell and I didn't want to go. He forced us into it."

"Of course he did!" said Bell eagerly.

"You snivelling worms!" snarled Fullwood.

"They stand self-confessed now!" I exclaimed angrily. "The inquiry has gone far enough. The sentence of the court is that they shall do all the dirty work of the camp in future. They will never be trusted with sentry work again, and——"

"That's not half severe enough!" roared Handforth.

"I rather think it is!" I exclaimed. "There'll be plenty of dirty work to do—cleaning up the mud patches, and a hundred and one other jobs of a similar kind. You can go now, you treacherous cads. And when we get some more food you'll be the very last to receive your share!"

Fullwood and Co. managed to escape. But it was only the seriousness of the situation which prevented the other fellows from falling on the nuts, and slaughtering them on the spot.

For the situation was serious—indeed, grave in the extreme.

CHAPTER VIII.

BESIEGED!



SOMETHING had to be done.

All the rebels were hungry—and this was only natural. Nobody had eaten anything since the previous supper. And they had been looking forward to one of Fatty Little's solid, hearty breakfasts. Fatty himself was pacing up and down, moaning to himself.

One might have thought that he was on the point of dying.

The mists were clearing, and the morning was breaking out quite fine. But we were not thinking much of the weather. With our food supplies vanished—owing to the treachery of Fullwood and Co.—we were without a bite to eat in the whole camp.

"Why shouldn't we make another raid?" suggested Pitt. "I vote we get a big party up, and go straight to the school, and pinch all the grub we can lay hands on. That's the best way."

"I rather think not," I disagreed. "You can be quite sure that Miss Trumble prepared this affair—and she'll probably anticipate a move of that kind. And may have a whole crowd of men ready to pounce on us."

"Phew!" whistled Bob Christine. "That's likely enough."

"Quite apart from that," I went on, "It's a dead certainty that she won't have the food in any of the ordinary storerooms. You can bet it's all been shifted away to a place we don't know of. If we went to the school for grub, we should come away bare—and we might land ourselves in trouble."

"Then what shall we do?"

"The only thing is to go to the village," I replied. "Fortunately, we've got a good supply of cash, and we can soon rake up a nice bundle of quids. The best thing is for a party to go to the village, and buy all the supplies we need for the day. We can make bigger arrangements afterwards."

"Good enough!" said Pitt. "That's the wheeze. Funny thing, but Nipper always has the right suggestion in the right place. I'm hanged if I know what we'd do without him!"

Chambers came up.

"What's all this I hear about grub?" he asked. "Here's a nice thing! As soon as I come and join you, you run out of food! Pretty rotten management, isn't it?"

"Sorry, Chambers, but we haven't got

time to discuss the point now," I said briskly. "If you want to know why we haven't got any grub, ask Fullwood."

"Fullwood is to blame, of course," said Chambers. "But if I had been in command, I shouldn't have allowed Fullwood to be on guard at all! The fact is, you need me at the head of affairs."

"Thanks all the same—but we'd rather not," I said. "You needn't worry Chambers. It won't be long before we get some food."

"It better not be!" said the Fifth-former darkly. "I'm hungry!"

The party was soon formed.

I placed Reggie Pitt at the head of it—deciding that it would be better for me to remain in charge of the camp. Pitt took a dozen fellows with him, and reckoned that he would be able to get back well within the hour. They decided to go by way of the towing path. It was not only nearer, but less conspicuous. They started off at a smart march.

They were urged to hurry.

Fatty himself formed one of the party, for he would have to do most of the ordering. Being the chef, he knew exactly what was required. And the spirits of the rebels began to revive somewhat.

But only for a few minutes.

For then came a most dreadful shock. Pitt, at the head of his men, had jumped out of the trench, and was well on his way across the meadow. Then, suddenly, he paused and stared.

In front of him a number of figures rose up from the ground. Men were appearing from every side—dozens of them. They seemed to come from nowhere. And, what was more to the point, these men were armed with thick sticks.

Pitt caught his breath in with a gulp.

He had seen something else.

Now that morning mists were clearing, Reggie could make out a kind of temporary fence work, stretching all the way round, in a continuous line. And, to his utter dismay, he saw that poles had been driven in the ground, and there were thick festoons of barbed wire.

To be quite exact, the entire trench system of Fort Resolute was now surrounded—a good distance away—by barbed wire entanglements. And just in front of these were men, all armed and grimly awaiting action.

"Great Scott!" gasped Pitt. "We're surrounded!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Tommy Watson. "We can't get out—it's impossible to leave!"

Handforth clenched his fists.

"Rot!" he roared. "We can fight, I suppose!"

"Even if we fight, and beat these men—which is doubtful—what about the barbed wire?" asked Pitt. "While we're scrambling through that, we shall be caught like rats in a trap. No, you can't get away from it—we're hemmed in properly!"

"My only hat!"

"We're besieged!"

"Like Paris in the Franco-Prussian War!"

"Great guns!"

"And—we haven't got any grub!"

The party of rebels stood there, filled with consternation. And they could see that Farmer Holt's men were laughing with triumph. They knew well enough that the juniors dare not advance any further.

From the fort itself the barbed wire entanglements had not been visible in the morning mist. But it was quite clear to Reggie Pitt that these men had been busy in the darkness of the night. They had planned to give us a big surprise.

And there was no getting away from the fact that the enemy had made a highly successful move. In fact, it looked as though everything was all up with the rebels.

Grave as the position had been half an hour earlier, it was now positively vital.

"Well, it's no good standing here. We'd better go back!" exclaimed Pitt. "This must be reported to Nipper—"

"We're not going back!" snorted Handforth. "We'll make a fight for it, and get through!"

"Hurrah!"

"Let's rush 'em!"

"Steady on—steady on!" said Reggie. "It's no good going on like that. Even if we get through, how do you suppose we shall get back? It'll be absolutely impossible to defeat that barbed wire twice! Because when we come back Holt's men will have strengthened it in readiness. No, we've got to return to the camp."

Even Handforth admitted the wisdom of this decision. And the food-party hastened back towards the trenches with their awful news.

CHAPTER IX.

HUNGRY AND HOPELESS!



"HALLO! The fat-heads are coming back!" said Bob Christine.

We were standing just outside the barn, and through the slight mist we could see the food party returning. As a matter of fact, I had been watching them all the time. I had seen them go out, had watched them pause—like figures in the mist—and now they were all coming back at the double.

I half-anticipated what was coming. And it was only a few minutes later that the whole rebel encampment knew the truth. The news spread like wildfire.

"Of course, there's only one thing to be done!" declared Christine. "We've got to make a huge attack. We'll smash these rotters to bits, and get clean through!"

"That's my idea!" said Handforth.

"You've got to understand that it can't be done," I said sharply.

"Why not?"

"Because we're fighting against a bigger

force than ourselves," I answered. "Not only that, but this barbed wire fence will do us. While we're trying to get through it, we shall be beaten back without any difficulty."

"But can't we all attack in one quarter?"

"Yes, and while we're doing so Holt's men will get in on the other side," I said. "Be reasonable, you chaps. We've got to look at this thing calmly. There's no sense in getting excited, but you can take it for granted that we're in a bad pickle."

Fullwood laughed.

"I suppose you'll try to say that I'm responsible for this, too?" he asked. "What difference does it make? Holt had prepared this fence, in any case. He had us whacked

"Had us whacked, eh?" I repeated sharply. "Don't talk such rot! We had enough food in the barn to last a week. We could have snapped our fingers at his men and his barbed wire. Miss Trumble can't last a week, and we should have held the upper hand."

Fullwood was silent.

"But the loss of our food makes all the difference," I continued. "Now I can understand why the food was taken away. It was all part of the same plan. Surrounding us wouldn't have been much good while we had a good stock of grub."

"It wouldn't have been any good at all," said Pitt.

"As it is, we're helpless—besieged!" I declared. "It simply means that they're going to starve us into submission."

"Or try to!" said Christine.

"It looks very much as though they'll succeed," I said quietly. "It's no good getting away from facts. We're surrounded, and we can't get out. There's no food here, and by the end of the day we shall be ravenous. What do you think most of the chaps will be saying in the morning, after a hungry night?"

"They'll be wanting to give in!" growled Pitt.

"Of course, they will!" I exclaimed. "A few of us might be willing to stick it for two or three days—but not the majority. Hunger's the worst thing. If we're going to be starved, about twenty-four hours will be enough for the bulk of us. The chaps will surrender, in spite of all our attempts to keep them with us."

"You're right!" said Pitt, scratching his head. "But surely we can do something? We're not going to be defeated like this, on the last lap! It's too awful to think about!"

"It was a carefully laid plot," I said. "They took our food away, and have made it pretty clear that we shan't be able to get any fresh supplies. You fellows had better get to your posts, and leave me to think things out."

I was worried.

Pitt and Handforth and a few more would be willing to go for a day or two without

anything to eat. But nine out of every ten fellows were hungry now, and would be absolutely ravenous by the evening. Many I believed, would be talking about giving it up then.

This was the most disastrous thing that could possibly have happened.

And it made me furious to realise that it had all come about because of the treacherous conduct of three of our own number.

Farmer Holt could not claim a clear victory.

Certainly, Fullwood and Co. had not deliberately acted the part of traitors. But by deserting their posts it nearly amounted to the same thing.

After another hour the morning mist had practically cleared.

And then we were able to see everything with painful distinctness. Holt's men were now hard at work. They had given us the surprise, and there was no longer any necessity for secrecy.

Men were hard at work on all sides.

During the night posts of the barbed wire fence had merely been silently pushed into the ground. But now they were hammered down further, and other posts were erected.

There was great activity. Coils and coils of wire were brought up. Indeed, long before the morning was over we saw that we were in a kind of cage. The barbed wire was so thick that no attack on our part would be able to get through it.

We were hemmed in—besieged in earnest.

Holt and his men didn't care a jot about attacking us now. They had found that it was quite useless to do so. They preferred to play a waiting game. Sooner or later we should surrender.

We should be compelled to do so, for hunger would make it absolutely imperative. We might be able to get through the day—and perhaps the night. But on the morrow I could foresee the rebels crossing over one after the other. They would weakly hand themselves over to Miss Trumble.

And, once back at the school, they would never be able to rebel again. A revolt of our kind is either a big success or a big failure. There are no half-measures about it.

Once the rebels gave in their spirit would be broken. They would never be able to get up another revolt. They would have to tamely submit to anything that Miss Trumble cared to impose upon them.

As for Archie Glenthorne and myself, we had been expelled—and we should remain expelled. I felt rather desperate as I thought of it. Something had to be done! But what? What?

Rack my brains as I would, I could think

of no solution to this problem. It seemed as though we were utterly defeated. We held the fort, and we were not attacked. But without food we were a beaten army.

There was a certain novelty about a siege. But it is better to read about these things than to actually take part in them. There was nothing that we could feed on. The meadows contained nothing but coarse grass and weeds. It was impossible to eat stuff of that kind.

It was bad enough to have Holt's men surrounding us. But that barbed wire fence was the tremendous barrier. It made it impossible for us to escape, and it made it equally impossible for us to make any determined attack.

I was quite sure that Miss Trumble was paying the expense. It was she who had bought the barbed wire. It was she who was paying these men. The ground belonged to Farmer Holt, but he would never have taken all this trouble on his own account.

The Headmistress of St. Frank's was making one last attempt to bring us to our knees.

Would she succeed?

CHAPTER X.

A DESPERATE VENTURE.



EVENING came, and the situation was unchanged.

At least, there had been no activity on the part of the enemy. The fence was now completed, and the men guarding it were posted about on every side. We had watched the progress of events with dull, listless interest.

The rebels had ceased to take interest in their own work.

They were hungry, weary, and desperate.

It had been serious enough to go without breakfast. But then dinner-time had come. There was no food. Now it was the usual spell for tea. There was nothing to put to our lips except water.

Even Miss Trumble's famous bread-and-water punishment seemed luxurious to the ravenous rebels. They had wondered why they had ever jibbed at it. Dry bread would have seemed very appetising just now.

Fatty Little was prostrate.

All he could do was to lay upstairs on one of the mattresses. He repeatedly told us that he was dying, and that he would be gone before night arrived. On more than one occasion he had attempted to creep away—with the idea of surrendering.

Fatty only lived for food. Everything else was of small importance to him. But for him to go without food was the worst possible form of torture. By the evening he had to be guarded.

But for this he would have delivered himself over to Miss Trumble on the spot. The other fellows were not so bad, although many of them were beginning to talk of giving in.

GET THE CHAMPION

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Archie Glenthorne remained quite serene.

"Of course, dear old lads, the whole thing is frightfully frightful. But there you are," he observed. "I mean to say, what's the good of jibbing? The jolly old belt is feeling loose about the middle, and, and I'm aware of a dashed big void. But all these sort of things have to happen in a lifetime, don't you know!"

"That's the way to look at it, Archie," I said approvingly. "I wish all the other fellows took the same sensible view."

"We're starving!" growled Hubbard. "What's the good of talking? The thing's hopeless, and so we might as well give in at once!"

"Hear, hear!"

"If there was any possibility of getting some grub soon we'd stick out," exclaimed Marriott gruffly. "But there's no prospect at all. If we're going to surrender, we might as well do it now—before we make ourselves ill from want of food."

"Of course!"

"Let's chuck it up!"

"The best thing to do is to march back to St. Frank's in a body," said Hubbard.

"Not likely!" put in Griffith. "All those fellows who want to go can go—and if there are any asses who prefer to stay behind they can stay. Hands up, those who are in favour of surrender!"

There were quite a good few fellows off duty in the barn, and a number of hands eagerly went up.

"Stop this!" I said sharply. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! It's absolute nonsense, talking about surrendering now!"

"Must have something to eat!" protested Hubbard.

"And you'll have something, if things go right," I snapped. "But I thought you fellows had more will-power than to talk of giving in just because you're a bit hungry."

"A bit!" snorted Merrill. "We've eaten nothing since last night!"

"Not a crumb!"

"This siege is absolutely finishing us!"

"That's just what Miss Trumble wants—she's been working for it ever since the campaign opened," I pointed out. "But don't forget this—it's a last desperate throw on her part. It's her final card."

"And it's the ace of trumps!" growled Hubbard.

"It all depends," I continued. "If this scheme of hers fails, she'll have to surrender. Can't you understand, you chaps, that if we can only best this one last trick we shall be victorious? We shall have her whacked to the wide. After this she can't do a thing—if we only get some food."

"That's a very big if!"

"Look here, I want you to trust me," I said earnestly. "I'm not asking very much. But just give me another four hours—say, until nine o'clock. If I haven't wangled some grub into the camp by nine o'clock—well, I won't object if you surrender."



I tapped on the window of one of the studies. It was the study shared by Stevens and Simms of the Fifth.

The Removites stared.

"What can you do by nine o'clock?" demanded Owen major.

"I don't exactly know—but I can have a good shot at something," I replied grimly. "I'm the leader, and it's up to me to get us all out of this mess. I want everybody's word that he'll wait until nine."

The juniors were quite willing enough. They were starving hungry, but they gave me the time I required. And I got the same assurance from all those who were on duty. In fact, I had put a little heart into the fellows. For they had begun to hope that I should do something.

I certainly had an idea.

And as soon as darkness had completely fallen, I got hold of six picked fellows—Tommy Watson, Pitt, De Valerie, Jack Grey, Bob Christine, and Tregellis-West. In the gloom, I took them all aside.

"I've got a bit of a scheme!" I said. "It's rather a desperate venture, but we've got to try something."

"What's the wheeze?"

"I want you fellows to creep out with me into the darkness," I said. "It doesn't matter if it takes us an hour. We've got to crawl on our stomachs. We've got to do something very similar to what they did on the real battle-front during the war. That is, crawl out in the darkness and capture one of the enemy. And we've got to do it without making a sound."

"But what good will that do, even if we succeed?" asked Grey.

"I'll tell you later—if we do succeed," I replied.

The juniors were quite curious, but I did not feel inclined to satisfy them. If we captured one of the enemy, all well and good. Then it would be time enough to explain my plan.

All the fellows were quite eager to help.

I put several others in charge of the various points. But I was fairly certain that there would be no attack. It was not the enemy's policy to do any fighting now.

They were simply keeping up this siege, and they knew that we would throw up the sponge when our hunger grew to a certain pitch. So we could be fairly certain that the evening would be quiet.

We could be equally certain that Farmer Holt would have many of his men posted about in different quarters. And it was our intention to grab one of these men if we could manage it.

As I had told the others, it was rather a desperate scheme. If it succeeded, I had something else to follow it up with. And I had every hope of being victorious.

We all started out from the front-line trench, and proceeded to crawl on our hands and knees through the long, icy-cold grass. I had particularly warned the fellows not to make any attempts at hurrying.

One false move, and all our efforts would be ruined.

I went on in advance, and as I got further away from the camp my movements became slower. Before so very long I was worming my way along like a snake. The others came behind—slowly and as silently as Red Indians. It was rather an impressive business.

And we were thrilled by the whole game.

For we were on a man-hunt. Our object was to capture a single enemy—and to capture him so neatly that none of his companions would know of his fate. It will be understood, therefore, that we had taken on a tall order.

We must have been out about half an hour when I saw the barbed-wire fence looming up against the sky, not far ahead. I

could see the posts, standing up, gaunt and ugly. A faint wind was whistling over the ground, and the air was chilly.

From the distance came the sound of a barking dog, and then the hoot of a motor-horn, perhaps. But near at hand everything was perfectly still. For all that we could see and hear, there were no human beings within miles of us. And yet I instinctively knew that Holt's men were not far off.

I wormed my way forward another yard or two. I acted as a kind of signal to the others. When I halted, they halted. When I moved forward, they followed my example. And they did their part admirably. They crouched so low, and they came so silently that it was practically a matter of impossibility to distinguish them from the ground itself.

And then, suddenly, I paused.

My nostrils dilated, and I sniffed gently, lifting my head slightly from the ground. There was something different in the air, a change from the earthy, dank smell which had been in my nostrils for the last half hour.

I had caught a waft of strong, shag tobacco-smoke!

And I felt myself glowing all over with inward excitement. Here was the first solid clue that one of the enemy was near at hand. I waited for a minute or two, deciding which way the wind was blowing, and determined, at last, that the smoker must be some little distance to the left.

I was glad of this, for there were one or two bushes there. In the other direction the ground rose, and was bare. It would never have done to have exposed ourselves on that projection.

So we edged off to the left.

And in a few minutes we were rewarded. For I caught sight of a faint little glow. It was the bowl of the smoker's pipe. And now I could distinguish the man himself.

He was sitting upon a fallen piece of wood—a kind of log, as far as I could see. And, to my satisfaction, I also saw that the fellow was inside the barbed wire fence, and not outside it, as I feared.

It was impossible to tell who he was, or what he was. But that mattered little. The main thing was to get hold of him, and to stop him from making an outcry.

The crucial moment had arrived.

Inch by inch I edged my way up behind him, crawling through the grass like a snake. He sat there, alternately smoking and humming a tune to himself. He was quite unconscious of any impending danger.

Then, gathering myself together, I sprang.

This, as I knew, was to be the signal for the others. That one spring of mine carried me upwards, and in a flash I had my arm right over his mouth, in a kind of hook.

It must have been a dreadful shock for the fellow. He gave one gurgling grunt as his pipe was knocked away, but uttered no real sound. In a moment Pitt and the rest were on him, sprawling over every inch

of his carcase. He was held down as though by a vice.

Then Tommy Watson handed me a heavy scarf. I pulled my arm away from the man's face, but he had no chance to cry out. The scarf was pulled round him in a moment. He caught his breath in as a preliminary to a yell, but the yell never came. It changed into a muffled gurgle. The scarf was wound round and round, and drawn tight.

Ropes were passed round his ankles and legs. And then we commenced our retreat.

Still crouching low, we went back by the same route as we had come. For the first hundred yards we dragged our prisoner. But after that we lifted him bodily, and carried him. And by now we felt that we were safe. We had been successful.

We had brought the enemy in.

CHAPTER XI.

IN BORROWED PLUMES.



"GOOD!" murmured Reginald Pitt breathlessly.

We had just arrived in one of the dugouts. None of the other rebels knew of our movements. We had slipped into the trench without attracting attention, and we had made straight for this dugout. It was provided with a rough door—a rudely constructed affair of wood. And this was closed, and we were in private. De Valerie set light to a candle.

And now, with great interest, we examined our prisoner.

The ropes were unfastened, and the scarf removed. The man spluttered and gasped, and glared round.

"You—you blamed young varmint!" he gasped. "My, but you give me a rare start! I thought I'd been havin' too many at fust!"

The man was one of Holt's labourers—a rough-looking customer of smallish size, and about forty years of age. I was exceedingly pleased that he was small, for this suited me better.

"Undress!" I ordered grimly.

"Look here, young shaver——"

"If you don't undress of your own accord, we shall undress you!" I exclaimed. "You can have your choice. But you'd better be sharp about it."

The man absolutely refused at first. He was indignant and angry. But as soon as he found that the juniors were in earnest—as soon as they attempted to pull his coat off—he agreed.

And as he undressed, so did I.

At least, I took my tunic off, but kept my breeches on. Then I donned the labourer's clothing. His thick corduroy trousers went on easily over my breeches, and then came his other coarse garments, including a choker round the neck and a dilapidated old trilby hat. We had not forgotten to bring

a couple of warm blankets, so that our prisoner could keep himself warm in captivity.

"My hat!" said Pitt. "You look the part to the life!"

"About the body, yes," said Jack Grey. "But he ought to have some disguise for the face——"

"Whatever I do, I can't make myself look like a man of forty!" I interrupted. "So I might just as well remain as I am. And in the darkness it won't matter a toss—it's the general outline that counts, to say nothing of the voice. How does this go?"

I said a few words in a gruff, coarse voice, trying to make it similar to our prisoner's.

"Great!" said De Valerie. "You've got it to a T!"

"Well, I'm off!" I said briskly. "Look after this chap, and keep him under close guard. If I don't come back with some good news, you can call me a failure."

And so, on a lone mission, I set off.

As I had told the others, I was the leader of the rebellion, and I reckoned that it was up to me to get us all out of this terrible predicament. Indeed, my plan was such that it had to be attempted single-handed.

As quickly as possible I made my way over the meadows, and at last I arrived at the barbed wire fence. And there, just inside, was that log of wood near the bushes. I took my seat, and remained there for a short time.

Then I got up, and commenced patrolling up and down. As I had half-expected, a figure loomed up in the gloom after I had done the patrol twice.

"That you, Ben?" came a whisper. "I ain't seen you this last half-hour."

"I've been keepin' quiet-like," I growled. "I thought mebbe them kids was gettin' lively. But it's all quiet."

"Them young rips won't do nothin' to-night!" said the man. "Leastways, nothin' except surrender. This 'ere game don't suit you, Ben—you're gettin' 'oarse."

"It's enough to make me 'oarse, ain't it?" I grunted, as I turned away.

The man laughed, and went off. And I didn't wait any longer.

I slipped to the barbed-wire fence, crawled through it, and then sped away across the meadow towards Little Side. As I approached this I went at a more sedate pace, slowing down to a lumbering walk. But I needn't have bothered. I didn't meet a soul all the while. And then, fairly quivering with intense inward excitement, I arrived in the old Triangle.

The lights were gleaming from all the windows. I had got through the enemy lines, and I was now right in the school grounds. I proceeded to put my plan into execution. The Triangle was deserted, and I slipped across to the Ancient House, and tapped gently on the window of one of the studies. It was the study which was shared by Stevens and Simms, of the Fifth.

In a moment the window was open.

"What the dickens—" began Simms.

"Hush!" I breathed. "Don't take any notice of my clothes—I'm Nipper!"

Simms stared in amazement.

"What on earth are you having a game at?" he demanded.

"It's not much of a game," I replied.

"I'm desperate, and I want your help! I suppose you know all about the siege?"

"Rather!" replied the Fifth-Former. "The school's been talking about it all day. In fact, we've been expecting you to surrender."

"You'll have to expect in vain!" I said.

"We're not going to surrender—we're going to beat this last trick of Miss Trumble's."

"Well, I hope you do, that's all," said the Fifth-Former. "But I don't see what the Fifth can do—"

"I'll tell you!" I interrupted. "We must have food—we haven't tasted a bit since yesterday—"

"Poor kid!" said Simms. "I've got a pork pie in here, and you'd better wolf it down at once—"

"Thanks, all the same, but I'd rather not," I interrupted. "I'm not going to eat anything till the other fellows can eat, too. Listen! I want the Fifth to collect all the grub it can, and come outside. What you've got to do is to bring all the stuff as far as the barbed-wire fence, and dump it through. The more you can bring the better. The commotion will bring our chaps up, and they'll soon grab the stuff—"

"Hold on!" said Simms. "How can we get any grub?"

"How?" I repeated. "What about all the cupboards? Haven't you got plenty of stuff in all the studies? Anything'll do for now—anything to be going on with! Can't you understand that the chaps are starving? Rush round and tell all the other Fifth-form chaps that they've got to make up the food into parcels and to bring them along."

I glanced round and felt thrilled.

"By jingo!" I added. "Mrs. Hake's shop is open. Look here, I've brought some money along—nearly ten quid! Take it, and buy all the grub you can for it in the tuck shop! Then the Fifth can rush it up to the fence!"

"Sorry," said Simms. "But it can't be done."

I stared.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, hang it all, be reasonable," said the Fifth-former. "You surely don't expect us to mix ourselves in your silly business? We can't be bothered to go and buy grub—"

"Can't be bothered!" I exclaimed aghast. "Do you mean to say that you won't help? The Remove's starving! Haven't you got any feelings at all, you cad?" I added, hotly.

"Don't be cheeky!" said Simms, frowning. "It wouldn't take me two minutes to tell Miss Trumble—"

"Tell her!" I said contemptuously. "I

don't belong to St. Frank's now, anyway! I've been sacked! Miss Trumble couldn't do anything to me, except mess up this plan."

"I don't want to be nasty, but it's too risky!" said Simms. "I'm jolly sure the Fifth wouldn't agree. Supposing Miss Trumble saw us? She'd drop on the Fifth like a load of bricks."

"Are you afraid of her, then?" I asked tartly.

"No, but—"

"Will you go round to the studies, and ask the other fellows if they'll help?" I interrupted urgently. "Go on, Simms! Perhaps they won't look at it in the same light! This is just the time when the Fifth ought to lend a hand. It's the crisis of the whole position."

Simms went off after a few moments. I was amazed by his attitude. I had confidently expected that the Fifth would be only too pleased to render any possible assistance. And then I got another shock. For Simms came back, after about five minutes, and shook his head.

"Nothing doing!" he said briefly.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I've been to all the fellows—I've taken a lot of trouble over you," said the senior. "But it's no good. The Fifth all agree that they can't interfere in your concerns. Miss Trumble has got the upper hand, and if we mix in now we shall only make things a lot worse. So you'd better clear off while you're safe!"

And before I could speak, Simms closed the window.

I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth.

"Oh, the cads—the miserable, unfeeling cads!" I muttered fiercely. "They ought to be kicked for this!"

It was seldom that I had felt as furious as I did then. And I was bitterly disappointed, too. I had been counting on the Fifth—I had been certain that they would rally round in such an emergency as this.

And I was thoroughly disgusted.

But I was not beaten!

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST CHANCE!



TO go back empty handed was quite impossible.

Such a thing was not to be thought of. Having failed in my original scheme, owing to the weakness of the Fifth, I had to get hold of another notion. But how? What could I do?

I walked about the Triangle, keeping to the black shadows, puzzling my brains as to some method of accomplishing my object. If the Fifth had displayed any decency, they could easily have carried the food as far as the barbed-wire fence, as I suggested.

But how could I go to Mrs. Hake's shop, and buy a big supply of grub and take it to the famished garrison single handed? The

thing was out of the question. And yet—what was to be done?

As far as I could see, I should have to fall back on the miserable expedient of taking just as much as I could personally carry. And this seemed ridiculous. I should only be able to carry enough to provide each fellow with a mouthful.

It hardly seemed worth while.

I should simply give them an appetite for more, and make them more ravenously hungry than ever. And while I was in this state of mind, I racked my brains again and again.

Would it be any good going to the Sixth?

But, after my experience of the Fifth, I did not think it worth while to approach the lordly members of the Sixth. As for the fags, this was equally impossible.

They might be ready enough, but it wouldn't do.

The fags would get into terribly hot water—for Miss Trumble would drop on them with awful violence. I couldn't drag the Third into the troubles of the Remove.

Who else was there? The servants? One or two of the grooms or gardeners might be able to carry something. But it was most unlikely that they would consent—for discovery would mean dismissal.

For the first time during the whole campaign I was nonplussed. There was food everywhere—on every side of me! And yet I couldn't take it to the fellows who were hemmed in in Fort Resolute.

And the very idea of going back without anything was too awful for words. The juniors would probably jeer at me, and throw me over. And, in a way, they would be justified.

Perhaps I could go to the village. I might be able to—

And then I quivered as a new thought came to me. The River House School! Brewster and Co.! The juniors of the River House would be only too willing to help. They were pals of ours.

"What an ass I was not to think of this before!" I muttered. "I've only got to go to Brewster and his pals, and they'll lend a hand! We can buy plenty of grub in the village and bring it up! By Jove! I'll do it!"

Having made up my mind, I did not hesitate.

Delay would not do, for the shops in the village closed early. What a lesson it would be to the Fifth! Possibly some of the River House fellows might object—for their Head had forbidden them to have anything to do with the St. Frank's rebels.

But I knew very well that I could rely upon the friendship of Brewster and his own chums. And I was thrilling with fresh hope as I sped across the Triangle and made my way out into the lane.

I started going down towards the village. But, after a moment, I crouched in the hedge. I had done this because a large motor-

was coming up the lane, and it was provided with big headlights.

And I was rather an extraordinary spectacle to gaze upon. I did not want to attract undue attention. I waited until the motor-van came past, watching it with idle curiosity.

As the big van lumbered by, I recognised it.

It was one of those big, cumbersome closed vans, carrying a full load of biscuits. It was a famous firm. And I knew from past experience that this van called at St. Frank's every week for the purpose of delivering the regular supply of biscuits.

The van passed on, reached the main gateway of the school, and then proceeded to turn round in a series of backward and forward motions. I stood there, watching—in a fascinated kind of way.

It may be thought that I was wasting time. But was I? I saw the driver jump down, and he went straight through the gateway and vanished. And there the big van stood, without anybody in charge of it. The engine was still throbbing. It was as though Providence had sent this chance right into my hands.

It seemed too good to be true. It was certainly too good to be ignored.

A big motor-van—absolutely filled up with tins of biscuits! I knew by the very way in which it had lumbered along that it carried a full load. The idea of it!

Hundredweights of biscuits—food in plenty! True, there was not much variety. But biscuits are glorious things to fellows who are as hungry as hunters. And we could manage to live on such a diet, for days on end, too. It would be monotonous, but what did that matter?

For, then and there, I decided on a fresh plan.

Since this chance had been thrust before my nose, I should have been an idiot if I had ignored it. There stood the van, with the engine running, and with the driver round at the back of the school. My mind worked quickly as I thought out the details.

And I decided that it could be done.

There was no sense whatever in wasting time. The only thing was to act boldly, and on the spur of the moment. By going down to the River House I might succeed in obtaining food for the morrow. But here, in this van, there were enough biscuits to last four or five days! It would be infinitely better to take the risk.

And so, without any further hesitation, I ran swiftly up the road. And I had only come to my decision in the very nick of time. As I arrived beside the lorry, I heard the driver coming across the Triangle. He was whistling to himself, and had not the slightest notion of impending disaster. Quick as a flash I leapt up into the driving seat.

I had driven a lorry before now—and as for cars. I've had tons of experience. I didn't

even need to look at the controls. I instinctively knew where they were.

And, just as the carman came out, I shoved my foot on the accelerator. I lifted out the clutch, shoved in the gear, and then slipped the clutch back quickly. The big van literally leapt forward.

"What the thunder—" shouted the driver wildly.

"Sorry, old man, can't wait!" I yelled.

He was running beside the van, waving his arms and looking excited.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "You mad young fool! Do you hear me? Stop! You'll break your neck—"

But he fell behind, for I had just changed gear, and the van was now racing on its way.

But only for a short distance.

About two hundred yards down the lane there was a gate—and this led straight into the playing fields of the school. Even as I drove, I was wondering what would be the best thing to do. If I pulled up and got down to open the gate the driver would arrive, and then my plan would be impossible. There was only one thing for it.

The gate would have to go!

And, with this idea in mind, I set my teeth grimly. It was neck or nothing now. My desperate scheme was for the defeat or victory of the Remove. If I failed, the Remove would fail—the great barring-out would end in dismal collapse.

But if I won, what a difference! I should take relief to the starving garrison and Miss Trumble's trump card would have failed. So it can be easily understood that I did not hesitate.

The headlights were good ones, and I was thankful for that. They revealed the wide gateway, just ahead of me. I jammed the brakes on, and then whirled the steering-wheel round. The van careered round in a wild curve, and made straight for the gates like some charging Juggernaut!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RELIEF OF FORT RESOLUTE.



C RASH!

The gate splintered to matchwood as the big van charged through it. I am pretty well sure that the corner was turned on only two wheels.

It was rather a miracle that we didn't cap-

size altogether. There was a series of wild jolts, I was nearly flung out, and then I found myself going across the grassland.

From behind came one or two faint yells. The unfortunate driver was still chasing behind, and I could easily understand his state of mind now. Not knowing any of the circumstances, he probably thought that I was mad.

"It's all right, old son!" I said softly. "There's no need for you to worry! If there's any damage done, the school'll have to pay for it!"

I was absolutely gloating with victory now.

For I had a certain conviction that this latest plan was to succeed. I could not see how it would fail—unless I capsized the van before reaching the Fort. As I knew every inch of the ground, this was not likely.

I accelerated, and in a moment or two the van was going at full speed. It was a noisy engine, and kicked up a terrific spluttering roar. And I added to the din by jerking down the handle of the klaxon horn in a kind of continuous motion.

The noise awoke the echoes of the whole neighbourhood.

The rebels in their stronghold could not fail to hear. At first the sound was a mystery to them. Reggie Pitt was standing in one of the trenches, talking to Tommy Watson. They could see a brilliance in the distance, over the meadows and the playing-fields.

"I can't make it out!" said Pitt, frowning. "Look! I'm hanged if there isn't a motor-van on Little Side!"

"Impossible!"

"I tell you it's a fact!" said Pitt. "Look at it—you can't mistake those lights! It's coming straight across the grass in this direction. And just listen to the horn!"

"The blessed thing must be out of control!" gasped Watson.

But Reggie suddenly gave a whoop.

"Hurrah!" he roared. "I'll bet it's Nipper!"

"Nipper!" yelled somebody.

"Of course! He's coming with the grub!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"It—it's too good to be true!"

"Who else could it be, then?" shouted Pitt. "Why is it coming along straight towards us? And listen to that horn! It's a warning for us to clear out of the way."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

The excitement was tremendous.

In the meantime, I was pretty full up with work myself. The van was swaying and rolling, and now the great moment of the whole mad career had arrived.

Somehow or other, I had managed to get

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out of the playing-fields. I had sent the lorry hurtling through a low wooden fence. She had gone through beautifully, nearly turning over on the other side, owing to the rough ground. And now, straight in front of me, lay the big barbed-wire fence—the impregnable barrier which Farmer Holt had erected.

In order to get to Fort Resolute, I had to burst clean through the wire entanglements. The lorry would do it, I knew. But how should I come off? If any of those wires drew taut as I smashed through, and caught against me, I should be cut to ribbons.

It was rather a risk, but I had to chance it. There was a wind-screen on the van, but it was in a lowered position. I decided that it would be foolish to slow down, for such a thing would only prolong the agony.

And, indeed, it was just possible that I should stick half-way through. It would be far better to make one dash at it, and chance everything.

So I set my teeth, and opened the throttle to its widest extent.

And now I became aware of men running up. Farmer Holt and his crowd had seen what was taking place, and they were alarmed, and probably furious. For they must have known that this was some desperate attempt to relieve the rebels.

I hardly had time to look to right or to left. The barbed-wire fence was just in front, and I rushed to meet it at full speed. I heard the men shouting madly. And I knew that unless they stood clear the wire would spring back and do them some damage.

And then—swish—zurr!r!

It was over in a flash. The van simply hurled itself at the fence. There was a most extraordinary sound as the wires were crumpled and twisted and torn to shreds. Instinctively, I had crouched low behind the steering column. But it was all over almost before I knew it.

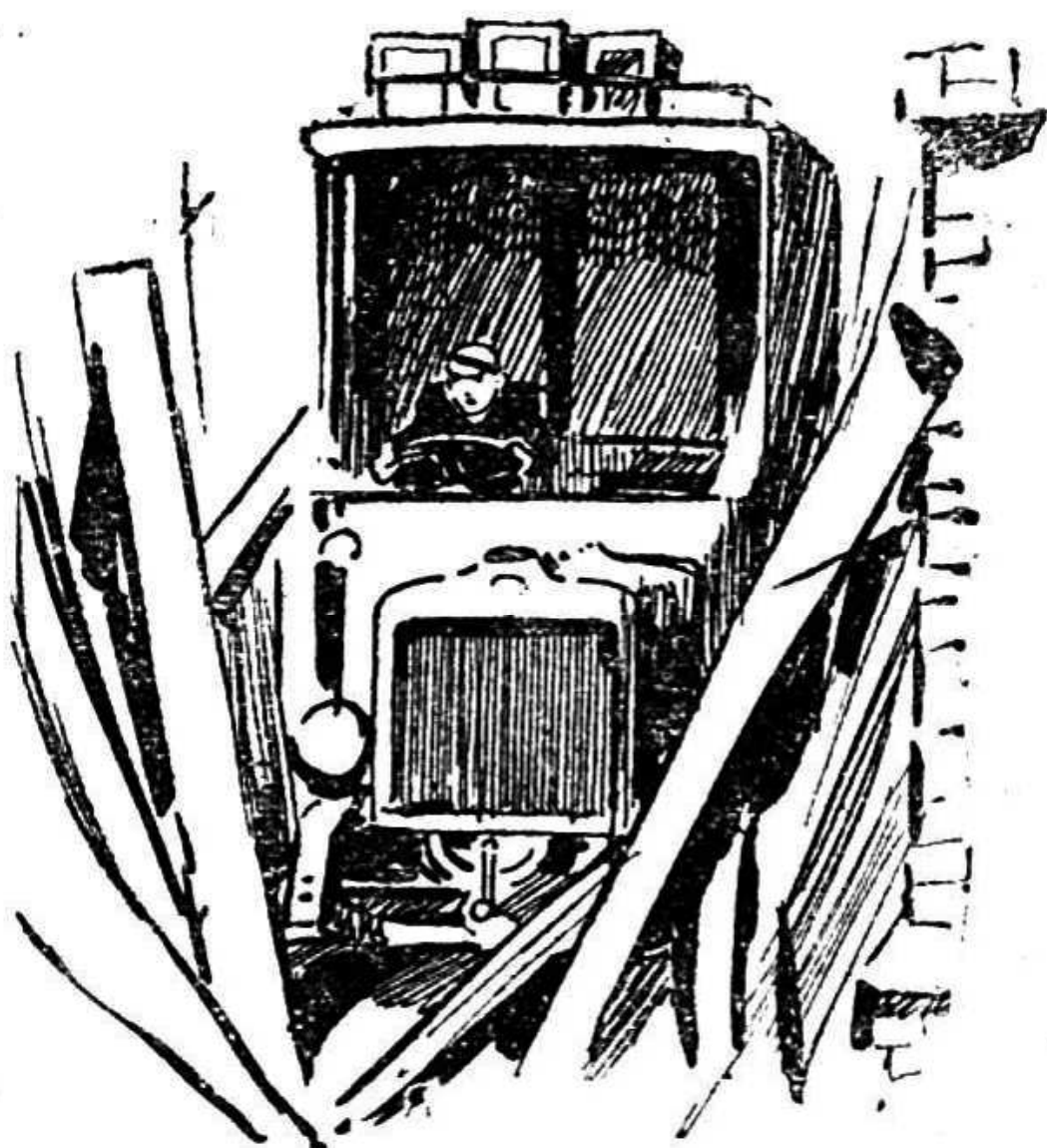
One piece of wire caught me on the arm as I whizzed by, but I didn't find out until an hour afterwards that my skin had been penetrated in a small gash. But this was the only injury I sustained.

The barbed-wire fence was down—torn to atoms in that section. And the lorry careered on like something alive. But now I slowed down. The ground was very hummocky, and fast driving would probably cause a sudden collapse. I made a bee-line for the defence-works.

And, almost before I knew it, the outer trenches were reached.

I tried to pull up, but found that I could not do so. And, rather to my astonishment, the lorry leapt clean over it in a couple of dizzy bounds. And then I was right in the middle of the inner trench system.

I jammed the brakes on in the nick of



Crash! The gate splintered to matchwood as the big van charged through it. I am pretty well sure that the corner was turned on only two wheels.

time. Even so, one of the front wheels went down a great hole, the lorry sagged, gave a violent jerk, and came to a standstill—stuck hard and fast.

"It's—it's not Nipper, after all!" yelled Hubbard excitedly.

"Isn't it?" I shouted, as I jumped down. "You mustn't take any notice of my clothes, my sons—I'm back! And I haven't come back empty-handed! Pile in!"

"But—but—"

"Biscuits!" I roared. "Hundredweights of 'em. Eat as many as you like now—but we shall have to ration them afterwards! Didn't I say that I'd be here with grub before nine?"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Oh, good man!"

The fellows danced round, almost mad with excitement and joy. They tore at the back of the van, wrenching open the doors. And I remembered that I was in command, and I stared round.

"Some of you chaps had better get in the trenches!" I shouted. "We mustn't leave ourselves unguarded! I'll see that grub is brought to you within five minutes. Holt and his men are about, and we can't take any chances!"

Quite a number of the juniors had good sense enough to obey my orders.

And before long the trenches were manned, and a strict watch was being kept. But

neither Mr. Holt nor his men appeared. They were probably getting sick of us by this time. Once again their plans had been ruined.

Pitt was shaking my hand warmly.

"Old son, you're an absolute mivvy!" he declared heartily.

I grinned.

"Well, I did my best," I replied. "Biscuits won't be so very nice after the food we've been having, but they're better than nothing any day of the week!"

"By jingo! Rather!"

"Three cheers for Nipper!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

After that the fellows had their mouths too full to do any shouting. Tins of biscuits were yanked out of the van by the dozen.

empty. And inside the barn we had stacks of biscuit-boxes, all full up. We also found to our delight that the load had included two cases of huge Dundee cakes and four cases of ginger-breads. Our prize was even better than we had hoped for.

And all the rebels, fully satisfied after a hearty meal, were in the highest possible spirits again. They were at their posts, feeling wonderfully braced. As for Farmer Holt and his minions, we saw or heard nothing of them. We didn't care a snap for the siege now.

It was as good as over, for we had a plentiful stock of grub in hand.

And then, just before the St. Frank's bedtime, Chubby Heath appeared out of the darkness. He was bursting with excitement.

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Fatty Little took a whole four-pound tin of fancy mixtures to himself—and I believe he got through the whole lot.

The other fellows were as busy as they could be. And in the middle of it all the driver of the van came up. I politely informed the unfortunate fellow that he was welcome to his van, but we should unload it first. With regard to payment, he could apply to Miss Trumble. And he had to be satisfied with that.

An hour later the camp was almost normal again.

We had helped the carman to get his van out of the hole, and it had driven off—

and explained that he simply had to come and tell us.

News had arrived at St. Frank's that all the school Governors were coming down to hold a full public inquiry.

The news was just the last thing that was required to put a perfect finish to the day.

We had beaten Miss Trumble when she had seemed certain of victory. And now came the news of this public inquiry. We were absolutely confident that we should emerge victorious when the facts were sifted.

The troubles of the rebel Remove were nearly over!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My dear Readers,

From the events just described in the narrative above you will be anticipating to read very soon of the end of the "Barring-Out" by the Remove against the lady Head and her colleagues. And you will not be far wrong, my chums. The failure of Miss Trumble's plot to starve the Juniors into submission is the beginning of the end. News of the great rebellion at St. Frank's has been spread far and wide. It has become the topic of the hour throughout the whole country. The newspapers are full of it and Public Opinion seems greatly in favour of the stand made by Nipper and his supporters.

THE ARMISTICE AT ST. FRANK'S

The governors of the school have been deluged with correspondence by indignant parents and others, and even they feel that something must be done to bring an end to the farcical state of affairs at St. Frank's. So with this object in view, the governors are coming down in a body to the school next week. There is considerable excitement among the belligerent parties as to the outcome of this visit. Miss Trumble is beginning to fear that the stolid resistance of the Remove may influence the governors against her. She feels that she must get the rebels back at the school at any cost. She there-

fore calls for a cessation of hostilities. But I must not tell you everything now, for you will have an opportunity of reading all about it in next week's exciting story—"THE ARMISTICE AT ST. FRANK'S."

STORY VOTING COMPETITION RESULT.

In this competition one competitor sent in a correct list of the stories in the order as voted for by the aggregate votes of all the competitors. The prize of a "Twelve Guinea" Model Steam Locomotive Engine by Bassett Lowke, complete with Railway Track, has therefore been awarded to the winner:

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KINDLY NOTE

Another thrilling story of Mervyn Hume will appear next week under the title of "REPORTED DEAD!"

THE EDITOR.



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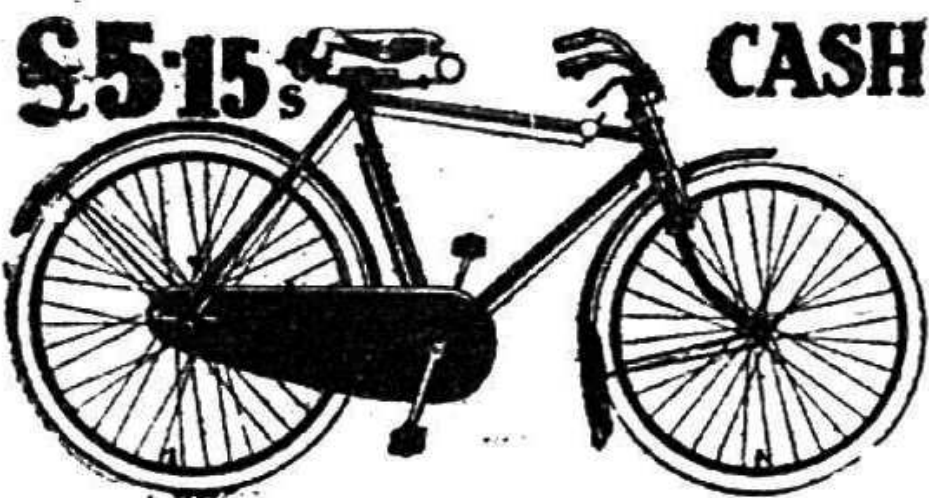


Holt's Farm

:: HOLT'S FARM ::

To the average boy at St. Frank's, Holt's Farm is a blot on the landscape, associated with persecutions and feuds and bitter contempt. It looks very peaceful in the picture above and no one would think that in the charming old house resided a man as vicious in temperament as the white bull that haunts his meadows, a man who is never seen abroad without his stock whip and from whose harsh voice one seldom hears anything but abuse. Unfortunately, the meadows of Holt's Farm are adjacent to those of the school and lie between the latter and Bellton Village, from which it is only half a mile distant. There is a short cut between the village and the school across Farmer Holt's meadows. Needless

to say, in spite of its being out of bounds, many of the boys use this short cut in their frequent visits to and from the village. Should Farmer Holt catch them there is sure to be trouble, and as this happens very often, it can be easily understood that the relations between the irascible farmer and the boys at St. Frank's are continually strained. Thus in the present exciting days at the school, Miss Trumble had not far to go to find a willing lieutenant in Farmer Holt to drive the rebels out of their stronghold. Now that the Headmistress has offered to sell the fields occupied by the Juniors to Farmer Holt, the battle now being waged is not only for the honour but the preservation of St. Frank's.



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